Digital Storytelling in the Age of Social Media: Reflections on Definitions, Curation, and Access

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Digital storytelling (through a variety of platforms) has become a large part of lived experience for much of contemporary society. A variety of websites and digital archives encourage people to tell their own stories in their own words or voices. In light of this, it is important to consider both the way that these true stories are often shaped and curated in terms of collections, featured stories and categories or otherwise molded by the platforms they are published in. It is equally important to consider the way that issues with access shape which stories get told. As the relatively new field of "Digital Curation" continues to emerge, with degree and certificate programs across the country, it becomes crucial to reconsider the question of access to storytelling tools (who has access to which tools to share their stories) as well as the ways that some stories are never told. In this paper, I will focus on some of the potential issues related to digital storytelling, curation and access.

Digital storytelling, particularly in the form of the telling or sharing individual life stories (true stories of everyday life), continues to evolve at a rapid pace. Innumerable websites and social media applications devoted to encouraging individuals to tell their own stories in their own words (and often voices) have developed over the last several years. As the definition of, and tools for, digital storytelling continue to shift and evolve, so too do the issues related to this idea. While the notion of allowing people to tell their stories is laudable, often the sites (web or app based) involved in cultivating these stories solicit or accept only certain types of stories or curate the stories in ways that are problematic. Additionally, issues with access to the technologies needed to create and submit stories to these sites is a lingering concern. As the field of digital curation continues to emerge, including archival curation for longevity in terms of library storage, there are serious implications for ensuring that a variety of stories are included in digital storytelling archives.

The Evolving Nature (and Definition) of Digital Storytelling

According to most sources, the digital storytelling movement grew out of academic interest in collecting and preserving oral histories. The West Vancouver Memorial Library notes that: "collecting and preserving oral histories became an academic endeavor beginning in the 1970s. Its popularity in academia declined during the 1990s, but the discipline has been reinvented and revived through digital media" (WVML, 2011, n.p.). The notion of digital storytelling at the advent of the Internet age evoked a particular format, typically a combination of still images layered with an audio or textual component all compiled in a video format. In the mid to late 1990s this type of digital storytelling required access to computers, expensive video and audio programs and a certain level of expertise working with, manipulating, and editing in, software. As StoryCenter's historical page notes, the "emerging digital technologies of the 1990s offered new tools for expression and fertile ground for experimentation" (StoryCenter.org, n.p.). As a result, early efforts at digitally cataloguing individual human experiences were diverse in their methods (utilizing locally developed methods and diverse software and hardware configurations and devices) and early digital storytelling archives were often hosted solely by nonprofit organizations or universities who tended to have an interest in preserving individual or community related stories in a manner consistent with the traditional goals of preserving oral history.

Digital storytelling, or the evolution or movement of storytelling into the digital realm, "is a natural progression from oral storytelling; one might even say that storytelling plus technology equals digital storytelling" (WVML, 2011). And, while precise definitions of digital storytelling are somewhat elusive in computers and writing scholarship (outside of a basic acknowledgement that it entails connecting narratives with digital technologies), most scholars in the field discussing the form do so in terms of multimodality and the possibilities for individual expression outside of the written word alone.

Importantly however, as Annette Markham and Nancy Baym (2009) noted, digital technologies (including the Internet and social media) have changed the ways that most Americans do everything and therefore have widely impacted individual's lives and their everyday practices (pp. vii–xii). As such, in the early 2010s and beyond, as user friendly Internet based tools became more widely available and accessible (in terms of both production and cost) more people were able to use these tools to catalogue their everyday life stories.

Over the last few years the popularity of digital storytelling has increased dramatically, which can be seen in the rise in the number of websites devoted to cataloguing individual stories as well as the increased popularity of true story podcasts, websites, and applications. As digital storytelling as a form continues to evolve, numerous social media websites and smartphone applications have contributed significantly to a blurring of the definition of digital storytelling in general. Consider the use of YouTube, Snapchat, and Facebook for examples of the ways that individual people create and share individual stories about their everyday lives. As these genres continue to develop and evolve, questions as to what exactly equates to a digital story continue to emerge. For example, are Snapchat Stories digital stories? Can we consider the posts made on Facebook a form of narrating our everyday stories? What about the short burst submissions documenting daily dramas on fmylife.com? Do these few sentence narrative submissions about something awful happening to the individual on that day count as digital stories?

Humans are "storytelling animals" (Gottschall, 2013), and we live for and through stories. It is no surprise then that we are drawn both to hearing, reading, and sharing stories. And so, as the spread of tools and applications allow us to access, to upload, and share our own stories continue to proliferate, so too do the number of stories being told. What this means, however, is that pinning down an exact definition of what digital storytelling remains difficult. What is clear is that the earlier format is no longer a strict container for defining or determining what counts as a digital story. Digital stories are now told through captioned images, videos, audio recordings, and in digital texts on a variety of platforms on the Internet and social media applications. They vary in length, depth, and breadth from long narrations told in audio or video podcasts to those few sentence posts shared on message boards. For the purposes of this exploratory discussion on the subject, I choose to rely on a wide ranging definition of digital storytelling which is inclusive of these formats. I prefer not to close in on a definition that might exclude certain sites, forms or stories and hopefully the rest of my presentation will explain why.

Digital Story Archives

There are currently a wide range of storytelling websites and social media applications available to individuals as noted in my earlier discussion. Quite frankly, there are simply too many different types of sites/apps to discuss in one short paper. Rather, to consider the implications of specific factors involving digital stories (including curation and access) I choose to focus here only on certain types of websites that are explicitly involved in gathering and publicly sharing digital stories to give a brief picture of the types and varieties of these sites. Unlike social media applications or websites that contain a variety of features, these are sites that are devoted solely to cultivating and archiving stories. I would like to explore their features by showcasing a few examples and considering the potentials and constraints of each type. In my initial research, I have determined that these sites can be divided up into three distinct categories, *tell us anything* sites, *content specific* sites, and *prompted content* sites. What follows is a brief discussion of each site type.

What I will call tell us anything (within reason) sites are those that offer individuals the option of sharing whatever stories that they choose to share. An example of this type of site would be StoryCorps.org (2015), one of the most well known public archives of digital stories, whose stated mission is "to provide people of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share and preserve the stories of our lives" (n.p.). Sites like StoryCorps tend to have a mission that is intently focused on the notion that individual stories can be shared to build community and tolerance, to remind us of our common humanity. These sites are interested in the value of individual stories and in the

preservation of human experience. StoryCorps, for example, lists its purpose in gathering and publicizing stories as being

> to remind one another of our shared humanity, to strengthen and build the connections between people, to teach the value of listening, and to weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that everyone's story matters. At the same time, we are creating an invaluable archive for future generations. (n.p.)

What I have chosen to call content specific sites only solicit digital stories related to particular topics or concepts. For example, the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) hosted by the Ohio State University library, solicits submissions of digital narratives specifically related to how individuals acquired literacies. The DALN is only interested in stories related to literate practices, however they invite "people of all ages, races, communities, backgrounds, and interests to contribute stories about how — and in what circumstances — they read, write, and compose meaning, and how they learned to do so (or helped others learn)" ("About", n.p.). Sites such as the DALN, which are focused on gathering digital stories related to a content specific goal, are fairly common. These sites include local and regional storytelling communities that seek to gather stories of local communities or the experiences of local inhabitants as well as stories related to specific experiences (such as a common experience with illness, loss of child/partner, etc.). The DALN of course is unique in that it welcomes stories about literacies from anyone who would like to submit them, however the stories solicited are still connected to one overall concept (literacy) and therefore content specific.

There are also a variety of sites that solicit stories per regularly changing topics or subjects. I choose to call these sites prompted sites because they tend to solicit stories based on changing topics or subjects. The British site www.Massobs.org.uk is an interesting example of this type of digital storytelling archive. The organization, Mass Observation (2015), is devoted to "recording everyday life in Britain" and to do so regularly assigns writing prompts to story contributors in the form of "Directives" which submitters respond to in writing and submit to the archive (Mass Observation Project, n.p.). For example, part of a recent directive entitled "Fraud and scams" provides the following prompt for storytellers:

> Cold calls, fake tickets, bogus emails and phishing…It seems that cheats are always inventing new ways to trick people into investing their own money or personal data in fraudulent schemes. In this Directive, we would like you to write about scams and include any personal experience you may have on this topic. (Autumn 2015 Directive, p. 1)

The organization, like other sites predicated on prompting storytellers, uses an approach of giving storytellers an idea to work with to facilitate storytelling on the subject matter at hand.

Key Observations Regarding the Various Digital Storytelling Sites

There are, of course, many affordances and limitations to each type of digital storytelling site identified. However, in my initial research into the types of digital story archives discussed above, the following observations emerged that may highlight a few potential key considerations for future research in this area. These include how awareness of the sites, the types of submissions accepted, and the use of curation and cultivation affect which stories are gathered and shared. I touch only briefly here on the first two (as they are largely self-explanatory) before providing a more detailed discussion of curation and cultivation within sites.

Awareness of Sites

Public awareness of a digital storytelling site's existence widely affects what submissions are received. For example, StoryCorps affiliation with National Public Radio, which regularly airs these stories via podcasts on the radio and features on their website, allows it to be widely known, increasing the likelihood that individuals who are interested in contributing their personal stories might become aware of the archive. In contrast to this, institutionally affiliated sites, such as the DALN, with primarily

academic audiences or word of mouth references, are less likely to garner widespread public awareness, which may limit the number of stories received as well as affect the variety of stories received as those contributed may come from primarily those affiliated with academia.

Types of Submissions Accepted

The type of submissions accepted (including formats required for submission) ultimately affect what type of stories are gathered. For example, sites such as the DALN and the Mass Observation Archive accept a variety of types of submissions (including both written text and digital files) in a wide array of formats (videos, audio, postcards, etc.) that can be delivered through multiple means (online submissions, via postal service, etc.) therefore diversifying the overall types of submissions received. Sites like StoryCorps, however, may prescribe a particular format (in this case the preferred format is a conversational interview between two or more people that is audio recorded), which ultimately limits who contributes stories and shapes how the stories are told.

Cultivation and Curation of Digital Stories

The cultivation and curation of digital story archives may affect not only which stories are read, but also how stories are approached by the reader. Many sites reviewed rely on some form of curation of the digital stories that they receive. This can come in the form of featured stories, collections or stories tagged according to categories of content. A look at StoryCorps (2015) revealed that the site features a prominently displayed feature story with two other smaller feature stories below, followed by an array of other staff pick stories underneath. Stories are curated into different collections and can be accessed by clicking on *Staff Picks*, *Browse Theme*s, etc. (n.p.). Even when you click on the Browse Themes tab you land on another page that offers some of the same options again along with other tabs that require you to dig further into curated story collections. It is difficult to get a sense of how many stories are available or even how they are tagged into these categories due to the way the site is structured, but clearly a great deal of curation takes place on the StoryCorps website and this curation alters which stories are brought to a viewer's attention. Additionally, like many websites that host digital stories, searchability within this archive is difficult and not user friendly.

Curation within the DALN is equally problematic. The main search page of the site lists several collections, such as *A Comprehensive Collection*, *Community Literacy*, *Editors' Picks*, *OSU FYWP AU2009*, and *Social Activists* (DALN, 2007, n.p.). While some of these categories seem clear cut, others are nearly unintelligible. What exactly is FYWP AU 2009 for example, and would someone outside of academia even attempt a guess? Additionally, some collections include only a handful of narratives. It leaves one to wonder how or why certain categories are selected and grouped into collections.

The Mass Observation Project's directives are archived within an archive known as *The Keep* which requires visiting an entirely different website that is difficult to navigate. Within my initial inquiries, it became quickly evident that this archive is also highly curated, with specific collections related to prior Mass Observation projects housed in one collection and ongoing collections categorized per topics as well. Generally, I found that although the site listed collection and category choices such as *Letters from the Archiv*e and *Authors*, viewing the materials within these collections was difficult. Where available, it appeared that the entries were highly contextualized by written introductions by staff members. There is also, the option of actually visiting The Keep in Britain itself.

Beyond the initial concerns noted above about how curation takes place within the sites themselves (in terms of special featured stories, collections or other curated categories) there are additional concerns to be noted in relation to the various sites and the curation of digital stories generally. In some ways, the lack of awareness of sites and the specified formats for story submissions discussed earlier can also be seen as a form of curation. Additional concerns with web and social media based digital storytelling platforms are that there are many sites that utilize a form of user curation, where visitors to the sites vote up or down different stories (often using thumbs up or thumbs down icons). Sometimes referred to as cocreation of content or as distributed curation, this method of curation results in individual stories being

rated on popularity with the audience that views or listens to them. Overall, the notion of curation within digital story sites remains complicated and unsatisfactory. There are a great many individual stories that are excluded from (or simply not valued within) the existing platforms due to a wide variety of factors, including issues with access to technologies and digital literacies required to create and upload stories.

Divides–Access and Literacies

Despite the widespread availability of websites to share digital stories through, there continues to be concerns related to access that need to be mentioned. As noted, many spaces for sharing digital stories are still in the form of websites. Often the tools needed to produce and submit the stories for inclusion in the various archives are still very much computer based and require a certain (even if minimal) amount of proficiency with using a computer. Access to digital storytelling sites is also complicated by the continuing problem of lack of access to the Internet generally. While great strides have been made over the last five years, equitable Internet access is still a problem in the United States. Thus, access to high speed Internet connection options is not always available to people in poverty or those that reside in rural communities. Consider, for example, the following: 1) In May of 2015, American Online (AOL) reported that 2.1 million users in the United States continue to subscribe to dial up Internet with the company (Paglieri, 2015, n.p.). 2) At the other end of the spectrum there is a growing number of younger Americans who are considered "smartphone dependent", these individuals only have access to the Internet via data service on their smartphones (Smartphones, 2015, p. 3). According to a recent report from the Pew Charitable Trust on smartphones (2015), 7% of Americans only access the Internet through their smartphones and "15% of Americans own a smartphone but say that they have a limited number of ways to get online other than their cell phone" (p. 2). In additional, a 2013 Pew reported that 15% of Americans never go online and another 9% only go online in places other than their homes (Who's Not Online, p. 2). No matter the cause, these factors limit whose stories are included in digital story archives.

A lack of Internet or access to the Internet only via a smartphone severely limits the possibility of uploading and viewing stories on digital story archives. The upload and download speeds of dialup Internet do not support either uploading or viewing of large files. Most digital story archives have not yet evolved the capacity to accept digital stories created by applications. Interestingly, however, StoryCorps (2015), the one site that I found does, offers an app for recording and uploading stories to their digital storytelling archive, however that app is limited to certain types of smartphones. The disclosure on their website read that the "app is not currently available on Windows phones" (n.p.).

I would also like to note, as a small addition to the concept of access, that considering access in general continues to be complicated by the problem of stories that are considered *untellable* because they *bump up* against socially acceptable narratives–that is, certain stories tend to remain untellable in society generally because they voice alternative views that are unpopular or dwell on unapproachable topics that people are not interested in hearing or reading about. The individual life stories that are focused on these topics are typically excluded from inclusion in any type of mainstream dialogue, including the digital storytelling archive sites discussed above. While there are a few sites devoted to telling stories that do not fall within typical mainstream life story purviews, they often have a shtick (for shock value, for laughs, etc.) and even so, they still have fairly restricted guidelines for story submissions. (See, for example Risk-Show.com or the Moth podcast at theMoth.org, etc.) This leaves individuals with somewhat controversial life stories to tell at an impasse, be excluded, become a spectacle, or shock.

On Digital Preservation and Curation of Previously Curated Stories

Beyond general considerations of whose stories matter and whose stories get told, there are ultimately real concerns related to the idea of digital curation because digital preservation has become an imperative of a great many institutions. Per the Library of Congress (2015), they are "implementing a national strategy to collect, preserve and make available significant digital content, especially information that is created in digital form only, for current and future generations" (n.p.) As institutions fret about archiving

and preserving aspects of contemporary culture that are created in digital format, digital curation has become a rapidly evolving field complete with certificate and degree programs popping up at universities across the country. The premise of digital curation as a field is a somewhat murky at the moment; however, the best explanation that I have found on the subject explains that:

> "Digital curation" concepts started to appear after digital preservation had already put a stake in the ground. "Curation" takes a "whole life" approach to digital materials to address the selection, maintenance, collection, and archiving of digital assets in addition to their preservation" (Lazorchak, 2011, n.p.).

Beyond mere preservation of digital materials, digital curation then can be seen as the selection of which digital materials are to be preserved for future generations, adding a certain amount of pressure to the consideration of digital storytelling, digital storytelling archives and issues of curation within and access to these sites.

In what may seem to be an interesting twist to this concern, consider for example the fact that some digital storytelling archives publicly available online are now working to ensure that the digital stories that they have collected will be preserved for the long run. Individual libraries and websites each have long term preservation plans for their digital data. The StoryCorps organization even collaborated with the Library of Congress to collect and archive stories that will be added to the Library of Congress in order to be preserved for future generations. Stories received via the StoryCorps app until March of 2016 will be "archived at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Interviews uploaded to the Library of Congress by March 2016 will be preserved indefinitely" (StoryCorps, 2015, n.p.).

Implications for Further Study

While the concepts and considerations that I have discussed in this paper are preliminary, the repercussions for further inquiry are great. There can be no denying that there is an inherent risk that digital storytelling archives are (whether intentionally or not) privileging the life stories of certain people over others. Unfortunately, what is at risk is even greater – the long term preservation of certain stories while innumerable other stories are ultimately excluded. Hopefully, the initial research shared here points to the need to complicate the ways we think about digital storytelling, and archives, and to expand our research into this area. As I ground my work in technofeminist scholarship, I am reminded that Jen Almjeld & Kristine Blair (2012) noted that continuing to "foster broader definitions of research" in the digital age is critical (p. 100). It would be wise to rethink the role of digital storytelling archives (as well as what the definition of digital storytelling is across a variety of platforms) as valuable knowledge production, that, no matter the source, is always worthy of our scholarly attention. And, as we do this, as Annette Harris Powell (2007) made clear, it is critical to recognize "access as practice," which reminds us that how people actually use tools (including digital storytelling archives and the tools needed to contribute to them) matters (that is, what tools are used—and access to them—to share stories matters) as we research digital stories (p. 18).

Cynthia L. Selfe and Richard J. Selfe (1994) long ago provided a guiding reference for considering the ways that technologies ultimately contain the values of specific communities, which can also help us to consider how digital storytelling archives and the tools used to contribute to them ultimately shape the stories that get told. And, as Gail Hawisher, Cynthia Selfe, et. al (2004) showed us, the gateways to technologies are often found outside of traditional spaces and the cultural ecologies that promote technological literacies aren't often the ones we (as academics) are focusing on entirely, which reminds us to consider what stories are being shared on platforms that we may not even be thinking of. All of this leads me to wonder how we might approach research into digital storytelling differently if we were to embrace a wide variety of digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter, fmylife.com, etc.) as digital storytelling archives—as spaces where everyday people catalogue their everyday life experiences. And, to consider how we might expand research into digital storytelling that includes a recognition of those (both inside and outside of Western culture) who may utilize different platforms, who may be without Internet access, or those with moderated, constrained, surveilled, or otherwise controlled, access to widely accepted

forums. Ultimately, it leads me to recognize how important it is that we, as a community, continue to strive to ensure that a wide variety of life stories are shared and preserved.

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