Enhancing Women’s Participation in Turkey through Digital Storytelling

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Abstract

This paper explores the process of introducing Digital Storytelling (DST) workshop practice to Turkey through a project called “Digital Stories from Amargi Women”, which was part of my Ph.D. research in the Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology, Australia. In the resulting dissertation, I examined the potential of Digital Storytelling workshop practice as a means to promote agency and self-expression in a feminist activist organization (such as Amargi Women), focusing in particular on whether or not Digital Storytelling can be used as a change agent – as a tool for challenging the idea of a single public sphere in ways that make it more inclusive of women’s participation. In order to explore the issue in depth, my thesis engaged with feminist scholarship’s critiques of the public/private dichotomy, as well as the concept of gender. The conducted workshops, the resulting digital stories, and in-depth interviews were analyzed to seek connections between these topics and narrative identity. The results indicated that the participating women defined new activist usages for digital stories, as well as their overall activated networking habits in the DST workshop settings. Digital Stories from Amargi Women became the first Digital Storytelling project that aimed to enable women’s participation in Turkey through facilitating a co-creative environment where the participants could share their stories and learn digital skills that they could make use of after the workshops.

Keywords: Digital storytelling, gender, performance, mediation, digital inclusion, agency, digitally equipped private sphere

1. Introduction
Digital storytelling (DST) practice has been around in many countries for a number of years and has been used for different purposes with people of different age groups and from diverse backgrounds. Since its earlier introduction as an artist-festival practice in California, by Dana Atchley and Joe Lambert in the late 1990s, Digital Storytelling first evolved into a more collective broadcasting frame with Daniel Meadows’ ‘Capture Wales’ project in cooperation with the BBC (Hartley & McWilliam 2009, 3-6) and at the moment there is a movement spreading to different regions through various projects of community building. Digital Stories from Amargi Women, the project I conducted in 2010 became the first DST workshop that was designed uniquely for the Turkish context in order to enhance women’s participation.

Coming from a feminist linguistics background, I became very interested in the potential of DST practice to collect and circulate women’s narratives in a context where the dynamics of gender relations are intriguing – such as in Turkey – and decided to make this the topic of my Ph.D. research. Joining a DST workshop in Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology and creating my own digital story ‘write’1 was both instructive throughout my project process and also motivating for future endeavors. In the dissertation titled ‘Using Digital Storytelling As a Change Agent for Women’s Participation in the Turkish Public Sphere’ that I completed recently at QUT, I discussed the potential of Digital Storytelling workshop practice for feminist networking as well as the use of digital stories as a means to circulate feminist concerns. Research on DST workshops in a feminist setting also help raising other questions about the dynamics of the practice and their contribution to public/private sphere discussions both in Turkey and in the region.

Until this project, there had been only one Digital Storytelling workshop in Turkey, which was run by the British Council as a part of a larger European project aiming to collect the stories of young refugees living in different countries. Apart from that workshop, which did not involve Turkish citizens, the project I designed became the first of its kind in the Turkish context and the first to join the movement in the world from Turkey. The feminist methodology, feminist pedagogy, and non-Western secular perspective in a country with Islamic features also have things to add to the overall DST scholarship.

In my dissertation, I tried to find answers to the research question, ‘Can Digital Storytelling be used as a change agent in order to activate and facilitate women’s self-expression for their participation in society through challenging the idea of public sphere?’ In order to examine the issue in details, I focused on how DST helps women to share ideas in a workshop environment through ‘co-creative’ processes, how the dialogic aspects of the story circle help women to build connections and join networks, and how this digital tool may enable women to circulate their concerns and create counter-publics in a ‘digitally equipped private sphere.’

This research project was designed in cooperation with three partners. Hacettepe University, Faculty of Communication in Ankara, was the base for the coordination of this research. The community partner was the Amargi Women’s Academy, which is a women’s NGO in Turkey. Choosing this organization helped me to achieve a geographic diversity of participants, with

1 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWN2js_nZbo.
Istanbul located in the west of Turkey and Antakya in south-east Anatolia, on the Syrian border. The third partner was Queensland University of Technology in Australia, the institution where I was trained to be a facilitator and was supervised throughout this research.

Amargi Women’s Academy provided the venues for the workshops and announced the activity via its network. The only requirement for participation in the workshops was to be in the Amargi network. This does not mean all participants in the workshops were necessarily Amargi members, but, being in search of their own way of engagement with the organisation, they were in the network and interested in Amargi activities. In its manifesto, Amargi invites women to take part in the organization in whatever way they choose, and to express their ideas freely. Activists and academics from diverse backgrounds and interests work collectively on different sets of activities. For me as an academic, the introduction of this Digital Storytelling project became a way of engaging with Amargi as an activist.

With the acceptance of the project by two partners, funding needed to be secured. Two separate research project proposals – one for Istanbul and one for Antakya workshops – were prepared and submitted to the Scientific Research Unit of Hacettepe University in December 2009 and May 2010. Prior to the workshops in Amargi, I ran a facilitator training workshop in the faculty with colleagues that I invited to be in the project team. This workshop took place in November 2009, following the conventional principles of running the workshop over the course of four days.

In the meantime, an application for Ethical Clearance for Low Risk Human Research was submitted to the QUT Ethics Committee on 29 January 2010 and approved on 22 February 2010. The Istanbul workshop was started and completed in the period between 26 February and 10 March 2010. The Antakya workshop was completed in the period between 10–18 June 2010. All digital stories created during these workshops were collected under one name, *Digital Stories from Amargi Women*. The stories were screened at the Culture Centre at Hacettepe University’s Sihhiye Campus on 1 October 2010.
Following the screening, the website for this project was launched. It contains information about the digital story movement in Turkey in both Turkish and English. This website was designed by the Desktop Publishing Unit in the Faculty of Communication at Hacettepe University. All translations of the digital stories and the website were done by me. I had to learn how to convert these translations into subtitles with a free subtitle program, Subtitle Workshop 4, in order to make English subtitles for the international audience as well as for the viewers of the website.

Image 1 The poster for the screening of Digital Stories from Amargi Women

www.dijitalhikayeler.org

2 www.dijitalhikayeler.org
The website for digital stories in Turkey was launched after the screening of the Digital Stories from Amargi Women Project in November, 2010.

In the following sections of this paper, I summarize some insights from the experience of facilitating DST workshops. I primarily focus on the most important outcomes of this research focusing on some important theoretical discussions.

2. A digital form for the circulation and connection of women’s narratives

Digital storytelling can be defined as a workshop-based practice that facilitates the production of digital stories, with each participant’s personal narrative presented using his/her voiceover and adding fourteen to sixteen visuals to form a unified video clip that is limited to two to three minutes. DST workshop practice is a collaborative exercise where the very basic everyday life practice of storytelling is valued as a means of exchanging experiences. In our everyday conversations, we connect to the lives of others through telling stories and “[w]e tell stories to make a point, to catch up on each other’s lives, to report news, and to entertain each other. And one story opens the floor to other participants for stories of their own” (Norrick 2007, 127).

In the introduction to his book Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community (2006), Joe Lambert also states that we introduce ourselves to others through the stories we tell, and we connect with people through the stories we exchange. Adjusting the stories according to different people and situations is part of the process (Lambert 2006, 88). DST workshops take this practice of telling as their basis and encourage their participants to carry their stories into the digital realm in a collective setting. In this sense, although each workshop participant tells a story of their own from their own life, the workshop is a collective practice and can be valued most for its do-it-with-others characteristics (Hartley 2009b).

DST workshop practice can be thought of functioning in a circular flow. Each workshop opens with the story circle where the participants and the facilitator/s of the workshop take their places sitting in a circle and tell their stories in equal, uninterrupted turns. Although the story circle is structured and moderated by the facilitator, the participation of the facilitator to the storytelling practice through sharing his/her own experience, contributes to the understanding of asymmetrical relations in the circle. The story circle stage is a dialogic phase where the participants get to know one another and also the connections through the stories told. These connections are strengthened slowly with the details requested by the listeners and response stories told.
As shown in the Figure 1, the computer mediated phases such as text creation, sound recording, image search/editing and putting the digital story together follow the dialogic phase of story circle. The final stage that closes a DST workshop is the in-group screening, the second dialogic stage where the participants comment on the created digital story. In my thesis I argued that although the workshop seems to end with the in-group screening, instead of closing the circle of this final stage in the DST workshop circle, it opens up the circle to the other forms connectedness. The co-creative collaborative DST workshop experience, that is facilitated by trained media professionals, or communication scholar facilitators who internalize a collective attitude towards the participants in order to break the boundaries of expertise and practice, motivates the participants to share their digital stories in different networks.

In *Story Circle*, Hartley and McWilliam (2009) state:

> Everyone loves a story. Not everyone loves a computer. ‘Digital storytelling’ is a workshop-based practice in which people are taught to use digital media to create short audio-video stories, usually about their own lives. The idea is that this puts the universal human delight in narrative and self-expression into the hands of everyone. It brings a timeless form into the digital age, to give a voice to the myriad tales of everyday life as experienced by ordinary people in their own terms. Despite its use of the latest technologies, its purpose is simple and human (Hartley& McWilliam 2009, 3).

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3 In order to explain the circular flow of the digital storytelling workshop practice I produced a graph in the earlier stages of my research, for my first presentation on Digital Storytelling in Turkey in ANZCA 2010 Conference.

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**Figure 1** Digital Story Circle- shows the circular nature of the DST workshop practice.
In the beginning of this research, the first question that raised itself in my mind was ‘how digital technology is combined with the everyday practice of storytelling in order to facilitate the wider circulation of ordinary voices communicating their own experiences?’ One way to approach this question is to investigate the dynamics of the workshop practice, to understand the process, and how the set time and the phases determine the need to cooperate in order to arrive at a digital story. Rather than valuing aesthetic quality, the core of the practice is to encourage participants to focus on telling their stories. This was the way my project was conducted. Although the conventional order of phases was followed, some stages needed to be customized depending on the context of the workshops. Circulating the idea that the strength of Digital Storytelling lies in its short, sincere and very human nature always helps to overcome the anxiety about the process – especially in a setting like Amargi Women’s Academy, where participants lack basic digital skills but need to develop these in order to arrive at alternative tools for the circulation of their concerns.

In a feminist setting, the focus lies on life narratives and the exchange of experience in order to create an alternative source of knowledge. In this respect, self-expression has been a major concern for gender studies. Domestic conflicts were seen as part of the private domain in capitalist societies until the Second Wave feminist movement emerged with the slogan ‘The personal is political’. From the Women’s Rights movement to radical and socialist feminist movements in different periods and societies, the divide between the private and public spheres was challenged. Over the past two decades, then, the Habermasian idea of the public sphere has been questioned on the basis that it is not possible to think of only one public sphere.

For some feminists like Felski (1989), the private sphere was the domain where women’s labor was rendered invisible, with domestic roles such as child care, household and housewife duties detached from the public world of work. On the other hand, some feminists such as Okin (1998a) suggest that privacy is needed by women to give them a chance to leave their social roles in the public sphere, to discover their potential for creativity and to construct their identities (1998a, 136). However, in the last decade – with the wider use of computers in households and the emergence of social networks and blogging – notions of privacy have changed, as now we are talking about a ‘digitally equipped private sphere’ (Papacharissi 2010, 21). This enables women to participate in public discussions in a different way from those that became familiar in deliberative or discursive democracy. Because of limitations of access to deliberation for public decision-making, and due to participation itself being reduced to voting, new digitally equipped ways of engagement are emerging – with definite advantages for women. Even so, problems of access are linked to the unequal distribution of resources such as knowledge, information and cognitive skills, as well as economic and social factors. The problems of inclusion and identity politics have been changing with the use of digital technologies in multiple spaces. Connecting around similar concerns, taking political action and expressing these common concerns in authentic ways contribute to the discussion around the idea of ‘the’ public sphere.
In this sense, developing digital skills is essential for women in order to access the digital realms from their digitally equipped private sphere. The common concerns of members of society who are excluded from deliberation are discussed by Margaret Kohn, who states that “under the guise of equality and impartiality, deliberative democracy privileges the communicative strategies of elites” (Kohn 2000, 426). This statement well applies to the digital exclusion of women from digital spheres due to their limited access not only to the digital tools but also to digital literacy. In this respect, power relations are at the core of the discussion of inclusion.

In this study, I grounded my interest in women’s narratives in my previous work on feminist linguistics, in particular how power functions in speech and silences, and how women resist the power of patriarchal ideologies (Lakoff 1975; Thorne et al. 1983; Cameron 1985; Spender 1987; O’Barr 1998; West 1998). This issue has been discussed in different areas of gender studies, as Felski (1989) points out:

While feminist discourse originates from women’s experiences of oppression and recognizes their ultimate authority in speaking of its effects, feminism as a critique of values is also engaged in a more general and public process of revising or refuting male-defined cultural and discursive frameworks (1989, 167).

Contemporary studies of gender and language have argued that gender is a performance. Gender identity is fluid, performed in both everyday interactions and narrative forms. In other words:

People use language variably, in order to ‘do’ gender or ‘construct’ different gender identities at different times, within different contexts (e.g. at home, at work, as members of groups and communities). Our identities are therefore multiple, multi-layered, contextualized, shifting, and often contradictory or dilemmatic (Litosseliti 2006, 41).

In recent years, research in the area of feminist linguistics has shown that women as well as men may construct their conversations in different ways, depending on the environment and the people accompanying them; they do this by using linguistic forms conventionally associated with gender roles (Cameron 1997, 1998; Gal 1995; Hall 1995; Kiesling 1997). Feminine and masculine features are not necessarily determined by biology, but by the performance of gender identity. Following Butler’s approach, sex and gender are socially constructed (Jones 1990; Cameron 1998; Coates 1998; Şimsek 2006). I accept Butler’s concept of gender as performance, but I still used the word ‘women’ in the thesis, on the understanding that this category is not unified and homogeneous. Rather, fluidity and indeterminacy are present at all times when I use the categories ‘women’ and ‘men’. In the context of the construction of identity, I draw on the concept of ‘narrative identity’ that McNay (1999) brings to the discussion of gender and agency through Ricouer’s work.

4 Deborah Cameron (2005) summarizes the tendencies in feminist linguistics as dominance, difference and performance-based discussions.
In the context of Turkey, with its distinct dominance of sex roles, raising discussions about the concept of performance is of significant importance. The strict boundaries of femininity and masculinity in relation to the Islamic social background is a determining factor, even though the state is secular. Turkey is a young parliamentary representative democracy where women’s lives have been affected at the intersection of the traditional values and the modernization process of the new republic that rejected the Ottoman past. The modernization project of Kemalist ideology became visible through changes in the image of women, with reforms to clothes, schooling and political rights, while the traditional family was continually valued. It is likely to mention two turning points in the social and political life of modern Turkey. First, the early years of the republic, during which a new nation state was constructed. And second, the years following the 1980 coup d’état until today. It is essential to take these two periods into account when aiming to contribute to the discussion about gender and agency in relation to Digital Storytelling as a democratizing practice for citizens in Turkey. In 1983, Turkey passed into a multi-party period for the third time in its history, and a new ideal – ‘A Speaking Turkey’⁵ – was celebrated. Over the following decade, ethnic, gender and religious issues started to be discussed. This new ideal also opened the way to commercial media enterprises, ending the monopoly that the state-operated Turkish Radio Television (TRT) had enjoyed since it was founded in 1964. Variety in media content has flourished as some of these commercial media enterprises joined multi-national networks. Storytelling as a workshop-based practice aimed at ordinary people to narrate a biographical story using multimedia applications is a new experience in Turkey. Hence, there was a need to introduce new forms of user-led content creation, even though there is a high percentage of social media usage in Turkey (Binark et al. 2009; Binark 2007). It is true that many people involved in the project were familiar with social networks such as YouTube or Vimeo for videos, Flickr for photos and MySpace for music content, in addition to the most popular and widely used network, Facebook. Digital Storytelling workshops, however, did not exist in the Turkish language prior to this project. The aim of my research was therefore twofold: to introduce DST to Turkey and to engage women in this co-creative process to examine whether digital stories can be a useful form to circulate their experiences and concerns to wider audiences via screenings and the Internet.

3. Fieldwork and methodology

The Digital Stories from Amargi Women Project, besides the introduction of DST into feminist cycles in Turkey, is also important for its contribution to gender studies as well as feminist methodology. My personal engagement with Digital Storytelling began at the ‘train the trainers’ DST workshop at QUT and has been highly motivating for two major reasons. The dialogic and collective nature of Digital Storytelling has not only been an inspiration in my search for alternative ways of self-expression for women, but also for myself as a feminist academic exploiting forms other than the written word – which is accessible only to a limited

⁵ ‘A Speaking Turkey’ was coined by Süleyman Demirel, general chairman of the right-wing conservative-liberal Justice Party, active in political life from 1961 until 1980 (Gurbilek 2011, 198).
extent by women, even those who are feminist activists. This aspect also became my own way of self-expression, as learning the basic skills for putting a digital story together opened a new area in which I gained confidence. I started moving beyond the Microsoft Office level of literacy towards using different programs such as Audacity, Adobe Photoshop and Windows Movie Maker, as well as software for transferring and converting files. In other words, I was fully engaged and immersed in every phase of the project, not only as a coordinator/facilitator of Digital Stories from Amargi Women, but also as a full participant. In that respect, while acknowledging my identity as a researcher, I also valued my role as a workshop participant very highly. I made it clear in every possible way that I was not an expert in digital technologies, but just learning the process with the rest of the participants and facilitator trainees in my team.

As I was self-questioning my position as a researcher and facilitator, I decided to follow a feminist post-structuralist discourse approach in the analysis of the data I collected, following Judith Baxter’s (2003) guidelines. Baxter’s approach seems to be useful for experimenting with feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA), as it tries to build a dialogue between critical discourse/conversation analysis and a feminist post-structuralist standpoint. Baxter suggests “that developing good practice in the field of discourse analysis depends upon encouraging an interplay between multiple-voices and accounts that only comes into being when each is heard in juxtaposition with others” (2003, 3).

Baxter sets three principles for FPDA that I find very useful for my research:

- self-reflexivity
- a deconstructionist approach
- finding a feminist focus

As a researcher and DST facilitator, I had to make hard decisions about that process, and sometimes needed to be critical of my own position as a researcher. In other words, in addition to experimenting with the facilitation of DST workshops in Turkey, I had to question my own position as a feminist mother, a researcher, a DST facilitator and a woman in the context of the workshops as well as in my personal life.\(^6\)

I collected my research data using audio recordings, participatory observation notes, field notes and face-to-face interviews with workshop participants. In order to record the impressions of the facilitators and technical team, I organized an informal group lunch, and I noted comments from that meeting in order to add them into the corpus of data in the analysis. I also analyzed the digital stories from the workshops, as I felt it would be useful to see how the process functioned and what themes emerged through this process.

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\(^6\) The positioning issue of the researcher, facilitator, feminist activist, mother situations in this project is discussed in more detail, in my chapter in the forthcoming book ‘İletişim Etnografisi’ [Ethnography of Communication], to be published in 2012.
4. Connecting women’s voices through digital stories

The digital stories produced during the Amargi Istanbul (March 2010) and Amargi Antakya (June 2010) workshops carry the reflections of the everyday experiences of women expressed with feminist awareness, and refer to feminist discussions and conceptions. In the scope of the project, 23 digital stories were told. Due to ethical clearance regulations, six digital stories from a previous pilot workshop at Amargi Istanbul in February 2010 are excluded from the data analyzed.

![Image 3](image-url) The story circle of the Istanbul Amargi workshop in March 2010.

First, it is important to note that the Digital Storytelling workshops at Amargi enabled women to become acquainted with a new practice that can be used both on and offline. The face-to-face aspect of the workshops gave the participants the opportunity to participate in a new environment while searching for their own way of engaging with Amargi. Participating in this workshop, and sharing their digital stories in online and offline spaces, the participants accessed different networks and became more active in the Amargi network and connected to other networks through their creative work.

Hartley mentions that “digital storytelling is an excellent initiative for recruiting new participants into that open network”(Hartley 2009b, 140).
Participation in these workshops also contributed to the digital literacy skills of the Amargi women, as some of them learned to use software they had never worked with before. Through the Digital Storytelling workshop experience – through creating a new media format in a co-creative environment – these women developed a better understanding of digital tools. The process of creating a digital story enhanced their self-assessment about their creativity and the enjoyment they gained from this process. The fulfillment the women got from the approval of their creativity by the other participants and the facilitators, as well as spectators, served as an additional source of satisfaction.

The researcher as mediator role was my main concern at the beginning of the fieldwork. However, during the course of the workshops I realized that mediation is binding in life. In this process, I learned to hear my own voice and speak out during the workshop process as well as during the writing of the thesis. I also recognized that my voice as a facilitator and using language in a non-hierarchical manner made the participants feel comfortable. However, at the end of this process I realized I had been a performance researcher who had been experimenting with multiple responsibilities of the field as well as my personal life. As a researcher in social sciences, I had been working with qualitative research methods for many years, focusing on gender following Butler’s (1999) performance conception. But I had never thought of building up a dialogue between that scholarly examination and my own research methodology before. The examination of the positioning of researchers, participants and third parties in the organizational settings through the Digital Storytelling workshop practice and the possible mediation aspects in the interactions between these different parties also provided a field of research to which I could apply feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis that focused on power and powerlessness situations in relation to gender issues.

Digital Storytelling workshop practice is an exercise of a different learning period, and this understanding was an important aspect that was emphasized throughout the workshops. As the facilitator team, most of us focused our attitude on not positioning ourselves as teachers. However, the attitude of the photography expert in the team was more in line with the expert
positioning. He discursively constructed a formal language with the participants and helped the participants from that positioning. For the participants, this learning process was both challenging and entertaining. The anxiety about writing was one of the significant moments when women expressed their distance from writing processes, even at the level of writing with a keyboard. I tried to emphasize that the text as a written form was not of any value, but rather a way of organizing the story and enabling the participants to record the voiceover more easily. I adopted a critical position about Digital Storytelling workshop practices, and during the workshops I attempted to overcome some of the problems caused by the structured nature of the practice. In this sense, the issue about writing a text became a phase where this critical positioning became more visible. I rejected editing the stories of the women with a professional editing manner. Rather, I valued the expressions and words of the storytellers more than grammatically coherent sentences. Over the course of the workshops, when I was faced with unexpected mother tongue-second language confusions, I realized that being critical about editing in Digital Storytelling settings helps to unfold diversity and enhance self-expression.

I believe this project is important in that it shows the dynamics of Turkish society, with all its conflicting and coexisting aspects, as the digital stories in these two workshops clearly point to issues that surround women in Turkey. The modern secular ideals in dialogue with traditional gender roles and new waves of neo-conservatism make Turkey an example of diverse feminist agendas in relation to wider discussions of politics as well as democracy. As McNay states:

[C]reative or productive aspects immanent to agency must be conceptualized in order to explain how, when faced with complexity and difference, individuals may respond in unexpected and innovative ways that may hinder, reinforce or catalyse social change (2003, 141).

Image 5 Sevinc’s digital story from Amargi Antakya workshop, reflects the struggle of young women in a women’s football team in Antakya.
At the core of the design of this research was a personal interest in seeking different ways of self-expression for women. In this sense, this research aimed to use Digital Storytelling for feminist advocacy, rather than bringing more stories to the Digital Storytelling movement. At the beginning, the most important aspect was to facilitate the production of individual digital stories from each workshop in a feminist setting. However, over the course of the research, as well as in the period following the workshops, during which we launched the website and also a major public screening, I realized that the digital stories in this project formed their own narrative with their connectedness. It is “important for feminist theory and feminist politics to include a great variety of voices” (Okin 1998b, 129), and in the environment of a public screening of the created digital stories, once these started following one another, it became clear that the stories were complementing each other in different respects.

The first-person narrative is an issue that is open to discussion once we are in the realm of gender studies. The success of Second Wave feminism was largely due to the grassroots consciousness-raising practices, as women got the opportunity to express themselves with their words while they were in a comfortable environment where they were encouraged to share. However, this practice has lost its effectiveness over the last 20 years, though some new forms of shorter-period activities emerged from these meetings. This is where I connect feminist activism to Digital Storytelling, as the Digital Storytelling workshops may well operate as small-scale consciousness-raising meetings in different contexts. These workshops enable us to establish a scene for a performance that is a collaborative process.

In this respect I have connected the theoretical discussions around the concepts of performance and agency in order to explore alternative models of feminist activism:

Women’s agency through media activism defines the lines and means of struggle over women’s right to communicate. As many have observed, the right to communicate is bound up with meaningful democratic participation in the civil society, to which women already belong but do not always have the means to readily enter, because of historical barriers based on sex discrimination (Byerly and Ross 2006, 237).

Digital Storytelling can be seen as a means to raise consciousness in feminist or any activist organizations for two major reasons. First, the intimacy of sharing experiences in the story circle and the meaning-making processes work together, building up connections in the DST workshop setting. Second, once the digital stories are created and they exist outside of the workshop, they can be screened and used as a discussion expander, as well as a facilitator for dialogue in other feminist/activist settings. These two reasons stood out in the analysis of workshop interactions and interviews: the participants valued the exchange of experiences in the story circle phase as an important process of a compressed consciousness-raising meeting. On the other hand, the digital stories that are connected in such an intimate exchange context widen the story circle through the inclusion of other stories being told in response after screening in different contexts such as home visits or activist gatherings.
5. Concluding remarks

As expressed by Heilbrun, “I do not believe that new stories will find their way into texts if they do not begin in oral exchanges among women in groups hearing and talking to one another” (2008, 46). Digital Storytelling provides an environment in which this exchange can be facilitated, comforting women to tell their stories with their own voices. Defining new usages of Digital Storytelling for activist purposes has been an important aspect of this research. Sevinç, a participant of the Amargi Antakya workshop, pointed out that in her visits to the houses of the women in rural areas, it is hard to open a ground for dialogue for discussing the problems of women. She emphasized that it is not enough to ask questions to encourage women to speak. She suggested that if she took her laptop with her and showed her digital story, this might help other women to speak as they wouldn’t be speaking about their personal stories in the first place; rather they would begin by commenting on the digital story they had seen.

The DST workshop setting is also a consciousness-raising process in a more functional sense, as women are encouraged to experiment with digital technologies as well as using them for future action planning and content production. The confidence in using multimedia applications that some of the participants gained through the course of the workshop was evident. In a way, Digital Storytelling workshops facilitate informal learning environments, as expressed by Burgess, Foth and Klaebe (2006):

Fostering human talent and digital creativity outside formal school or workplace environments will favourably nurture societal and cultural values – promoting not only an innovation culture and economy but an inclusive society (2006, 13).

In our workshops, expressions such as ‘I am a woman’ helped to widen the discussions about gender in relation to narrative identity and meaning-making in life. In the context of contemporary Turkey, where there is a conservative closing in the language, using the word ‘woman’ (kadın) has negative connotations, as it seems to represent secular, republican women, whereas ‘miss’ (bayan) represents a conservative, Islamic female identity. This linguistic closure has implications for daily life. For some, to say ‘I am a woman’ is stating a political positioning and she is secular in her outlook. The women in this project, intentionally used the statement "I am a woman" as a way of expressing their feminist identities. In this sense, my project has fulfilled the objective that Hull and Katz define as “voicing agentive selves through the creation of multimodal texts”(2006, 71). In addition, the confidence and the enjoyment the participants experienced in the DST workshops is one that they can carry with them and experiment with even in their homes.

I value Digital Storytelling as a change process, and I believe each digital story can be valued as a change agent in the feminist movement in Turkey. Digital Storytelling can be a change agent for two major reasons. First, this practice enables the visibility of women as they want
to narrate their identities. Second, Digital Storytelling provides just the right environment for consciousness-raising in the digital sense, as well as political participation and activism. Binark (2007) mentions that new questions have to be asked when the new media are concerned – especially in a country like Turkey. She proposes that the analysis of the new media content seen as a text has to be combined with ethnographic research. In such a research context, Binark points to the importance of the issue of privacy and participants’ rights (2007, 40). Gaining the consent of the participants in that respect should be an important component of new media research in Turkey, where there are no set ethics for conducting new media research. It is important for the researcher to gain the consent of the participant in a free and informed mode (2007, 41). In this context, it is clear that my research has contributed to the new media discussions in Turkey in several respects. This research has been sensitive to the ethics issues, and the ethical clearance that I obtained from QUT has helped me go into the field better prepared for possible risky cases.

My research is also a contribution to presenting a non-Western perspective in the Digital Storytelling movement in the context of Turkey with its emphasis on the power relations that are embodied in the lives of women all through the modernization processes, and later in the 2000s. The new media usage in Turkey shows that there is a dynamic profile, and although there are social, economic and political divides, the digital divide seems to be coped with following different strategies such as Internet cafes or the remarkable examples of home computer usage by housewives. Digital storytelling, in particular, seems to have the potential to provide a non-formal learning environment for women, where they can build new networks and meet the goals of former versions of consciousness-raising in shorter periods of time, finalizing the workshops with a unique form of self-expression: their voices digitized and connected to others through their own digital stories.

The point, of course, is not that by itself Digital Storytelling could be the catalyst of such major change, but rather that it is only in the context of change on that scale that the potential of Digital Storytelling as a social form can be fully grasped (Couldry 2009, 58).

Story circles and the Digital Storytelling workshop experience are mediated practices. Being aware of that is important if they are to be used to widen the possibilities of self-representation. Digital Storytelling helps participants listen to voices from diverse backgrounds and identities. In an environment such as Amargi – an organisation that strives to be open to dialogue and inclusion – listening as well as speaking out may be practiced with different activities such as literature writing workshops. However, the outcomes of Digital Storytelling workshops can have multiple usages to widen the dialogue.

The skills that are learned in a co-creative, comforting atmosphere are taken home by the participants of a DST workshop, and I hope in the near future we will see more ‘vernacular creativity’ (Burgess, 2007) by women who are active citizens in their digitally equipped private spheres, in addition to their business of ‘creating lives’ (Okin, 1998a). Discussions on home and domestic life, especially domestic violence, have been useful for examining the dynamics of the private sphere. However, new conceptions of the private sphere are also
dependent on society. At the same time, an utopian idea of creating a room of their own in cyberspace can be significant for women. In this respect, it would be useful to attract attention to the three important functions of self-expression – visibility, self-reflexive knowledge and collective action – as Baxter (2003) defines them in relation to feminist activism. In the digital era, it is possible for us to be connected in our private intimate cocoons – which Papacharissi (2010) calls the ‘digitally equipped private sphere’. Baxter’s above three principles can be combined well with Papacharissi’s five new habits of citizens in the digitally equipped private sphere– connectivity, new narcissism, subversion, collaborative filtering and pluralism of online activism, in her A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age (2010). I find these five habits important for the discussion of a feminist activism and Digital Storytelling connection. These five habits contribute to the functions that Baxter defines for self-expression and experience-sharing in feminist contexts. In relation to the Amargi workshops, the participants improved these five habits. Through their digital stories, they improved their understanding about the culture of connectivity and also defined new usages for their digital stories for building new connections. During the process of creation, all participants represented some aspects of their identities in their narratives. Papacharissi (2010) calls this process of looking at themselves the ‘new narcissism’. At this point, it is important to note Baxter’s (2003) emphasis on self-reflexive knowledge. While constructing their narratives, Amargi workshop participants were critical of some of the current events, and reflected their opposition in satire – for example, to the heteronormative statements by a member of parliament. The plurality of collaborative filtering was a part of the whole Digital Storytelling workshop experience, as some images were avoided in order not to reproduce the heterosexist ideologies and to enhance visibility of the invisible aspects of women’s everyday lives. Most of the workshop participants expressed a change in their understanding of the potential of online activism. However, it is still too early to decide whether or not the Amargi workshop participants will use their digital stories as part of their online activism. Defining new functions for their digital stories, the participating women found new routes of action through this collaborative process.

References


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