



Digital Storytelling: *Resistive Stories and the “Measurement” of Change*

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Abstract

In this paper, I interrogate our understanding of social change in the telling of self-representational digital stories, stories that speak from the perspective of the storyteller and which centre on the “I”. There is a growing audible criticism of the value of these digital stories if distribution and outreach of such stories do not reach both wider and critical audiences. As a digital storytelling practitioner, I examine these criticisms and draw attention first to our understanding of storytelling, and second to our understanding of audiences within an ancient oral tradition of humankind. There is no doubt that the digital in digital storytelling allows for a global arena of possibilities. However, it is these very same global possibilities within the digital that have possibly forced a cursory value on storytelling by the most important audience among audiences—the marginalised “I” who struggles for political, social and economic attention. The existential self is severely talked down to for not going beyond that one digital story or those few friends and family members. In these instances, that potential to transform “power over” into “power with” and “power within” the storytellers quickly disintegrates. What happens instead is an expansion of the pool of judges of narratives, a predominant and more overt phenomenon in the field of human rights. What form the final narrative takes in any digital storytelling project is often shaped by the interests of these “mediators” who turn “judges of narratives” when they mould and package these stories to be more palatable to their specific audiences and consumption needs. The storyteller’s sense of existential peril is in this way prolonged. These untoward developments beg us to ask the question, “what change then are self-representational digital stories meant to bring about?”

Change is too often seen as synonymous to “cause and effect”. Drawing from interviews conducted with those who organise and conduct digital storytelling workshops within a

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human rights framework around the world, as well as those who have strived for social change through storytelling in Malaysia, I contend that there is no such causality. The "change" is in fact dialogic and in constant flux—between self and other, self and non-self and in being for self and the other—in that storyteller's struggle of regaining control over situations and circumstances she or he had little or no control over. For what is implied in self-representational stories is that the intended audience of such a digital story inherently must include and bring meaning to the "I", the storyteller.

Keywords: digital storytelling, social change, Malaysia, sexual minority, existentialism, LGBT, resistive stories, resistance, social justice

1. Introduction

Arguably, the powerful potential of digital stories lies in their "digital" nature. It places a value of possibilities on such stories and pushes their "collectors" to strive for more, to achieve a wider impact with these stories. It is the intended purpose of "wanting these stories collected and created" that not only heavily influences the final narrative form and telling of a digital story, but also ironically conditionally demands for some form of utilitarian value. As a digital storytelling practitioner, I interrogate this requirement for "use" and "usefulness" through the lens of social change and within a human rights framework.

There is no doubt that the digital in digital storytelling allows access to a global arena of audiences. However, securing access to a greater number of "receivers of stories" affords no guarantee of change. There is no "cause and effect" in storytelling, and the "change" sought by institutions through the creation and co-creation of digital stories is questionable.

Lambert describes the "evolution" of digital storytelling within the growing movement of digital storytelling mediators quite aptly as "our appropriation of 'storytelling'" (2009: 80). It is indeed in our appropriation of storytelling that we bring in our personal and institutional biases, motivations, interests, inclinations and agendas—professional or otherwise. As media, archival, cultural and educational institutions struggle to add value and purpose without losing their advantage and profitability (Hesmondhalgh 2007; Lash and Lury 2007; Thumim 2008; Wu 2009: 232), these join many individuals around the world who find themselves increasingly losing relevance and influence over decisions that affect their lives. The "struggles for attention" have brought forth a digital storytelling movement, practised in increasingly diverse contexts, but heavily criticised for its lack of utilitarian value (Hartley & McWilliam 2009: 14–15), outreach and scalability (Hartley 2013: 78–79). Hartley (2013) argues

that personal stories must compete to gain attention and to do so their storytellers would need to emulate the capabilities of mainstream media (2013: 78).

Hence, those who wish to use stories and digital media for self-expression and community advocacy must go beyond the identity and authenticity of the maker, to embrace communication and outreach (a.k.a. marketing).

To support his argument, Hartley puts forward the example of Tavi Gevinson, someone who, from the young age of 11 years old, capably took the often limited reach of self-mediated social media and transformed it into a global presence (2013: 78; see also Gevinson 2012). What Hartley fails to consider is that it may not be about Gevinson's creative use of digital media's scale-up capacity, but the discourse she used that appealed to many, a discourse that resonated with young women, girl teens, and highly possibly, adult women all over the world.²

Gevinson's own struggles in questioning how she locates herself as a feminist is a discourse of imperfection and internal flux that is able to speak to multiple audiences at any one time over social media, the phenomenon of context collapse that boyd (2008) alludes to. There may also be the paradoxical issue that stems from the patriarchal norms of society of how girls enjoy wider freedoms of expression as well as the privileges of being heard, until they grow up to be women. Furthermore, if change is assured with scale-up and outreach, the human race would have managed to stop many of the atrocities of violence and discrimination that not only continue to be perpetuated, but appears to be much more widespread than ever before with us seeing many more failed States across the world.

This requirement of use and usefulness is where digital storytelling departs from our human tradition of sharing stories, and acquires characteristics similar to that of storytelling to advance human rights. The digital storytelling movement in effect has inadvertently produced a greater number of "judges of narratives"—people who exercise their "will to know" and who sit in judgment over personal narratives which are packaged and presented to conform to their pre-set rules.³

It follows then that the key questions to ask here are, "what change is sought through digital storytelling and digital stories?" and "where does the significance of such change lie? Whose loss of relevance and influence are these digital stories meant to address?". While the question, "who is heard, and to what end?" (Burgess 2006: 204) is

² See, for example, Poletti 2011a and 2011b, where she discusses the massive success of PostSecret, an ongoing community mail art project by Frank Warren, and the appeal of the discourse of confession.

³ For a fuller discussion on the "judges of narratives" in the field of human rights, please see Schaffer & Smith 2004.

valid, what is implied in self-representational digital stories is that the intended audience of such a digital story naturally and ultimately must include the “I”, the storyteller.

2. Digital Storytelling and Social Change

Even when Helff and Woletz described the problem of defining digital storytelling, they possibly offered the most all-encompassing definition for self-representational digital stories (2009: 131).

Digital narratives easily overstep generic borders by playing with fact and fiction, and documentary and imaginary modes of representation, while producing new compositions of media, genres, and narrative practices. . . . increasingly formed by story elements that can be neither located in a specific narrative tradition nor in a singular national context.

What Helff and Woletz inadvertently point to is that digital stories are inherently non-conforming. They are able to be both endearing and resistive, which can often be powerful in their simplicity and authenticity. The “surprisingly powerful rawness” which Simondson observed (2009: 121), makes these digital stories a natural resource for human rights activism.

Because of this surprisingly powerful effect on audiences, digital storytelling has understandably caught on with women’s rights groups who have long given credence to herstories—valuing and honouring the sacredness of the woman’s voice and her chosen text, by retaining only the details and information that she wishes to share. While the advent of new media has facilitated such an impetus,⁴ the appeal of digital storytelling for human rights activists lies in the fact that it literally places the power of media into individual women’s hands and the hands of the marginalised “I”. For example, Amy Hill’s work through Silence Speaks foregrounded how digital storytelling can be effective in enabling survivors of violence to own their process of healing through their stories.⁵ Since then, other rights-based groups like Women’s Net in South Africa and the Association for Progressive Communications through its global partnerships and projects have ensured that digital storytelling skills now exist in countries with comparatively harsher social, economic and political contexts, like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Congo-Brazzaville.⁶

⁴ For a further elaboration on how new media are able to do this, see for example, Curran & Couldry 2003.

⁵ See www.silencespeaks.org.

⁶ For further information on some of the rights-based work that is being undertaken in countries outside of the USA using digital storytelling, see for example [the work of Women’s Net in South Africa, http://www.womensnet.org.za/digital-stories-transformation.html](http://www.womensnet.org.za/digital-stories-transformation.html), and Take Back the Tech, https://www.takebackthetech.net/media/digital_stories. For information on the work of the Association for Progressive Communications, see www.apc.org.

Through digital stories, the idea was that telling a personal story is also a validation of that person's experience, and where people allow for their stories to be used elsewhere and serve as a way of building community, building broader understanding of gender inequality as a structural issue. And a lot of women think they are singular in the experiences that they have, but when they start talking to others or when they hear about other stories, there's a greater understanding that there's something larger out there, which we would refer to as patriarchy, that actually impacts and shapes their experience, their day to day lives. So it's both an educational tool of life stories but as well as a tool for personal empowerment.⁷

In fact, the original intentions behind digital storytelling mirror the practice of human rights activists, in how agency and the voice of the marginalised is encouraged and positioned. For the motivations of those who originally organised and offered digital storytelling are to “assault dominant culture” (Lambert 2009: 81), “to challenge representations” (Thumim 2009: 205–217) and “to give participants a sense of agency and control in the telling of stories about situations wherein they typically had little or no control”.⁸

[I]t's a revelation for themselves, it's a revelation that they can say things . . . a revelation for the person themselves, because they see themselves through different eyes. Each time, it's the same thing, people look at their own stories like these stories come from someone else. It is like they couldn't believe that these stories are theirs, that they have a stand about something.⁹

The use of stories in the field of human rights, however, tends to focus on two prominent functions—to highlight the violation of human rights, and hence, the violence and the impact of such violence, as well as to put a human face to such suffering. What digital stories are able to do quite powerfully is to affect audiences and carry them beyond the overt violence while still enabling the voice of the agentive self (Hull & Katz 2006), one that exercises self-representation and one that leads in the social change sought (what is often referred to as the form of “power to’ by human rights activists).¹⁰ With digital stories, the storyteller need not be merely a “human face to suffering” but an intimate experience of rawness, a result of the sophistication that the digital can add to the telling.

⁷ Interview conducted on 19 April 2012 with Natasha Primo, a digital storytelling practitioner in South Africa and former Executive Director of Women's Net, South Africa.

⁸ See <http://silencespeaks.org/methods/>.

⁹ Interview conducted on 20 April 2012 with Valentina Pellizer, a digital storytelling practitioner in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

¹⁰ For a further elaboration of expressions of power, see VeneKlasen & Miller 2007.

3. A Return to the Telling

Schaffer and Smith (2004) have described in great detail the venues for storytelling for human rights advocacy, and have shown that the “packaging” of the personal story has had to conform to the rules of those “receiving” the stories, whether they be truth commissions, tribunals and national inquiries on the one end or infotainment websites and platforms of non-governmental organisations, media groups and so on, on the other end. The “judges of narrative” exercise their “will to know” and subject such personal stories to scrutiny, to ensure that these stories are sufficiently strong enough “to sell” to audiences of authority and influence. The “packaging” is particularly constrained within the existing protocols for codification of a human rights abuse and the legal norms of argument. Paradoxically, these protocols bring to bear a further reinforcement of the dominant (Schaffer & Smith 2004: 40).

As digital storytelling practitioners—those who conduct digital storytelling workshops and those who intentionally collect digital stories—we similarly invite digital storytellers to tell their stories, and we purposefully collect them for our own reasons. We are certainly the mediators whom Powazek (quoted in Meadows & Kidd 2009: 96) placed in positions of authority and power in describing “authentic media”, and which he defined as mediatised stories that “give the mike over to people who actually have something to say”. Though we may tell ourselves we are only mediators, we often find ourselves sitting in judgment as to what story is “worthy enough” (see for example, Silverstone 2007: 109; Deuze 2007, quoted in Lundby 2009: 184).

You are in a position of power, because you hold the space, you hold the technology very often, and sometimes, this is a learning for me, and as a personality, you know, step back, accept imperfection in the story. . . . Digital storytelling trainers should meet, to also reflect on the ways in which to learn how to control the power you have, not to be overwhelming, because participants really trust you. It's a specific space, and you build this trust, where they are really, majority of them are really ready to listen to you.¹¹

Whether we remain “judges of narratives” depends on our mediational processes which in turn rely on how well we transform “power over” during the digital storytelling process into “power with” and “power within” the storytellers (see also Martin Barbero 1993, quoted in Lundby 2009: 182; Couldry 2000: 7; Taub-Pervizpour 2009: 245–247). It is this very transformation of power and the equalising of power relations that will return us to the essence of our ancient oral tradition of humankind, telling stories.

¹¹ Interview conducted on 24th April 2012 with Rebecca, a queer human rights activist from the Middle East and North African region.

4. Gifts of Value

In our human tradition of telling stories, stories are often exchanged between friends, and only sometimes among strangers. They are seldom “useful” but in themselves they carry a social value.

People are attached to their stories. And we are attached to that, to these stories, to the trust that they have put in us, in telling us their stories.¹²

Digital stories, like stories, are gifts, given away in trust. Digital storytelling is merely a digital extension of our ancient tradition of storytelling, not necessarily one that is more expressive or effective in affecting audiences through the telling, because time and again, the human tradition of telling stories has ostensibly proven that not everyone is a good storyteller.

In our understanding of digital storytelling, it becomes critical to differentiate the “art of storytelling” as a profession, and “telling stories” as a human tradition. The latter is often a private, selective, exclusive and intimate affair—an outcome of a conscious decision to share, sometimes through invitation, often because of acceptance or at minimum, in the absence of rejection. Commonly, between friends, it is a non-verbalised standing invitation. Implicitly, it is informally conditional only by the varied personalities of our friends and the differential extent of intimacy we have with each one. Digital storytelling may be described as such an intimate invitation but it is one, which is formally conditional.

Digital storytelling workshops are both intentional and purposeful. The stated objectives usually go beyond the mere sharing of stories. Irrespective of any “promises” or incentives given (in cash or in kind), however, no storyteller (unless they lack the decision-making capacity of the average adult) engages in any digital storytelling workshop without first accepting the invitation to tell a story, and to share it within the prescriptive parameters set forth by the organisers of these workshops. The digital storyteller may even pay a fee to attend such a workshop. At the end of the day, the digital storyteller remains the one who decides which story to “give” away, dictated by her or his personal needs, even if we, as digital storytelling practitioners, “demand” that these stories are told. However, the decisions by storytellers in what stories to give away are not always easy, and not always with the willingness and readiness expressed below.¹³

¹² Interview conducted on 24th April 2012 with Rebecca, a queer human rights activist from the Middle East and North African region.

¹³ This includes workshops where funders are visibly involved. While there is the issue that the stories become the property of these funders, despite the limited space for renegotiating the power dynamics in these situations, digital storytellers do decide which story to give away even as they are subjected to the dictated parameters on themes, topics or types of stories.

[W]hat is important is that they are ready to give the story away and it's a gift for others, because people quickly understand that their stories can help. As an example, they can help others. So they're ready to give their story.¹⁴

Digital stories like stories uniquely retain their ownership with their original storytellers when completely subjected to the benevolence of those receiving them. We, as digital storytelling workshop facilitators or as owners and organisers of digital storytelling projects, may seek consent describing how we intend to use and store the digital stories collected, but consent obtained in this manner is an ethical practice that is not legally binding. While there is a parallel practice in the field of human rights, the rules determined for digital storytelling workshops are not necessarily always designed to intentionally bring about “an act of response” to the story or stories concerned. For example, both videos on “Digital Storytelling”¹⁵ and “Making Digital Stories” by the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI)¹⁶ are presented from the point of view of a supplier’s need (in this case, its mandate and organisational purpose) as well as what facilitators need to know, and not how it would benefit the storytellers, other than possibly the acquisition of technical skills in putting a digital story together.¹⁷ While Simondson emphasised that ownership of the digital stories remained with the storytellers, the telling was crafted to suit the purposes of ACMI, admirably trying to balance self-representational needs of the individual storyteller against the self-representational needs of ACMI, the organisation (2009: 120–121). Yet undeniably, to bring about social change or any kind of substantive change, requires a conscious act to respond. Merely “knowing” these stories in receiving them is not “to act”, and without such an act, what change can we reasonably expect?

5. Changes and the Marginalised “I”

Within the digital storytelling movement, there are a number of projects or programmes that do not necessarily “challenge the dominant”. Some of these offer skills-building, with a focus on imparting the technical skills and/or bridging the “digital divide”. Others educate on the narrative form, often focusing on traditional narrative forms or the performative story, possibly framing these within a communication perspective. Many, largely public institutions, focus on knowledge-building, such as contributing to the building of a collective history of a community or towards public education and awareness-raising on public health issues. Then there are those with predominant

¹⁴ Interview conducted on 20 April 2012 with Valentina Pellizer, a digital storytelling practitioner in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

¹⁵ See http://www.acmi.net.au/dst_about.htm. Accessed 30 April 2013.

¹⁶ See http://www.acmi.net.au/dst_making.htm. Accessed 30 April 2013.

¹⁷ The links are no longer accessible at the time of publishing. ACMI now iterates what it offers through its digital storytelling workshops differently, that is, based on what stories digital storytellers want to tell. See <http://www.acmi.net.au/collections-research/community-engagement-projects/digital-storytelling/>. Accessed 27 January 2015.

commercial interests who adopt digital storytelling for story branding (or brand storytelling). The intentions behind offering a digital storytelling workshop for such “project owners” dictate the kind of change they seek and not necessarily the change sought by storytellers. Even when both seek to witness a change in levels of skills or knowledge, such changes do not bring about a change in attitude, and without affecting a change in attitude, a change in practice is less likely to materialise.

While commercial interests do seek a change in practice among consumers, it is a change that seldom provides the social, economic or political attention that the marginalised “I” seeks—to regain relevance, to regain control, and to be better able to influence those with “power over” their lives. Drawing from my interview-based conversations with Dorian Wilde who participated in a digital storytelling workshop that I conducted in Malaysia in 2013,¹⁸ I illustrate that change starts with the “I”.¹⁹ Even if the change may not go much further beyond the “I”, the change is significant and dialogic, in that storytellers are in constant flux between self and other, self and non-self and in being for self (in meeting the expectations for oneself) and in being for the other (in willingly meeting the expectations of others). This kind of change is immeasurable, and it is independent of the number of people who listens to or receives the digital story. Yet, it is this kind of change that sustains the “I” in seeking existential balance, between their seeking autonomy and in being subjugated, between their striving to be authentic and in being denied, between their existing and in being nullified.²⁰

Dorian Wilde chose to do a digital story on “shaving”. I asked him why he chose to tell a story on “shaving”.

Shaving is such an integral part of my life, you know. . . . I've always watched, you know, my Dad shaving, and I've always wanted to do it, so I would use toothpaste and stuff, put it on my face, and use my toothbrush instead of his razor. I've always dreamt of having my own beard that I can do whatever with. . . . And, I remember you know, every time [I would] like take photographs of the few strands of hair (laughs). I still have those photos, you know. Click! . . . I guess it's exactly what most teenage boys

¹⁸ The digital storytelling workshop was one of four workshops that were conducted as part of my research strategy for my professional doctoral research entitled, “Authentically Ambiguous, Credibly Anonymous: Perceptually Reframing the Personal Narrative towards Effective Persuasion in Aggressive Human Rights Contexts”.

¹⁹ Interview conducted on 17 March 2013 with Dorian Wilde, digital storytelling workshop participant, Malaysia.

²⁰ Existentialists are unable to agree with each other on what exactly is “being” and “to be”. What is commonly described is the individual struggle of balance and adjustment in the “how” of living, rather than the “what. Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir wrote from an atheist existentialist perspective, preferring to ask “how can I live?” instead of “how should I live?”.

go through, like the moment it starts coming out, like click, you know (laughs). Ah, and then it just grew out and I'm so happy. So the reason why I did it [was] because it was such an integral part of my life, I mean, something I've always wanted, especially that experience of going to the [Malaysian] Indian barber.

I explored further and asked him why particularly a Malaysian Indian barber, why not just any barber. Dorian replied.

[T]here was such a, I don't know, this whole male bonding thing you know, that kind of exclusive male spaces. I know I'm supposed to be a feminist right (laughs). But to be accepted in such a space, I guess, that was very gratifying even though the feminist in me is like rebelling right now (laughs). Uhm, I guess it's something that you know I've always seen my father, like, he wouldn't bring us to the barber when he gets shaved, when he doesn't shave it himself, and it has always been that mystical space that I've always wanted to go to and be a part of. It's like a symbol of manhood for me, so Indian [Malaysian] right? You need a moustache or you're not a man (laughs).



Indian barber shop. Clip from Dorian Wilde's "Shaving", time stamp 21s. Photo by Jose.

Clip from Dorian Wilde's "Shaving", time stamp 36s. Photo by Jose.

Knowing that he is a feminist and that he has spoken up for women's rights in various spaces and publicly on Facebook, I tried to better understand his need to be in exclusive male spaces, and he explained.

That is like a huge conflict that I have with myself sometimes that, I'm a feminist and I believe in the feminist ideas and ideals, but at the same time (laughs), I like these things, I mean, ya. I don't really like being in solely male hangouts type of thing, because guys can be assholes when they're alone (laughs), with each other, and I don't really feel comfortable.

Dorian drew a distinction between “wanting to belong” and “being accepted”. What I saw as patriarchal ideology, which upheld the male privilege, he saw it merely as “an exclusive space”.

I guess the yearning, was basically to feel like who you are, I mean I yearned for the beard and all that, but not necessarily as much as uhm, you know, like really, really, really wanting to belong and to conform and all. I wanted to be accepted in those spaces because that would be a sort of affirmation of the fact that I am male, therefore I can be accepted in male-exclusive spaces but it is an acceptance which I did not have to overtly go and ask for, I could just be there and I would just be accepted. That, I think, is different from wanting to belong, because people don't analyse you, they just open the doors and let you in, but you know, the yearning was a different thing altogether where you were obviously not allowed either overtly, or you know, not so obviously, that you were not allowed in those spaces, or you're not welcomed in those spaces, and being outside looking in and wanting to be in, not so much you like the idea of that whole patriarchal construct but because you want to be seen as who you are, you know. So that “outside looking in”, I don't experience that anymore. I don't yearn to be in patriarchal situations but that is because I am accepted into such spaces without question, you know. And I don't conform when I'm in those spaces.

I then pressed Dorian for other examples of what he saw as “male exclusive spaces”. He gave two. The first example was on the role of the eldest son or eldest male relative in the Hindu funeral ceremony. The second was on how he would be invited to his sister's wedding, if he would be asked to play any male role if he were invited at all. For both these examples, I questioned that exclusive male role, the overvaluing of the male and the emphasis on the man's importance in these rituals, particularly in Hindu funeral ceremonies, where the man is given the responsibility of “ascending the dead into the next world”, as if only a man had the power to do that. Dorian agreed that women should be able to play the same role but he persisted in distinguishing such roles which if he were to play them, would be a validation that he is a man, a symbolic recognition by his family members and relatives.

I think that would be a validation from my family that I'm a man. It's not so much [about] conforming to a patriarchal idea. . . [If my parents were to] communicate their wishes, or if I were to take up the role and nobody objects, because I would insist [on playing that role]. Then that would be a validation. It is almost a symbolic show to the rest of the family. Here is the eldest son. Here is the son. Not a daughter. But a son. I guess what I want is validation, that I'm a man and there's nothing you can say or do about that. You know. I really don't care if you accept me or not, you know. At least to the people [who] matter, I am. And if and when I take up such a role, that would be like sealing the matter. There would be no, at least what I feel lah, that there would be no debates about it anymore, because if the immediate family accepts, then who are you to say anything? And they [other people] would just have to accept it or learn to live with it.

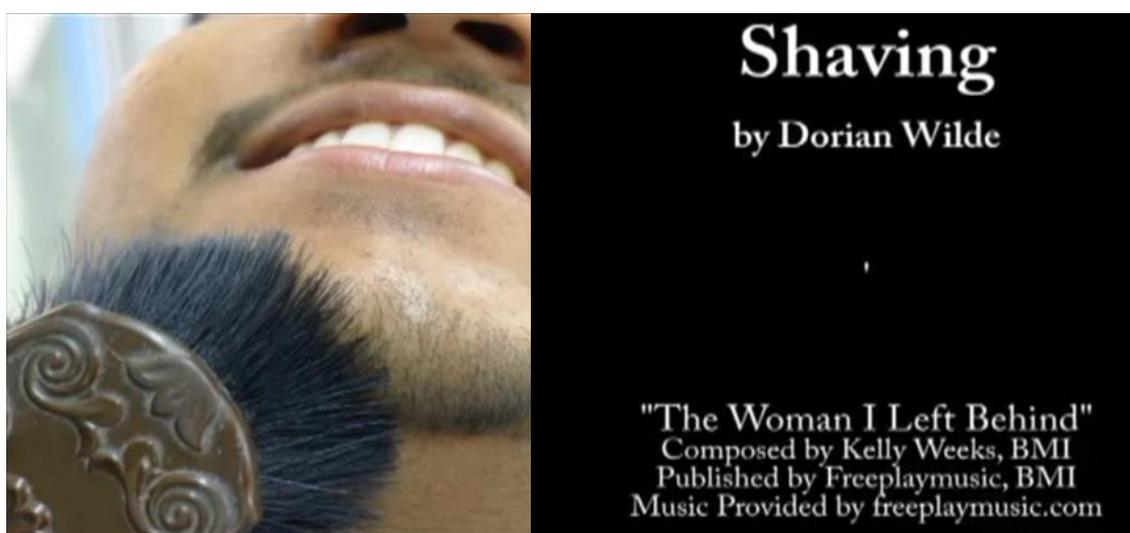
Dorian who already had some level of video editing skills before he attended the workshop shared how he loves his digital story. In explaining what exactly he loved about it, he returned to his reason for wanting to tell his story on “shaving”.

Because, the stories that I've told before are mostly sad, even with my writings and stuff, sad, disturbing, traumatising you know (laughs), but I wanted to say something positive for once, like something happy, something good, that my life is not all misery and sadness and pain and trauma. There are also the awesome parts of my life and I wanted to, even if it was just one story, to tell at least one that is not all doom and gloom. I thought that I managed to, to actually show who I really am, because that doesn't really come across in my stuff, like who I am with most people. Everybody knows me as somebody who at least tries to be funny (laughs), somebody who smiles a lot and, is seemingly carefree and stuff. Uhm, and I guess I just wanted to portray something like that you know, something positive, something happy.

Dorian's digital story does not explicitly say that he is a transman. The question of, “how ‘useful’ is a digital story on shaving?” remains equally relevant whether he is a transman or not. While a few of Dorian's friends expressed some level of disappointment that he was not explicit about his gender identity in his digital story, he feels that he did talk about it but in very different ways. For example, he spoke of how it was his mother who gave him his first razor. How he finally experienced the puberty he had always wanted. How it was his uncle and not his father who offered to teach him how to shave.

Dorian who uses social media a lot, has placed his digital story on both YouTube and Facebook.²¹

A lot of people spoke about how they love the story. A lot of people like said that they laughed and that they really liked the fact that I did a different type of video, because usually I post me just talking to the camera, which can be really boring (laughs). . . . It was the first time that anybody shared my video (laughs). It was pretty cool. When I saw the number of shares, I was like “ding” [big smile] even though it was just three shares but that was good enough for me, you know. Never having had a share before.



Clip from Dorian Wilde's "Shaving", time stamp 2 m 40s. Photo by Jose.

Clip from Dorian Wilde's "Shaving", time stamp 2m 49s. Photo by Jose.

The change the “I” and in this case, the marginalised “I”, appears to be an internal dialogue within the “I”. Dorian subscribes to feminist principles and ideals, and yet he seeks to be accepted in all-male spaces, which can be uncomfortably too sexist for him. He sees his validation as a man in male roles that are distinctly patriarchal. He acknowledges his internal conflict but persists in making meaning for himself in seeking validation for the self from the other while insisting that his wanting validation is not about “being for the other”. Dorian’s justification is premised on non-conformity, and yet, his validation as a man buys into some patriarchal ideas of manhood. Facial hair for example, is not just that, facial hair. Instead, within his ethnic community, facial hair, in Dorian’s words, is “the signifier of whether you’re [a] man or not”. Playing socially defined male roles, which meet the expectations of a patriarchal society in retaining the gender binary, is patriarchal. If it is known that he is a transman, Dorian would be non-

²¹ Dorian’s digital story can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxGuJENUb60&list=UUk8EJRjyV_k7_KMJVICR7sg.

conforming in such patriarchal spaces even if he may be playing gender stereotypical roles. If men in their exclusive spaces without their knowledge that he is transitioning accept Dorian, to what extent would his validation be non-conforming? Dorian's meaning making through storytelling seems to exemplify Arendt's view that storytelling is an aspect of "the subjective in-between".²² When men deny him acceptance, they exercise a "power over" knowingly and unknowingly. Yet, this is not the dominant that Dorian chooses to challenge.

[It] wasn't just about my father's rejection of me, it's also the barber's rejection of me, basically the whole male circle, that whole patriarchy, the whole patriarchal construct that rejected me, before I started passing.

The "power over" that concerns Dorian the most is that of his immediate family and relatives, that their rejection still has a hold over him, that their non-acceptance of his gender identity as a man could still hurt him.

I realised that I was talking about my issues, but in a very positive, funny way and, it was very interesting for me as well because I never, as you said, never told stories like that, and, you know, I think telling it in a funny way, sort of made me come to terms with that part of my life, that rejection. I mean it still hurts and all that. The barbers' earlier rejections, those don't hurt anymore because every time I go to a barber, they'll like clear the chair (laughs). There's no doubt in their minds that I'm definitely coming for a shave (laughs), that it's me and not [me] waiting for somebody else to come. Uhm, my father, that will take some time. It's a gradual process but, I've been toying with the idea in my mind to let him watch the video [digital story]. I honestly don't know if I want to let him watch the video [digital story]. It's possible that my mother [who is a Facebook friend] could have already shown it to him. Maybe that's why he's being extra nice nowadays.

6. Conclusion

The digital story by Dorian Wilde and his self-reflections suggest that possibly the most important change that digital storytelling mediators can help achieve, is the validation of a digital storyteller's existential struggles. While I recognised this crucial role, at the same time, however, I found myself asking, "what is a conscious act to respond?" during an interview with Suriani Kempe, who is the Programme Manager and oversees the Advocacy Legal Service & Publication Unit of the non-governmental organization, Sisters in Islam in Malaysia.

²² For a more thorough anthropological discussion of Hannah Arendt's view on storytelling, read Jackson, Michael. 2002. *The politics of storytelling: Violence, transgression and intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen.

[O]ne thing that immediately came to mind was how the individuals that approached the ministry with stories of their own personal suffering, are the ones who get attention. Are the ones who elicit a certain response, . . . perhaps not institutional change, but a certain person in the ministry will mobilise to help this person, you know. And in many instances, given the framework that you're working in, it's done on a charity basis, . . . saya tolong awak sebab saya kesian awak [I'm helping you because I empathise with you], it's that kind of mentality, I will do whatever I can that's within my power to help you . . . So in that regard, it might not elicit systemic or institutional change, but what it certainly does is that it motivates the individual to move, you know, to act, to elicit compassion, to elicit empathy, and I think what it does is, it puts the human back into the entire equation. . . . and that I think is the power of storytelling in and of itself.²³

Is a charitable act of response sufficient as change? If it is, how would a flooding of digital stories through the Internet affect such charity? Would we as receivers of these stories suffer “compassion fatigue”?²⁴

As digital storytelling mediators, we may have to consider that change through self-representational stories lies in a painstakingly pace of story-by-story, not one of mass scale. In validating a digital storyteller's lived experience and choices in the telling, we help create a society that is that little bit more just and accepting, a society that will hopefully one day refuse to inflict the kind of injustices that it can and does, against the marginalised “I”.

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²³ Interview conducted on 17 December 2012 with Suriani Kempe, Programme Manager, Advocacy Legal Service & Publication Unit, Sisters in Islam, Malaysia.

²⁴ Mass media are saturated with stories and images of tragedy and suffering. These are often so decontextualised that the public is increasingly cynical of the genuineness of the depicted suffering and may even resist helping, out of fear that their kindness and generosity is being exploited. For a further reading, see for example Moeller 1999; Höijer 2004; Kinnick et al. 1996.

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