

Media Technology and Justice: Teaching Interactive Storytelling for the Greater Good

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Abstract

This research will consider ways to bridge the gap between Computer Science and Media Communications and while doing so create Social Justice for student success. New Media, as it has been referred to, is considered content available on-demand through the Internet, a digital device, usually containing some kind of interactivity and creative participation. It is the interplay between technology, images, media and communications. The next generation of newspaper, radio, television, and film students need to have a working knowledge of the technologies that are available for the creation of their work and taught to use this knowledge to create a voice. The work is interdisciplinary; in communications we understand the necessity of reporting, disseminating information and good storytelling. In documentary we understand the instructional and historic aspects of media and technology and in the non-profit sector, we see the need for expanding outlets for good. So, the true necessity is to utilize “new media” technologies to advance social causes while reporting information, informing citizens and creating a great story. There is no longer a need to be a computer scientist in order to have a working knowledge of communication technologies and how they will benefit our work. There are many free and easy to use applications available for the creation of interactive communications. A goal of this research is to give communications students a better understanding of the technology that is both, currently at their disposal, and on the horizon, so that they can use it in their media, communications and storytelling to be a voice for their generation. This is Qualitative-Empirical Study that puts these ideas into action. There is a survey at the end of the course that is qualitative in nature and allows for the participants to share ideas and feelings about the technology and approach.

Keywords: Media Technology, Interactive Storytelling, Digital Media

Introduction

My experience in the ten years that have been teaching media, art and technology to Millennials is that they are only experts in their own daily technology. This means that they can move around their personal circles of social media and know all the apps on their cellphone. But does this mean that they are technology experts? Absolutely not. They know what they want to know and what works for them to socialize and get required work done. A recent survey by ServiceNow concluded that so-called, “digital natives” are not as tech savvy as we might think (White, 2015).

According to Chris Pope, senior director of strategy at the technology services company ServiceNow, most digital natives grew up accustomed to using social media and texting for communicating and not learning other programs or software (White, 2015).

As White indicates, Millennials are very fast paced and in the moment. They want their media in small quick bits. The audience now finds itself reacting to media in the same way. If the story is not told quickly we just go to another site, channel, or app to get it faster. This has become standard for communications. We are all in a hurry. When is the last time you spend an hour talking on the phone? 30 minutes? 10 minutes? It is just easier to text what you need to know and move on. Or television, do you give a show a fighting chance? Or if it has not gotten your attention in the first 15 seconds, are you onto another channel?

Facebook’s video consumption has increased by 75% in the past year, reaching 8 billion daily video views; over 1.5 million small businesses posted a video (or a video ad) on Facebook in September 2015 (Kalogeropoulos, 2016). According to the Reuters Institute Report, this was, in part, due to the fact that the average length for the Facebook native news videos was 75 seconds (Kalogeropoulos, 2016).

Shorter form videos are well suited to online delivery, as viewers can dip in and out and access a range of content at once rather than committing to viewing the long form piece.

I am sure that most of us can agree that we are all becoming “swift-media” consumers. We spend more time using media but, when we do, we want our stories to be faster. The purpose of this study is to use these ideas to create a project that allows viewers to become involved thought interaction. Interaction is now the key to creative online storytelling. Knowing how to, and understanding the importance of creative interaction is a major step in creating stories that will allow for social awareness to create civic engagement.

Background

Technology clearly plays a role in representational options (Ellis, 2012). Interactive technology is based on the functionality of the system, in other words, the ways that the information is retrieved. Interactivity is based on user control.

Interactive and Cross-media innovations have created a new model of communication that can go in many directions, where audiences can both consume and produce in the social activist setting and by 2005, more possibilities grew for online participation (Whiteman 2003). The introduction of peer-to-peer broadcasting, largely influenced by YouTube created ever-expanding possibilities for social networking and change. Sites like Facebook continue to add to social networking possibilities. Web 2.0 has created a truly unique opportunity to explore international communities (Miller, 2009).

Interaction allows for the five C’s to occur: communication, collaboration, community, creativity, and convergence (Faraj, 2011). Through the creation of an interactive story and the use of social media, communication of some kind will occur. If the story is told well and the social media plan is put into place properly, the community will collaborate creatively. New interactive tools allow the viewer to take on a collaborative role as creator. When the viewer is encouraged to add their voice to a project, it enhances the community and welcomes others to do the same. This type of interactivity allows the user to become

intimately involved with the project and the social cause.

And there is no mistaken the fact that the Internet, and its surrounding technologies, have created media and technology convergences as well as convergence of consumption as students use different media simultaneously to create both art and news. And there is also the convergence of rules that has caused the blur in the roles of creator, producer and consumer (Friedman, n.d.).

According to Dovey (2014), the content of the blog world, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Flickr are all real, journalistic, and expressive and this is what interactive storytelling encompasses. These social media outlets are living documentaries for those who create them. New tools for collaboration and sharing in social media platforms build a participatory culture that creates the formation of groups with common views and goals (Jenkins 2006). These groups create communities with enthusiastic, innovative citizenship that work to self-organize for common purposes and causes through this social media (Nash, Hight & Summerhayes, 2014).

With all of this in mind, we now are charged with teaching our students how to create media, whether, radio, television, film or online media, with our consumers in mind. They must create fast paced, informationally sound and esthetically pleasing works.

This is where critical perspectives and creative production practices are imperative in teaching our next generation of media producers.

First making sure that Communications/Media students have both the historical and theoretical backgrounds to lay the groundwork in their craft but then making sure that they have knowledge of the emerging technologies available to help create fast-paced, informative, entertaining and interactive story-making.

Documentary film, in some form, has been part of our culture and society since the early 1900's. In the 1930's John Grierson began using film to show the world things he believed they needed to see, and the Advocacy/Social documentary was born. Films that represent the world's conditions have continually grown in popularity over the years. Now, with the advent of new technologies the social/advocate documentary is once again becoming a force to be reckoned with. Documentaries not only expose audiences to foreign people and unknown places, but they are also helping to create social movements of important causes and marginalized populations.

Interactive documentaries are a new form of documentary, with its roots in the interactive Internet. Interactive Documentary has gone through many iterations including use of CD ROM and early Internet access. It was not until the mainstreaming of the World Wide Web and Web 2.0 in 2004 that Interactive Documentaries could take their place on the documentary stage. Web 2.0 created a relationship between the documentary author and user as both, producer/viewer and co-creators (Ashton 2012).

Documentary filmmakers have been producing commentaries concerning the world's marginalized people and places in an effort to shed light on the problems and help create social movements to effect change for the future (Moyano, 2011). New technologies are now in place that can elevate this light to a much greater audience, through the use of interactive storytelling and multi-media platforms.

Using the background that has been laid out by documentary film and infusing interactive media and internet capabilities, this study looks at how we can advance a social justice cause using current and developing technologies.

Methodology

This is Qualitative-Empirical Study puts these ideas into action. There is a survey at the end of the course that is qualitative in nature and allows for the participants to share ideas and feelings about the technology and approach.

Emerging Technologies for Media Interaction: The Course

With this course the student begins by creating a website, using a front-end web design tool, such as Wix.com. Both teacher and student followed the 16 week cycle to create an interactive documentary for a social justice cause.

The student must choose a social cause or their capstone subject area (dealing with social awareness) and create the site in that vain. The site is required to have at least 4 pages, video, audio and interaction to start. The site also contains a blog. The students then create a mobile app to accompany the site.

Next we look at virtual and augmented reality. We are currently using Aurasma to create augmented reality photos that can be placed on the website and also a business card or brochure. We then play with gaming and animation and create a game that will be added to the site.

In an effort to get the sites up and running and test their interaction, we create and connect all social media: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Soundcloud, Pinterest and Linkedin. We also set up Analytics.

The final phase of the class is launch the sites, create a social media tactical plan/campaign and track the analytics.

This course not only created a home-base for the social cause, but it also allowed for several convergence points for audience interaction (Mobile, Augmented Reality, Gaming, Video, and Audio). Audience can be analyzed from each location they enter the site, through the analytics.

Tools such as mobile apps, virtual reality, augmented reality, animation, gaming and technologies for learning are now all part of the “tool-kit” that the interactive storyteller or social change agent, has at their disposal for creating good interactive stories. As Simon Staffans (2011), of Re-Think New Media Solutions puts it, we are looking at a shift towards a collective journey. Due to a connected society and made possible by technology, stories and narratives can be seen as a collective. These stories are uniquely individual but also dependent on the collective (Simon 2016). We need to consider all of the tools of interactivity when planning the interactive aspects of the project.

A Mobile application can be connected to the website housing the interactive/social change story and can aide the interaction. This can be done by creating a mobile friendly version of the site and then connecting it to a software, such as Appsbar (appsbar.com), to create the app and icon for any mobile device. This tool is simple and free to use.

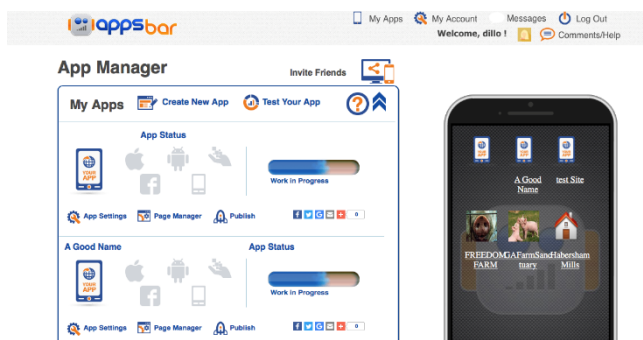


Figure 1. Appsbar

Augmented reality is also based on mobile. This environment allows a still picture to come to life for the user through the camera on their phone. This can be used on advertisements or as an enhancement to the interactive storytelling experience. Aurasma (Aurasma.com) is an example of a good, simple and free resource for creating beautiful augmented reality pieces for any project.

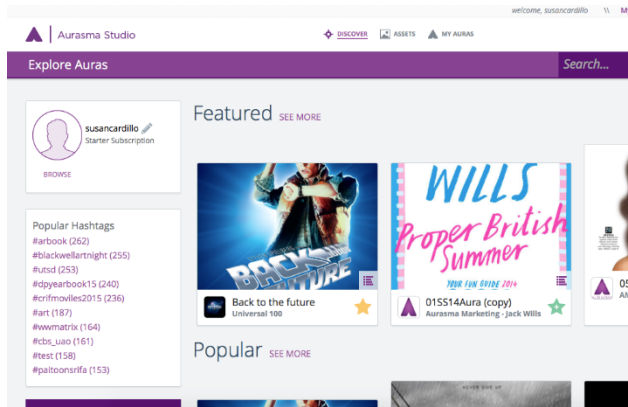


Figure 2. Aurasma

Virtual Reality- With the advent of 360 cameras and Google cardboard (among others) virtual reality can be created for any interactive storytelling project. 360 cameras are now fairly inexpensive and editing can take place in Adobe Premiere. Youtube enables VR video to play on their channels. But there are also the virtual worlds that can hold a “world” for the project as well. Secondlife is a good example of such a world. The storyteller can create a virtual world for the cause where people can gather, get more involved with the cause and find out how to get involved in “real” life.



Figure 3. Second Life

Animation and gaming are also strong areas of advancement in storytelling. There are several tools that will help the interactive storyteller add animation or gaming to their story to create yet another level of engagement and interactivity.

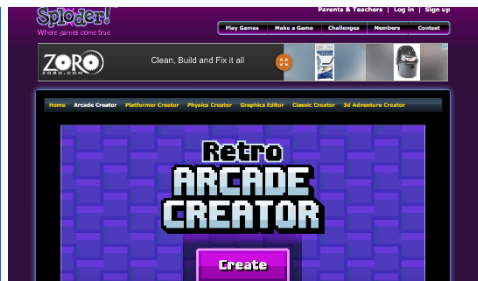
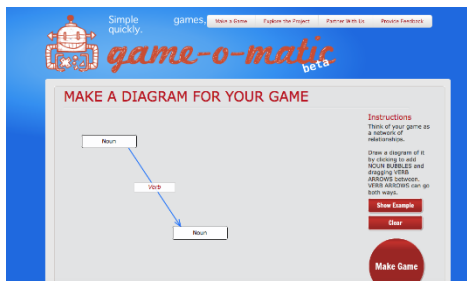
Photoshop is a simple way of creating easy to use animations for a project. There is a frame animation tool built into Photoshop that is simple to use.

There are also online resources, that will help the storyteller create simple animations to advance, entertain and engage the audience.



Figure 4. Animation

Sites like Sploder.com and the University of California at Santa Cruz', Game-o-Matic will allow storytellers to create simple game creation.



Figures 5 and 6. Game Creators

Tools for learning- these tools allow for video to be imported into the tool in order to create a learning experience, such as a quiz or response before moving forward. An example of this is Zaption.com.

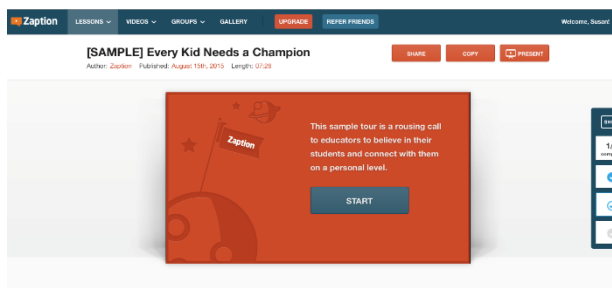


Figure 7. Zaption

These are just examples of a few of the emerging tools of interactivity, collaboration, and participation that an interactive storyteller can use to create a project that will engage, entertain and help to create social awareness, civic engagement and social change. All of these tools can be embedded into the social cause storyteller's website or blog.

Analytics is the discovery and communication of meaningful patterns in data. It is imperative that students know and understand the use of analytics. Most of the tools mentioned above, each have their own set of analytics but the site can also be connected to Google Analytics to keep a "one stop" location for understanding how and when citizens are engaging in the social awareness site.

Once engaged, these tools, along with good storytelling techniques, can take social awareness to the publics, create citizen engagement and, as an ultimate goal, create social change.

Discussion

Once this course was complete, the students were asked to take a survey about their experience with the different tools.

The survey first asked:

- 1) Do you think the class and site should be built around
 - You
 - A social cause
 - A subject of your choosing

Sixty-five percent (65%) of the class responded that the class should be built around a subject of their choosing. With 35% saying that it should be built around a social cause. As a disclosure here, the students did not come into the class knowing that the subject of the project would be a social cause. Many were just taking a technology course and found themselves involved in social justice. The survey tells us that the students were interested in creating the projects but not necessarily for the benefit of a social cause.

The next question broke down each of the areas of the course and asked; For each of the areas we worked in or talked about, please tell me which you liked best, did not like at all, thought could be eliminated, do more with, or any other suggestions:

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1) Mobile Applications | 6) Animation |
| 2) Augmented Reality | 7) Social Media/SEO |
| 3) Virtual Reality | 8) Wix.com (front-end user web building) |
| 4) Learning Technologies | 9) Interactive Documentary |
| 5) Gaming | |

The areas that the students liked least in this study were Learning Technologies, Animation, Gaming and Mobile Apps. The most popular areas of the course were Augmented Reality and Wix (100% said that these were their favorites), Social Media and Interactive Documentary.

Augmented Reality and specifically Aurasma got the most attention in the comments. The students were very excited about this technology and thought there were endless ways of using it in both storytelling and marketing. They also appreciated the ease of Wix.com in creating beautiful, interactive, blog friendly websites for free. One student proclaiming, “Wix is my new favorite thing to do!”

When commenting on the Learning Technologies, they were unsure of its potential for creating civic engagement since people do not want to feel like they are being tested when they visit an interactive story. They found Animation difficult and Gaming was deemed unnecessary for the cause. Gaming is a great tool of interaction, but the level the student would have to get to, as a game creator, was far beyond the scope of this class.

An interesting finding through this survey was that the students had little interest in the Mobile Application. Their comments mentioned that they could create a user-friendly mobile site with Wix so it was unnecessary to have an app that would just take up room on their phones.

The students are on the right track here. We know that apps are changing, but where the technology goes next is still a work in progress.

Paul Adams (2016), VP of Product at Intercom put it this way:

In a world of many different screens and devices, content needs to be broken down into atomic units so that it can work agnostic of the screen size or technology platform. For example, Facebook is not a website or an app. It is an eco-system of objects (people, photos, videos, comments, businesses, brands, etc.) that are aggregated in many different ways through people's newsfeeds, timelines and pages, and delivered to a range of devices, some of which haven't even been invented yet. So Facebook is not a set of webpages, or screens in an app. It's a system of objects, and relationships between them.

As the next phase of mobile interaction is being developed it will move beyond the app, as we know it. We will stay tuned to this and learn how to best utilize the interactive features of mobile communications to advance causes.

The Social Media aspect of the course was popular with the student with comments that indicated that it was a place they were comfortable with so, it was fun to "play around in". But not many of the students mentioned SEO as something they found interesting or cared about. There were a few students who were surprised at the ways they could create search engine optimization, as it never occurred to them before.

And finally, although they did not create one, they were very interested in the concept and review of Interactive Documentary. The response was very positive to creating smaller independent stories that worked together as a whole but could be separated and spread out on social media to create the greatest interaction.

Overall this course was a great success. Communications students learned new technologies for storytelling as well as gaining an understanding on how to reach an audience, to effect social awareness and change. As an instructor I learned that this type of course is every changing. Technologies are changing, improving and disappearing on a regular basis and as a teacher and learner of media technologies, our work is never done.

Future Work and Conclusion

The next phase of this project will be to have students create an Interactive Documentary for social awareness and change. Interactive documentaries are capable of relaying deep and complex information in compelling ways. The shift in audience metrics from "exposure" to "engagement" offers important opportunities for students to think about communication. This form can be structured in what could be describe as "micro-narratives"—small narrative units that, like Legos, can be disaggregated and reconfigured in various ways (Uricchio 2015).

"If the growth of interactive documentary does anything, I think it will open our eyes to the hundreds of possibilities of telling stories in original ways, and re-defining what a story is, what an audience is, and what a maker is." Gerry Flahive, National Film Board of Canada

The objectives will be to use the tools of technology to film/edit short, meaningful segments that will create a story. The story will shed light on a social cause. The students will use the knowledge and practice they gained from the first part of this course to create a social media campaign and interaction through blogging, to create an audience and effect social change. Analytics will be used to measure citizen engagement in the cause and interaction data will be collected to determine social change.

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