Networked Identity Work as Project Development Among Co-Creative Communities

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ABSTRACT

Networked identity work is the conscious negotiation or co-creation of identity, enacted by speaking and listening across differences among multiple publics, including those real and imagined, familiar and unknown, on and offline, present and future. It is a concept I explore extensively in research with queer Digital Storytellers who share their personal stories in public places to catalyse social change (Vivienne 2013). In this article I consider distinctions between 'story' and 'identity'; 'networking' and 'networked identity work' and argue that the two concepts may be usefully employed in development of co-creative community projects. Finally I consider how variable definitions of co-creativity influence project development.

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Introduction

The *Co-creative Communities Exchange* brought together community artists, community organisations, media-makers, web-developers, activists, broadcasters, researchers[2] and funding agencies in a one-day collaborative workshop. While all of these actors had a clear commitment to digitally enabled community storytelling, some participants were still considering the significance of their personal and/or organisational identity in relation to story (or their project's narrative content) and in turn the significance of their story to audience or publics (including funding agencies and broadcasters). I distinguish between *'identity'* and *'story'* here to highlight the fluid, evolving and collaborative nature of identity in contrast to the strategic communicative intentions of a cohesive narrative, or story. While media-makers in development are frequently asked to pitch the central *'story'* of their project they rarely reflect upon connections between the identity of their organisation, identity of the project, identity of potential stakeholders and identity of prospective audiences.

I argue that mapping these networked connections – for example: Whose story is it? How can each community member contribute to storytelling? Who needs and/or wants to hear it? How might different stakeholders, time-frames and locations influence the shape of the story? – enable more articulate expression of a community projects' key characteristics (identity) thereby facilitating pro-active development and pre-production strategies. Clarifying distinct definitions of *'co-creativity'* may also underpin a more nuanced and satisfying approach to project development. This small shift in the development process, away from the prevailing focus on *'networking'* and *'story'*, towards an understanding of evolving networked identity work, inclusive of multiple voices and publics, may also prove to be more sustainable for co-creative community practice.

Background

In November 2012 at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne, at a one day event variously known as a *Co-Creative Communities* *'lab'*, *'exchange'* and/or *'workshop'*, six teams of two community media-makers each presented their multi-media projects to an assortment of experts from three distinct fields – community broadcast; media production; and cultural development. The intention was to workshop these community projects in a safe environment while researchers from the *'Co-Creative Communities'* ARC Industry Linkage Project both participated in and observed interactions. Publicity material stated that the event aimed *'to draw attention to best practice achievements and debates, and*

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[2] My engagement with *Co-Creative Communities* was as a research assistant with some expertise in Digital Storytelling and a background in film and media development and production.

to explore the value of our community arts, media and cultural development networks… we want to inspire and encourage the on- going use and development of co-creative media practice' (Spurgeon 2012).

Participation was competitive and prospective participants were asked to canvas the following points in their submissions:

1. What is your project?
2. Who is it for and why?
3. How is the project participatory, collaborative, or co-creative?
4. What do you hope to achieve with the project?
5. What resources do you need to make the project a success?
6. What connections do you have, or do you hope to make, with other communities, organisations, networks, etc, on this project?

Selection was determined by best fit with the aims and objectives of the *Community Uses of Co-Creative Media* Linkage Project. The final six projects presented quite different content, aims, skill levels, storytelling genres and platforms. They included organisation-driven projects proposing digital tools for audience engagement, and independent media-maker/activists proposing digital platforms for representation of communities of interest. Some projects undertook documentary strategies (in shaping participant interviews and contributions into stories), some were archival and curatorial (in that they re-purposed existing content for new audiences), and some others were influenced by event-specific agendas and time frames.

 The gathered experts received submissions several days prior, and on the day of the exchange served as audience for brief presentations of the projects. They were then divided into six themed groups and the media-makers circulated from table to table in search of insight, constructive criticism and useful connections. The six themes were 'Community Collaboration', 'Co-creative Ownership', 'Building Audiences', 'New Platforms for Collaboration', 'Funding and Financial Sustainability', and 'Partnering with Researchers'. I was positioned as a consultant member of the latter, in part because of my experience of a variety of development processes from several perspectives – as a media-maker, as a project officer within a funding agency, and as a researcher. It is from these diverse experiences that I draw some of the speculative argument in this article, in combination with data drawn from Digital Storytelling case studies, and triangulated with media and communication theory.

Story, Networking and Networked Identity Work

Project development, whether it is for community or mainstream broadcast media, typically follows a trajectory something like this: conception, articulation, workshopping with stakeholders (including participants), pitching to investors… etc. This cycle is iterative and projects frequently change shape with the involvement of new stakeholders (for example, the criteria of broadcast initiatives will influence both content and format of a project). 'Networking' may occur at each and every stage of this cycle and generally signifies the strategic trading of information and contacts that may benefit project development (and in turn career development). This activity can take place in an informal social context (as well as

more formal screenings, project launches and conferences) and often involves social lubricants in the form of 'drinks and nibbles'. In some cases distinctions between project 'story' and media-maker 'identity' may become blurry. For instance a media-maker may feel that, if a commissioning editor doesn't appear to like them, their project will also be regarded unfavourably. Conversely, a poorly articulated proposal may reflect badly on a media-making team.

However, at a small remove from the delirium of networking it is possible to argue that both project and media-making teams have discrete 'identities' to the 'stories' they may present. Stories are generally regarded as having a narrative structure (whether linear or interactive), an overarching message and a clear target audience. This, arguably, is the case for both a project and a project team, as evidenced by networking hooks like 'What's the premise of the story?' and, in the latter case, 'So… what's YOUR story?. 'Identity', on the other hand, is mutually constituted among multiple publics and greater than the sum of its parts (Giddens 1991; Goffman 1959). Divergent stakeholders or audiences may regard the same project identity and/or project team differently. Awareness of these fluid parameters turns scattershot networking into strategic and potentially co-creative networked identity work. In the following I consider the evolution of this concept in my own research and how it may be usefully mapped onto co-creative project development.

Networked identity work invokes the conscious negotiation and co-creation of identity, which occurs in speaking and listening across differences among multiple publics including real and imagined, familiar and unknown, online and face to face, now and in the future. Networked identity work is deeper, iterative and more expansive than networking, and bears some resemblances to Butler's 'performativity' (1990). However, while performativity is continuous, context aware and evolving, networked identity work incorporates digital tools and platforms and draws on established concepts of 'networked publics':

> Networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice (boyd 2011: 39).

In my research with activist-oriented queer digital storytellers (Vivienne 2013) I sought an understanding of how personal stories might have amplified social impact when shared widely across digitally connected social networks. In many cases participants hoped to catalyse social change in quite specific contexts (for example legal definitions of marriage and policies determining access to assisted reproductive technologies). However, while measurable changes to public policy can be influenced by personal storytelling (and in several cases was evident in my research), forging a direct and causal correlation between storytelling and swings in public opinion can be difficult to prove. Despite this, when I mapped the networked publics that storytellers engaged with, I observed an unexpected variant of social change – what I call erosive social change – that is the profound incidental product of networked identity work.

In creating a digital story about identity, participants invariably discussed the use of personal photos, subjective anecdotes and memories with the family members and friends that share ownership of these artefacts of life. Simultaneously, as activists, storytellers hoped to provoke

shifts in social stereotypes about gender, sexuality and family structures. They undertook deep consideration of the consequences of public disclosure of private intimacies and the persuasive potential of their self-expression. In other words they negotiated and co-created their representations of identity with multiple publics. They imagined what impression they might make upon Facebook friends just as they considered how best to address members of a parliamentary inquiry. In many cases they modified their rhetoric accordingly, but not always by reducing their narrative to the 'lowest common denominator' (Hogan 2010).

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) early work on the presentation of self, Hogan (2010: 383) argues that the collapsed contexts of networked publics require us to consider not every conceivable audience but simply two: 'those for whom we seek to present an idealized front and those who may find this front problematic'. Many storytellers in my case studies, while carefully and creatively delimiting self-disclosure, experience what they describe as 'self-empowerment' through extricating themselves from concerns about moral social judgements. The young transgender participant who made 'Back to Happiness', described his journey through mental illness and thanked his families – one biological and one made up of select friends – for their support.

> My self-confidence in telling my story has developed and with it my relationships with close family and friends has also benefited, as people see and hear how I felt at the beginning of my transition... I don't feel as much of a need to be accepted as I did before and so don't feel a need to shout my diversity from the roof tops. I do enjoy modifying my behaviour, including my femininity/masculinity, depending on who I am talking with... (Sean 2012, personal communication).

Mapping their networked publics (including both advocates and opponents) encouraged storytellers to both *consolidate* and *own* their variable self-representations. In seizing agency over their digital story (and in this case 'story' represents a condensed and profound representation of 'identity') some storytellers were able to set aside concerns for those who might find their 'front' problematic.

In a broader context, networked identity work is ostensibly a process of mapping the stakeholders in a project – whether that be a digital story, a community project, or a media-making team and/or organisation. As 'story' is to 'identity' (one component of a larger, collectively negotiated and evolving entity) so 'networking' is to 'networked identity work'. While the former, based on slight and spontaneous interactions, may generate some connections worthy of pursuit, the latter requires reflection, analysis and negotiation. With whom does the storyteller (or owner of the story) wish to negotiate or co-create identity? What agency do they wish to confer upon their collaborators in the co-creative process? What ownership of the end product do they wish to retain and what do they wish to share?

Negotiating Agency and Ownership in Co-creative Practice

The task of managing the presentation of a media project or organisational identity across an infinite array of contexts and publics is an overwhelming one, however Hall's theory of audience-reception (1980) has long put to rest any argument that media-makers can

unilaterally control how audience's receive their product, or interpret their story. Nevertheless, as was illustrated in Sean's comment quoted above, consideration of how different publics may conceive of and contribute to a project can consolidate both identity and ongoing project development.

While networking is rarely conceived of as 'co-creative', networked identity work is just that. Regarding all stakeholders as potential creative contributors with whom the evolving identity of the project should be negotiated affords a better capacity for listening to their needs and expectations. Assuming equal footing among collaborators assumes all have agency and a capacity to speak and a right to contribute something significant. I address processes for engaging quieter or even silent voices elsewhere (Vivienne 2013) and many useful strategies may be drawn from narrative theory and practice (Freedman & Combs 1996; White & Epston 1990). If networked identity work clearly engages constitutive communities, the primary function of community media-makers becomes one of interpretation, articulation and amplification. Consideration of the practical and technical facilitation of these processes – for example recording vox pops, uploading photographs, up-skilling with digital devices – demands clear planning and understanding of constantly shifting and disparate community needs as one of many pertinent publics (including audience) throughout the lifespan of the project.

This kind of networked identity work may however be written off as token community consultation if ownership of the project identity is not clearly affirmed. When participants feel that an end product in no way reflects their contribution they are more likely to dismiss it or claim that it is somebody else's work. Ownership can be framed as 'feeling proud' of an end product and need not necessarily take the form of complex legal splits of intellectual property, nevertheless co-creative process and product should be clearly agreed. The *Co-Creative Communities* program defines 'co-creative' as:

> *...a term we use to get beyond the hype about participatory media, 'digital natives', 'prosumers' and user generated content. It's our way of describing genuinely collaborative media production practices that have emerged at the intersection of community-based media, arts and cultural development, and which have fundamentally different methods and values from more professional or commercial examples of participatory media. They actively encourage social learning and 'bottom up' participation through creative expression and storytelling (Spurgeon 2012).*

Despite this clear mission statement, feedback from the researcher-participants of the *Co-Creative Communities* exchange highlighted the lack of a commonly shared definition:

> *Many of the Chief Investigator field notes from the exchange commented on the variety of understandings of co-creative media practice that were apparent in the projects presented on the day, and in the assumptions and experiences of presenters and participants (Spurgeon 2013: 8).*

This lack of consensus around what exactly constitutes co-creative process and product is also evident in this extract from an interview with a service provider in community media:

We don't talk much about 'co-creative'. In fact, we don't use that as a term at all. We talk more about empowering people to tell their stories… there are certain aspects of community arts I don't like. I don't like CCD (Community and Cultural Development) very much. I don't dislike it but I'm very aware of the fact that it can stop stuff happening. I mean, CCD is when you go – I'm going to find the 'blah' community living in 'blah' and I'm going to sit with them over a period of time and work with them to develop a project which they have control, that they know exactly 'blah, blah, blah, blah'. And we don't necessarily do that. You know, some of the most successful projects, we have actually gone to a community and said 'I can get the money for this, do you want us to do it with you?' (anonymous media-making service provider 2012, personal communication).

Underpinning these comments are tensions in authority, authorship and ownership, central aspects of collaborative process and product. Despite inevitable asymmetric differentials between stakeholders, community projects are often co-authored and co-owned (in contrast to most mainstream broadcast media content with finite chain of title, intellectual property and broadcast and distribution rights). It is these dimensions that put the *'co'* in *'co-creativity'*. Hartley reflects upon the asymmetry typically witnessed between facilitator and participant of digital storytelling workshops, arguing that this differential can be productive:

In DST there is a clear asymmetry between facilitator and participant, but it doesn't have to be construed in terms of differential power. Instead it invokes that most important attribute of the literary translator, which is knowledge not only of the technical aspects of both the home and target 'languages' but also (ideally) a wide knowledge of their literary, journalistic, scientific and popular-cultural elaborations and a facility for translating the strengths of one into the strengths of the other, even when there is 'mutually untranslatable' asymmetry. In short, the expertise of the filmmaker or documentarist when coupled with a 'parallel' intelligence from the lay population can result in new and compelling stories that do credit to both parties (Hartley 2008: 205).

In the context of Digital Storytelling this mutual acknowledgement of creative contributions may take the form of a facilitator acknowledging and respecting the fact that they have limited understanding of the cultural landscape of the storyteller; while the storyteller may acknowledge that they have limited understanding of sound-recording and editing software. Neither form of tacit knowledge trumps the other as long as all collaborators hold one another in mutual regard. The fact that all parties have a valid contribution to make is explicit in the workshop framing. They are networked, mutually constituted publics engaged in construction of a project identity; a process that adds up to more than the sum of its parts; a shadow of the final product or story.

Broadcast and Community Media Development

In the broadcast and community media development landscape, traditional networking strategies may seek to build affinity between a media-maker and project facilitators by establishing mutual interests; intersections between project aims and organisational interests.

These networking interactions however, occur across finite periods of time, in limited locations and across structural power differentials. Unlike the asymmetric terrain of cultural capital canvassed by Hartley above, there are clear and acknowledged power differentials. Typically there is much to gain on the part of the media-maker (for example, funding, endorsements, networking assistance) and little to be gained by the funding agency, investor, employer and/or broadcaster. Most traditional networking opportunities occur face-to-face (although the occasional savvy media-maker may consolidate a connection with phone or email follow up). Once the project moves out of development into pre-production active negotiations dwindle, hinging around those stakeholders with power (most often broadcasters and investors) and frequently diminishing the role of community members. In these regards there is little distinction between the broad field of mainstream media-makers (creating product for television broadcast) and the subset of community media-makers, other than, arguably, community media-makers have a wider field of participants (the community) at the commencement of development and in some cases throughout production.

Opportunities for Networked Identity Work as Project Development

Thus far I have reflected upon distinctions between 'identity' (contextually negotiated and evolving) and 'story' (proposed narrative content and/or structure of a project); and 'networking' (developing useful social contacts in order to advance a project and/or career) and 'networked identity work' (contextually negotiated across time, place and space). While they are useful distinctions they are by no means finite or mutually exclusive. In fact the question of whether workshop relations could ever be free of power differentials depends largely on the objectives of the participants and the ownership of negotiated outcomes. It is important that these questions of agency and ownership are clearly negotiated and agreed upon by participants and the social service agencies that auspice workshops. Regardless of social contexts that are always asymmetrical in some regard, if participants retain an authoritative voice in negotiations over content and a meaningful stake in the ownership of the end product they are likely to regard the development and productive process as both co-creative and satisfactory; fulfilling their expectations.

The *Co-Creative Communities* lab/exchange/workshop offered a rare opportunity to break down some of the well-established asymmetrical power dynamics in media project development by focussing on co-creativity. Just as the participants in my queer Digital Storytelling projects negotiated and co-created identity with multiple networked publics, so too media-makers, researchers, community development agencies and broadcasters had opportunity to reflect upon and co-create identity – whether that be as storytellers, as facilitators of story-telling or as co-creative partners engaged in developing a project identity. Regardless of potential, many respondents noted that participation in the exchange was uneven, with some people positioned as experts and others as receivers of expertise. Use of *'experts'* is interwoven with *'peers'*, *'advisors'* and *'practitioners'* in the *Co-Creative Communities* documentation suggesting a lack of clearly articulated identity for many participants. The discussion themes were framed at a late stage and not shared with media-makers until the day of the forum. To reiterate these were: Community Collaboration, Co-creative Ownership, Building Audiences, New Platforms for Collaboration, Funding and Financial Sustainability, Partnering with Researchers. Expert participants were not always

clear about the nature of their contribution (eg benevolent, inquisitorial, conspiratorial, cooperative) and whether this was a contribution to the narrative of the proposed project (story) and/or the identity-narrative of media-makers and/or community organisations.

Nearly all respondents identified a need for project presenters to be better prepared for the day, and to have better support and direction from organisers in this respect prior to the exchange. In particular, project presenters needed more advance information about the exchange themes so that they could make best use of expertise available to them in the exchange. Conversely, other exchange participants (the experts) needed clearer direction on the tone of engagement with project presenters, and this needed to be reinforced by the researchers tasked with the job of convening each themed table of participants. One project presenter commented, *'some "experts" may like to look at communication skills – sharing in conversation'*. Other suggested improvements included more time for each rotation (Spurgeon and Heck 2013: 7).

Conclusion

As an exercise in better mapping the tacit and broad ranging knowledge of all participants (media-makers, community broadcasters and community artist/activists) the exchange proved fruitful. However it also provided evidence in action of the obstacles to sharing this knowledge in a mutually respectful manner that facilitates project development. The research team concluded (among other points) that a more formal guide and/or professional development activity might be useful as a response to an emerging central question of how media-makers/communities overcome the various knowledge gaps that thwart co-creative media development and production (Spurgeon 2013). This would certainly define the nature of engagement between media-makers and consultant/advisors but also constitutes a shift away from co-creative exchange between participants with different but equally valid knowledge bases. In a more formalised activity or guide, advisors might facilitate the networked identity work undertaken by media-makers on behalf of their community teams and projects. Conversely a provocative development exercise might ask community collaborators, technical experts, funders, broadcasters, researchers and audiences to consider and map what role they play in the networks that constitute project identities. Do they regard themselves as creative contributors with agency? Do they seek ownership? Or are they chiefly facilitators of a co-creative process among others? How should they articulate their contributions? Negotiating a project identity in this instance becomes a process of determining what all stake-holders might wish to contribute, and what influence this may have on the project's narrative form.

It should be said however that workshop processes that call for acknowledgment of power and privilege are not always comfortable or successful. Narrative practices applied in social justice contexts highlight the many difficulties implicit in recognising socially embedded hierarchy (Freedman & Combs 1996) and political philosophers point out the impediments to listening across differences let alone overcoming them (Young 2011). The Co-Creative Communities Exchange was, in this regard, perhaps overly ambitious in its stated objectives. Nevertheless the experience provided an opportunity to reflect upon the complicated nuances of co-creativity in project development and the multivalent meanings of these processes in

praxis. Several propositions for best practice in workshop facilitation emerged and require further development and clarification.

Ideally, in the early stages of project development, definitions and key aspects of co-creativity would be made explicit and agreed upon by all collaborators. For facilitators, inviting media-makers to undertake *'networked identity work'* rather than *'networking'* might enhance project development. Conversely, inviting facilitators, researchers and media experts to undertake networked identity work in relation to the projects and communities they endeavour to support may shed light upon previously obscure obstacles and opportunities, and certainly bring about greater awareness of their contributions and limitations.

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