

Telling Tales: Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Qualitative Data Interpretation and Communication

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Abstract

Academic journal articles often do not embody the rich accounts of long-term qualitative field work, while creative storytelling offers researchers an alternative way to reflect upon and communicate their findings. Digital storytelling is an emerging research methodology increasingly used to gather qualitative data but not so often to communicate results. As part of the ICT4COP research project, which investigates community policing and police-reform in post-conflict settings, we decided to try out digital storytelling to communicate some of the findings from the research. During the process, we observed that the digital storytelling methodology led researchers to approach their data differently. This article explores our adapted digital storytelling methodology. We draw similarities with ethnographic storytelling and highlight the digital storytelling methodology both as a means of dissemination, as well as an alternative approach to data interpretation for qualitative researchers.

Keywords

digital storytelling, qualitative methodology, research communication, research storytelling, ethnography

The world *needs* our stories

Goodall (2010, p. 262)

The rich insights, realities and nuances of field experiences can often be challenging for researchers to translate into academic writing. Ethnographic research, for example, is traditionally presented as dissertations, monographs, or in some cases, films. However, as Adèle De Jager et al. (2017) state, the time and resources of academic institutions are largely allocated to publishing journal articles. Journal articles often do not embody the detailed accounts of an ethnographer's long-term field work. Hence, ethnography, both as an approach and as a means of representation, has become open to creativity, innovation and experimentation (Barton & Papen, 2010; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Richardson, 2002; Van Maanen, 2011). Alternative approaches to research communication, such as creative storytelling, can “[make] research findings more readily interpreted, meaningful, and relevant” (Christensen, 2012, p. 240).

Digital storytelling is an emerging research method increasingly used to gather qualitative data. However, it is not commonly used to communicate research findings to stakeholders (De Jager et al., 2017). Being responsible for the comparative analysis and results dissemination of the ICT4COP¹ research project, which investigated community policing (COP) and

police-reform in post-conflict countries, we decided to try out digital storytelling. We initially implemented digital storytelling as an alternative means for researchers to communicate some of the rich, empirically based, and often context specific knowledge and experiences gained from the ICT4COP research. However, during the process we became curious as to whether digital storytelling could be useful beyond pure communication of results. For example, could it help researchers with the way they approach and unpack their field-based findings? This article explores digital storytelling not only to communicate and facilitate stakeholder engagement, but also the potential of the digital storytelling methodology to process, interpret, and re-interpret qualitative data by triggering a deeper reflection and analysis of specific topics.

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Understanding Storytelling

Ethnographers explore specific groups—cultures or societies—from the point of view of the group members, and without fully becoming a member of the group. By observing and spending time with the group under study, the ethnographer seeks to grasp their values, perceptions and practices. Understanding local practices and tacit knowledge may provide insights into often controversial issues and complex realities at local levels.

Ethnographic texts are characterized by “thick description” (Geertz, 1973); that is, socially and culturally rich accounts of the observations and the insights made through long-term ethnographic fieldwork (see also Cunliffe, 2010; Ponterotto, 2006). Combined with “self-reflexivity,” that is, the explicit examination of how a researcher’s own skills, experiences, and background may have influenced the research process, thick description is useful to enhance transparency, and thus increase the legitimacy and credibility of the ethnographic account (Humphreys & Watson, 2009; Kharel, 2015; Marcus & Cushman, 1982). Thick description may also “[evoke] emotionality and self-feelings” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83).

Organizational ethnographer, John Van Maanen, encouraged a strong focus on the choice of “voice, style [and] authority” to translate ethnographic representations of culture, and what they mean for a broader audience (Goodall, 2010). Ethnographic texts, or as Van Maanen (1988) referred to them, “tales of the field,” should engage their readers. Moreover, personal, self-reflective narratives differ from traditional scholarly texts but have become common and valuable in ethnographic narratives (Cunliffe, 2010; Herrmann & DiFate, 2014; Richardson, 2002). Personal stories have the potential to uncover complexities (Barone, 2009), and as such, they also have the potential to challenge established knowledge and practises of knowing and doing (Barton & Papen, 2010). Furthermore, storytelling as a form of research communication opens a space beyond what Richardson (2002, p. 417) refers to as “the homogenized [science] writing voice.”

“New ethnography” takes a more creative as well as a personal approach to narrative writing. It seeks to engage and interact more meaningfully with a diverse audience (Christensen, 2012). Narrative ethnographer, “Bud” Goodall Jr., connected his own family stories to broader narratives in “tales” that became intensely personal and that “brought the readers in” (Goodall, 2010; Herrmann & DiFate, 2014). Furthermore, creative storytelling holds value to instantly reach and interact with a diverse audience (Brown et al., 2005; Christensen, 2012). Christensen represents an example of an ethnographer who seeks to engage and interact with diverse audiences through creative storytelling. During her doctoral research on homelessness in Canada’s Northwest Territories, Christensen (2012, p. 232) remarked that “[she wanted the] stories to mean something to other people, to show people the connections between the bigger issues and people’s lives.” Christensen adds that “creative representations of research [...] can influence participants’ understandings of their experiences” (p. 237). Therefore, storytelling’s potential to engage the audience and

challenge established preconceptions was of particular interest to us when we decided to use the digital storytelling methodology to communicate the research findings of the ICT4COP project.

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling was originally developed as a tool for community interaction, development, and empowerment by Joe Lambert and Dana Atchley in the 1990s (De Jager et al., 2017). Digital storytelling is the practice of combining narrative with digital audio and visual content to create a 3- to 5-min-long film that typically contains a strong reflective, emotional and personal component (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). The narratives often center around an experience, incident, or event—a turning point—and how the storyteller reflects upon and interprets it in relation to their own life situation (Jamissen, 2008). The strength of digital storytelling lies in its simplicity, and correspondingly, its accessibility. This applies to both making and understanding the stories. A digital story does not need to be a sophisticated multimedia presentation; a slideshow with corresponding narration constitutes a basic but often highly effective digital story. The focus is not on the technical aspect, but rather the combination of the narrative, audio and visual elements (Martin et al., 2019). The emphasis is on the intention; “to stimulate reflection, deeper learning, and perhaps transformation” (p. 2). Digital storytelling is as much about the process as it is the product. Moreover, it has evolved into a methodology with multiple uses, including becoming a valued qualitative research practice.

Why Digital Storytelling?

Digital storytelling is often used as a learning and capacity building tool. It can promote reflection (through plotting and telling a story), critical thinking, and help with digital literacy and writing skills (De Jager et al., 2017). Digital storytelling can strengthen relations between participants (Davey & Moulton, 2020). It offers a safe space in which to share and reflect upon experiences; it is often used when working with vulnerable or marginalized groups; and it often touches upon particularly delicate or sensitive issues such as gender-based violence (see Martin et al., 2019). In this article, storytellers’ “tales” focus on sensitive topics such as extra-judicial police killings, reporting gender-based violence, and the security concerns of trans women in post-conflict societies.

Digital storytelling offers a platform for rich, descriptive narratives. The “story” is important (Martin et al., 2019). Moreover, the narratives often delve into specific issues that may be difficult to both research *and* communicate using conventional methods. Indeed, we highlight the importance of the narrative throughout this article. Furthermore, selecting the audio and visual elements encourages creativity and metaphorical thinking. This can engage the audience and often evokes an emotional response (Davey & Moulton, 2020).

Digital storytelling is often cited for its knowledge communication and translation potential. According to De Jager et al. (2017, p. 2548), arts-based research methods “allow findings to be disseminated and understood by the general population.” This increases the visibility of research beyond the confinement of academic publications. Furthermore, its participatory and co-productive nature has the potential to break down power hierarchies that are often present when using conventional research methods. Several scholars have claimed that digital storytelling can contribute to the decolonization of research (De Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; De Jager et al., 2017; Morgan & Castleden, 2014). The method is also flexible and can be adapted for use in a variety of contexts. In a previous project, the first author experienced how an adapted digital storytelling methodology can reveal beneficiaries’ perspectives of a project as *they* experience it, and not, for example, what they think *project donors* might want to hear (see Davey & Moulton, 2020). The reflection, dialogue, and co-creation of knowledge that the digital storytelling process initiates through sharing and discussing stories may help find more appropriate responses to specific situations within specific contexts (Alterio & McDrury, 2003). Digital storytelling therefore responds to research in a way that both befits and benefits the communities and cultures in which the research takes place.

Although digital storytelling has evolved from the model developed by Lambert and colleagues at the Center for Digital Storytelling (now StoryCenter) (Jamissen et al., 2017), its essence largely remains the same—reflection, emotion, personalization, and a story narrative enhanced by audio and visuals which is presented within 3–5 min. Recent years have seen an increasing amount of literature covering a variety of new digital storytelling-based methods in education and research. However, and as De Jager et al. (2017) report, that the potential of digital stories for research dissemination has not been systematically studied, there was a lack of literature on digital storytelling as we intended to use it. Furthermore, storytelling’s place as an accepted form of research dissemination remains contested and questioned within the social sciences, particularly in terms of what makes a research story “good,” “valid,” or “authentic” (Barone, 2009; Christensen, 2012; Richardson, 2002). Nevertheless, the assumed potential of digital storytelling to communicate research findings formed the basis of our decision to use it in the ICT4COP project.

How Are Digital Stories Made?

Typically, digital storytelling is done in a participatory workshop which is normally held over 3 days. Facilitators pay attention to the environment in order to make it a safe and comfortable place for participants to both learn and share their stories and experiences. Participants, who from now on become storytellers, will normally share their narratives with facilitators and the other members of the group in what are known as story circles. Sometimes storytellers will come with a prepared narrative to share, sometimes they will come with an idea to share and develop into a narrative with the help of the group

and the facilitators. Being part of a story circle helps storytellers refine their narratives before moving on to pre-production of the stories.

Pre-production includes storyboarding—organizing the story into parts and gathering relevant audio and visual material to enhance and compliment the narrative. Finally, stories are produced using simple, easily accessible video editing software before they are shared at the end of the workshop. Throughout the whole process, facilitators will give short tutorials or discuss hand-outs in relation to the various stages. They will be on hand to guide and assist throughout all stages of writing, creating, and constructing the digital stories. The process is often more important than the product, and at the end of a workshop stories are often left to “polish-up” at a later stage. Nevertheless, participants and facilitators usually finish by viewing what the storytellers have produced over the 3 days—their digital story. This is often a moment of empowerment for storytellers, claim Davey and Moulton (2020).

ICT4COP & Post-Conflict Police Reform

The ICT4COP² project ran between June 2015 and November 2020. The project’s aim was to understand human security in post-conflict contexts by exploring community policing and police-reform in post-conflict societies. Also integral to the research was the extent to which information and communications technology (ICT) can impact upon the security of vulnerable populations in such regions.

ICT4COP research involved case studies addressing broader issues pertaining to policing in post-conflict settings, including gender, youth, ICT, and police training. The findings were compiled into an e-handbook prepared for international and national policymakers and practitioners, for example police or police advisors, as well as representatives of local communities in post-conflict regions. The aim of the e-handbook is to stimulate critical reflection and debate about the opportunities, risks, and dilemmas of COP approaches and practices.

Introducing Digital Storytelling to ICT4COP

We, the authors of this article, started working for the 5-year ICT4COP project during its fourth year. The first author has a background in teaching, facilitating and implementing a broad range of visual research methods, including digital storytelling in a variety of contexts. The second author has a PhD in Development Studies. Her research experience includes various ethnographic research projects in African contexts, and she has developed a special interest in the use of research-based knowledge in policy and practice. The first author was initially brought into the ICT4COP project to trial digital storytelling as a potential means of communicating project results, latterly filling the role as project dissemination manager, while the second author’s main role was to conduct comparative and meta-analysis of project results across regions to communicate through an e-handbook on community-oriented policing.

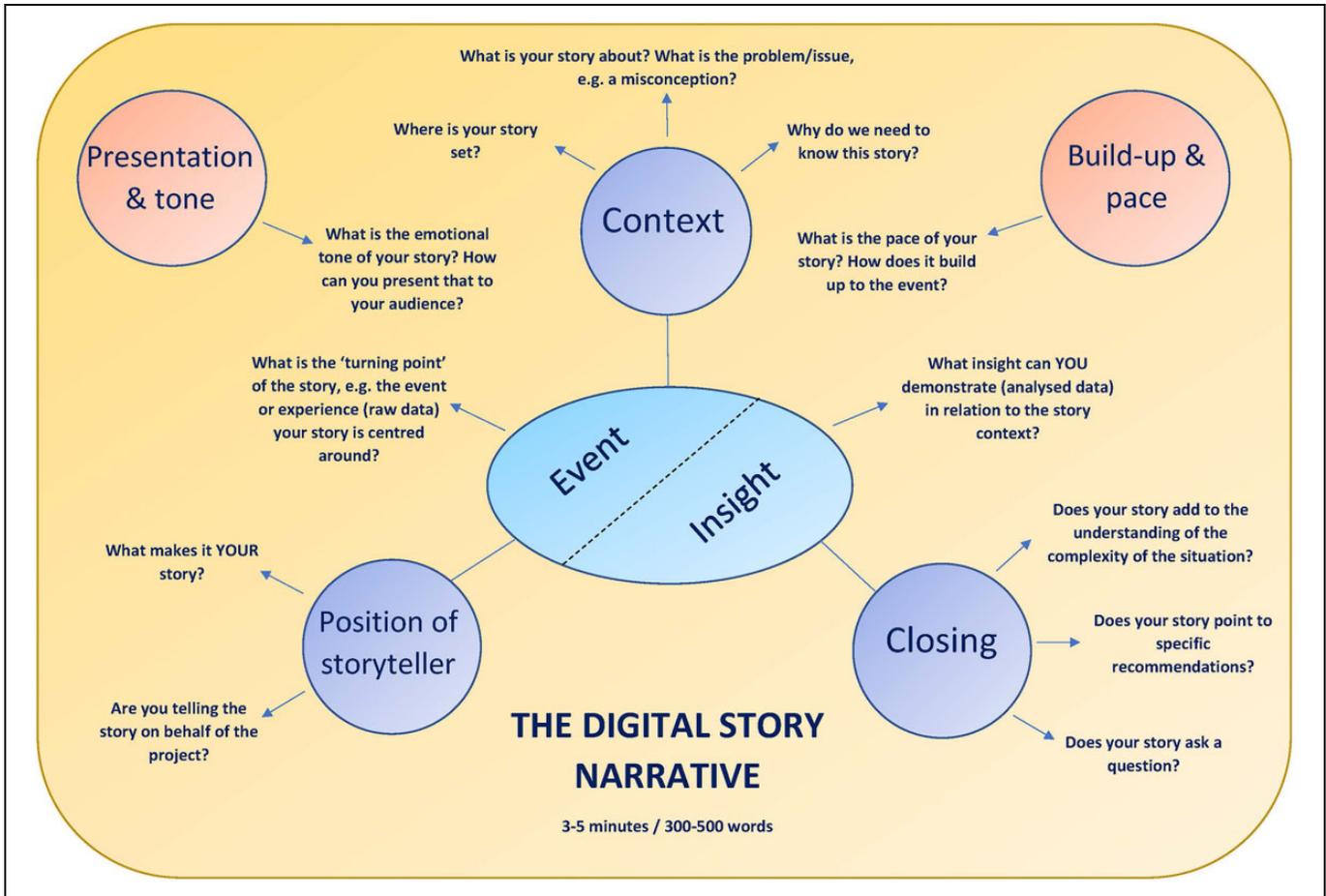


Figure 1. Guide to writing an ICT4COP research based digital story narrative.

In developing the e-handbook, we wanted to take advantage of the grounded knowledge produced through the project case studies. The interdisciplinary team of ICT4COP researchers included anthropologists, criminologists, political scientists, lawyers, and technologists. The research approach was qualitative and participatory, aiming to co-create and co-produce knowledge, and to give voices to different types of actors involved in post-conflict police reform.

We did not anticipate for our digital stories to replace conventional means of dissemination, such as journal articles. We wanted to offer researchers an alternative outlet to communicate some of their findings to a non-academic and broader audience. Digital storytelling was perceived as being useful to share and reflect on a variety of lived experiences and could potentially include contextual details that may be overlooked or hard to represent using conventional methods (Martin et al., 2019). We therefore decided to organize a series of digital storytelling workshops for ICT4COP researchers. We identified over twenty potential stories by reading researchers' work, conducting comparative analysis of data, and through discussions and brainstorming sessions with researchers and police experts. This pre-identification of story topics, and storytellers, is another

aspect that differentiates our process from that of classic digital storytelling.

Our Digital Storytelling Methodology

While digital storytelling is conventionally used in research to gather data from informants/participants, in our case, the researchers became the storytellers—the narrators of their own experiences based on their fieldwork. This introduced an extra layer, where the storytellers represented points of view through their interpretations of their data. Participants could either write and narrate a story based on their own research as part of the project, or on behalf of the project to represent the project's research through their voice. Narratives needed to be strong, purposeful with a clear message, and credible. This was challenging for storytellers who were unfamiliar with this style of writing, in other words writing a personalized 300–500 words narrative for a digital story. To facilitate the narrative development, we developed a guide for digital story narrative writing.

Our narrative guide (Figure 1) was inspired by Jamissen and Ohlmann's dramaturgical curve (see Jamissen & Dahlsveen, 2012, p. 51). Jamissen (2008) claims that defining dramaturgic

effects can provide criteria on which to base a good story. Our guide was non-linear, but with identified “trigger” points: event, insight, context, position of storyteller, and closing. The trigger points were used to initiate the writing process with the storyteller, and to build the narrative around. We stressed identifying the “event”—the piece of raw data on which the story was based—and the “insight”—what the event means, or the “analyzed” data. Following this, storytellers were asked to develop a “thicker description” by referring to the specific story’s context. Richardson (2002, p. 415) highlights context as a “valuable tool” of storytelling along with personalization and reflexivity.

To help the storyteller set the context, we asked three fundamental questions: Where is your story set? What is your story about, in other words, what is the problem or issue? Why do we need to know this story? We also emphasized the importance of the positioning of the storyteller and asked: What makes it *your* story? Are you telling the story on behalf of the project? Finally, and crucially, we defined three criteria of which the story must meet at least one: Does your story add to the understanding of the complexity of the situation? Does your story point to specific recommendations? Does your story ask a question? We also asked storytellers to think about the emotional tone of their story and how they could best present that to their identified target audience; along with the pace of their story—how it builds up to the event and what tools they can use to do so. Storytellers often do not draft their narratives until Day 1 of a digital storytelling workshop (Martin et al., 2019), however we discussed narratives with storytellers either individually or in group Skype calls prior to our workshops. This enabled them to draft a narrative in advance which allowed for more feedback, and thus more refinement.

It is hard to “adequately and ethically” facilitate a digital storytelling workshop without having first been through the process (Martin et al., 2019, p. 4). Fortunately, we could draw upon our experience and knowledge from both taking part in and facilitating similar workshops. Being responsible for the comparative analysis and results dissemination, and thus having in-depth knowledge of the ICT4COP research project also added to our legitimacy as facilitators. Furthermore, although we had not always met face-to-face, we had already engaged with many of the storytellers either from introducing and guiding them through the narrative writing process, or from prior meetings/collaboration throughout our time with the project.

Most of our workshops followed a standard 3-day format based on the digital storytelling model developed by Story-Center (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). Others were adapted accordingly depending on logistics and the time we had available with each storyteller. Day 1 focused on narrative writing. Storytellers began by sharing their “story so far” in a story circle to receive feedback and input from other members of the group. We encouraged participants to think back to the narrative writing guide. We wanted to tease out the stories, but we did not want to influence the direction or the storyteller’s vision and ownership. Afterward, storytellers used the feedback to refine their narratives. Day 2 focused on pre-

production of the digital stories, also known as storyboarding. We encouraged storytellers to sketch out and organize their stories to identify then gather the most suitable media to enhance them. Throughout the final day, storytellers worked on producing and realizing their stories using freely available video editing software. As facilitators, we were always on hand to assist and guide the storytellers either individually or as a group.

During the workshops we concentrated on what we believed to be the most important aspects of the digital stories during the time we had together. It was crucial to have a strong, credible narrative with a clear message that met our established criteria. Likewise, we wanted storytellers to have creative control of their digital story even if they did not complete it during the workshop. This way, we could assist them in realizing what they had envisioned after the workshop finished. We encouraged storytellers to continue working on their story if they had the time and capacity to do so.

We continued to cooperate closely with the storytellers until we had a version with which we were all happy and which had been reviewed and approved for publication. A review committee was necessary to ensure our digital stories adhered to ethical guidelines and appropriately represented the research. Again, this strict adherence to our criteria, and the review, is unlike conventional digital storytelling. Nevertheless, we highlighted *the process* as being as important as *the product*. This is synonymous with both conventional digital storytelling and the ICT4COP methodology. Furthermore, during the process we began to wonder if digital storytelling was starting to shape (or reshape) our storytellers’ interpretations of their own data, and thus had value over and above our original aim of communicating ICT4COP messages.

Sixteen ICT4COP researchers and three police experts shared stories. Subsequently, we wanted to find out what potential the storytellers saw for digital storytelling in research communication and outreach. However, based on our observations of what we believed to surface during the process, we also wanted to find out to what extent digital storytelling represented a reprocessing of storytellers’ own data. In other words, did the storytellers approach their data differently during and after the exercise? For this article, we interviewed eight of our storytellers, all of whom gave informed verbal or written consent to take part.

So, What Did We Learn Throughout Our Story?

In the beginning . . . The workshops brought together a diverse array of researchers and practitioners involved with the ICT4COP project. Storytellers came from around the world, including Afghanistan, Guatemala, Kenya, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States. The wide demographic of storytellers included junior researchers, university researchers and professors, security advisers, and serving and retired high ranking police officers. Hence, there was a vast and varied amount of experience and knowledge to share and draw upon and contribute to what De Leeuw and Hunt

(2018, p. 6) refer to as “multiple ways of knowing and being.” Overall, we experienced positive dynamics in our workshops. This thought was shared by our storytellers who told us the dynamics enriched their experience. This could be in part due to the workshops becoming a place to bring together members of an international research network; participants looked forward to meeting, learning, sharing, and interacting with their peers. Moreover, their connection to the community of ICT4-COP researchers and practitioners became more apparent through being in the same place at the same time (Martin et al., 2019). However, we did not necessarily consider group dynamics as a factor when selecting storytellers; this became an unintended positive consequence. The composition of participants subsequently complimented our co-productive methodology and we believe is part of what triggered a reinterpretation of data for some of the storytellers.

The workshops, particularly the story sharing sessions (story circles), awarded us the opportunity for peer-to-peer interprofessional collaboration, and ultimately (as it came to pass), co-production of knowledge. Story circles have been recognized for being effective in developing and refining narratives among storytellers and as a space where partners’ contributions can be synthesized efficiently and compassionately (De Jager et al., 2017; Jamissen & Moulton, 2017). The story circles helped participants add value and relevance to both them as storytellers and to their findings and narratives. Storyteller 7, a police university college researcher, commented on how he benefitted from this “less insular” way of working from what he was used to. We observed how the story circles and the interactions between storytellers not only helped to tease out the meanings in cloudier narratives but also strengthened their meaning and increased their potential to “stand up to scholarly enquiry” (Christensen, 2012). Thus, the story circles acted as a peer review. Furthermore, storytellers contributed to one another’s stories, sometimes until the moment of recording their narratives. For example, Storyteller 1, an experienced security adviser, suggested a closing point to Storyteller 5’s—a former police chief—narrative at the time of recording—what *she* took away from his story then became part of *his* story. Storyteller 1 also commented that storytelling is not a one-way street and the digital storytelling process allows storytellers to consider their audience throughout the multiple sharing and feedback sessions.

Seven of the eight storytellers we interviewed either conducted their own field research or had been part of the experience or event their story was centered around. The other had experience of the research area but based his story on his interpretation of others’ data. Thus, many of the stories became “mini-ethnographies.” Storytellers were either the central character (auto-ethnographic) or they retold their tales through their own reflective lens based on data gathered from their observations and their informants during fieldwork. This often translated into the thick description that Geertz (1973) originally claimed validates ethnographic representations. Cunliffe (2010) refers to writing ethnographic tales as a “literary pursuit” (p. 229) that can be useful for “engaging with social,

economic, and political issues” (p. 234). In our case, and as Storyteller 7 pointed out, we had 3 min to make an impact and to contribute to policy, understanding, or debate. Storyteller 2 explained how the exercise highlighted the importance of storytelling—the words and the narratives—in research writing and communication. However, Storyteller 4, a Doctoral research fellow, experienced that the criteria in our narrative writing guide limited his passion in telling his story. Nevertheless, he did tell us that it helped him to stay focused during the writing process.

Personalization often proved challenging for our storytellers who were more-often-than-not used to writing standard third person academic texts and where there is an assumption that they are “qualified” to do so. William G. Tierney (2002) highlights that some researchers may find it difficult to transform their writing to another genre. American linguistic anthropologist, Shirley Brice Heath (1993), also notes her own struggle to adapt to a more personal, self-reflective style of writing. This also proved to be a double-edged sword for some storytellers. Storyteller 2 for example, after creating her story, acknowledged that while managing to connect to and personalize her story, as a local researcher she often became “trapped in an insider’s perspective.” Thus, she needed to clarify internalized knowledge and context for an outside audience, all the while adhering to the 3- to 5-min criteria for the digital story as well as providing the audience with a good “take-away” message. Storyteller 2 also told us that the process led to a clearer interpretation of her data (for herself) in order to make a succinct narrative. Similarly, Storyteller 7 claimed the process taught him to go into the data to bring it out and make more convincing in a short space of time. The “turning point” in his initial draft narrative was hard to identify. Storyteller 1 chose to tell a story she had presented before but acknowledged that the digital storytelling process forced her to narrow down the “take-away.” She made use of our guide to sharpen and refine her existing story. This helped her focus on solid points instead of general analysis and included retrospectively identifying the turning point of her story. Her existing story thus became punchier and more powerful. For Storyteller 1, this version of her story about women recruitment to the Afghan police was “just right”!

Some of our storytellers created fictitious characters as embodiments of their own informants to convey and enhance their messages. In what Christensen (2012) calls “fictive imagining,” this led to strong and revealing narratives that helped communicate often unheard voices. Ethnographer Michael Humphreys (Humphreys & Watson, 2009) wrote of using this technique with his character “Charity”; how she represented many individuals and how she helped him hide the identity of his informants. Since this was also a concern for our storytellers, this became a useful tool.

In the middle . . . During the digital storytelling process, we stressed the importance of the positioning of the storyteller; who they were to tell the story; what made them a credible storyteller; and how they could make the story relevant, both as

a storyteller, and for their target audience. Hence, they must clarify what Cunliffe (2010, p. 226) would refer to as *their room* and *their view*. Further, a credible story, or interpretation of a situation, should then have bearing in the broader sense of post-conflict police reform, for example by stimulating debate or pointing to policy recommendations. Thus, storytellers needed to examine their own relationship with their data in order to both validate their position as storyteller and to give their story validity and relevance. Their own identity should become central to their story (Herrmann & DiFate, 2014). Most of our storytellers were in a unique position to tell their story and we encouraged them to be explicit about this. It came easier to some than to others. For example, Storyteller 5 knew very well that nobody else could tell his story which was based on his experience as a senior police advisor to a national police service in Africa. Moreover, he had told it many times before, albeit in different formats. Others, including Storyteller 7, learned throughout the process that his background enabled him to tell his story with confidence, and therefore, credibility.

The workshop sessions not only helped storytellers articulate and communicate their findings, but also address how they interpret their data. For example, the workshop helped Storyteller 3 come to peace with the concept of “networking” as opposed to “corruption” in Afghanistan’s border region. Previously he had been uncomfortable with this, perhaps through his adoption of colonial ideas on networking versus corruption. However, Storyteller 3 told us the workshop helped him “[trust his] own interpretation.” Furthermore, storytellers respectfully expressed their opinions throughout the sessions, even if they differed from those of their peers. Alternative views can often be complementary instead of conflicting (Asselin & Basile, 2018), and Storyteller 4 stated that during the process, he removed himself from his own emic research perspective to consider the views of others. However, De Jager et al., (2017) question whether the influence of others is always advantageous under such circumstances. Thus, although Storyteller 4’s story became stronger and more nuanced throughout the process, upon reflection, the extent of how peer influence informed the dynamics of the workshop gave us something to consider.

We observed the risk of some participants potentially having more influence than others, for example, by being more eloquent in presentation, having seniority, or perhaps by being more representative of mainstream arguments and normalized knowledge. For example, Storyteller 4 toned down his criticism of the police in Nairobi’s informal settlements after group discussions and interactions with one of the police advisers. At first, he thought, “No, he was working with the police. He doesn’t understand the community I come from.” Throughout the process however, Storyteller 4 appeared to become more lenient toward the police, thus buying into an alternative argument which he claims was in part due to his co-participant’s convincing presentation manner. Significantly, Storyteller 4 commented on the usefulness of the workshop, by both learning how to communicate his messages in an alternative manner, and by learning how to step back and reflect upon his research

while considering alternative viewpoints to make his stories, thoughts, and opinions more nuanced. Upon reflection, Storyteller 4 states that many of his research colleagues have gone “deep into the community and forgotten the police institutions.” Subsequently however, we encouraged him to continue to tell *his* story, and let the other storytellers tell *theirs*. Conversely, the participatory workshop concept enabled us to overcome structural hierarchies in our workshop in Pakistan. For example, the story circle appeared to help group members feel more comfortable in providing their senior colleagues with constructive criticism as opposed to what they normally would. This encouraged storytellers to co-operate and co-create, relying on a variety of perspectives to “flatten” the traditional hierarchy (De Jager et al., 2017) and allow for a wider understanding. Moreover, the respect and credibility we received as facilitators, along with an openness to embrace a new method of which they were originally unsure, contributed to a worthwhile learning and sharing experience for our storytellers.

In the end... Often good digital stories favor the implicit rather than the explicit, when the meanings and messages are subtly woven into the story through the various elements. This was evident, for example, in Storyteller 6’s story, which she told us made her most *invisible* research group—trans women—*visible*. Moreover, while referring to it as “creative nonfiction,” Cunliffe (2010, p. 233) highlights Goodall’s style of ethnographic writing, or “new ethnography” as “an interweaving of self-reflection, cultural critique, and human and social experience [...] to create compelling stories about human experience and public issues.” Storyteller 1 pointed out that digital storytelling seems to emphasize people and connections over theoretical perspectives. Indeed, ethnographic narratives are concerned with social relationships and interactions (Geertz, 1973). Furthermore, we experienced in at least two cases, how digital storytelling allowed for our storytellers (researchers) from the South who have specific and unique perspectives to communicate their emic understanding of situations to provide valuable insight into the topic. Providing a critique of a situation from within its cultural context is essential to the ICT4COP project’s methodology and is what Geertz claimed brings us closer to the meaning. Christensen (2012, p. 243) argues that “personal narratives offer agency to the researched.” Although Christensen refers to the personal narratives *of* the researched, many of our storytellers did award such agency *to* the researched, at the same time increasing their own agency to tell the stories. Local knowledge including “tradition, culture and heritage,” according to Morgan & Castleden (2014, p. 564), should be valued and many of our stories emphasize this.

Storyteller 3 told us that his digital story gave him a “home” for data that he struggled to find a place for, thus rendering the unpublishable publishable. Similarly, the essence of Storyteller 6’s story would have been difficult to capture in a standard scholarly article. One viewer claimed that watching Storyteller 6’s finished digital story gave her “goose bumps,” thus evoking an “emotional response.” Furthermore, another viewer

remarked that our digital stories were easy to process, digest, and reflect upon without being overwhelming. Interestingly, Goodall (2000) points out the “gendering” of scholarly writing and communication where a feminine writing style favors self-reflection and audience rapport over the more masculine style of theoretical problem-solving and reporting.

We found that an openness and willingness of storytellers to accept input from us as facilitators and from their peers also increased their potential to reflect upon, revisit, and in some cases reinterpret their material. Moreover, the storytellers’ different backgrounds and experience reflected their different approaches. For example, for Storytellers 1 and 5, our guide and workshop simply enabled them to narrow down a story they had told before and helped them focus on the relevant criteria to deliver their message in the format of a punchy digital story with a clear take-away. Nevertheless, upon viewing previously made digital stories, Storyteller 5 immediately saw the value of digital stories in the field of police advising on Day 1 of the workshop. Storyteller 6’s narrative was well developed by the time of the workshop. She was also writing her PhD thesis in Gender and Security at the time, which incorporates her story topic. Therefore, she was already immersed in a process of reflection. This came through in her narrative at an early stage and subsequently resulted in a poignant and powerful digital story. Furthermore, we concur with many of the existing claims about digital storytelling, including De Jager et al.’s (2017, p. 2572) that it “has the potential to encourage a deeper level of reflection and engagement on a specific topic.” For some of our storytellers, digital storytelling triggered a process of personal reflection. Storyteller 2 told us that the process led to a rediscovery of herself, by telling stories and drawing.

Our storytellers soon realized the potential of digital storytelling to engage with and share their findings with their target groups. Storyteller 3 recognized the ease with which a non-academic audience would be able to access and comprehend the rich, sharp, but uncomplicated digital stories. For example, they could easily be shared on social media or chat platforms to stimulate discussion and debate with local groups. Storyteller 4 also recognized this as an innovative way of “giving back” and sharing his research with his local community in an accessible and digestible format. However, although Storyteller 4 wants the community to have access to his findings on police brutality and police-community relations, he expressed that his story’s now nuanced perspective may not be fully appreciated or understood by his community. Christensen (2012) notes that research storytellers need to carefully consider the consequences of their representations, both ethically and credibly, when choosing how to best present their experiences. Furthermore, storytellers were free to choose which language they wanted to use depending on their target audience. Although English was the most common language, stories were also narrated in Spanish and Dari Persian. This renders them culturally accessible, acceptable, and helps to connect the storyteller to the community. Subsequently, we applied English subtitles

to the finished digital stories to ease viewing and understanding for a wider audience.

Multimodal Elements

The multimodal aspect is often what brings the stories to life. Audio and visuals can engage the viewer and help represent experiences that words alone cannot (De Jager et al., 2017). They can also add the experiential element that scientific representations often lack (Davey & Moulton, 2020). However, although music is commonly used in digital stories, our storytellers chose not to. They did not believe music would enhance their stories and may even detract from the narratives’ messages. Nevertheless, our stories did include a mixture of still photographs, video, animation, drawings, illustrations, graphics and audio effects.

Several storytellers chose to use their own photos or create their own drawings. Others spent time searching for and selecting licensed images online. At the end of the 3 days, most storytellers at least had an idea of how their story would look and which visuals would work best to represent it. This was important to us. Selecting images (and additional audio in some cases) that best enhance a story’s message increases a storyteller’s sense of ownership according to Jamissen and Moulton (2017).

Storyteller 2 made her own simple but effective drawings to compliment her narrative. She told us this enhanced her personal connection to the story. Storyteller 6 also used her own drawings and photographs. In selecting and creating images, she found it revealing to understand how much is behind an image and how they can complement a context with which a viewer is unfamiliar. Similarly, Storyteller’s 3 and 4 used their own field photos which helped them revisit the context and environment of their data, in other words the event their story centered around. Storyteller 3’s field photos were a helpful tool to unpack the reality of surviving in the Afghanistan/Iran border region. His images also offered a window for viewers to experience the harshness of the situation—the barren landscapes and deserted towns.

Additionally, some of our stories included audio effects. Storyteller 3’s story was enhanced by the sound of wind whistling over the dusty Afghan landscape. Another story included the sound of high heels walking along a cobbled street; and another came to life with sounds of gunfire and shouting. These elements help “convey a sense of [. . .] being there” (Cunliffe, 2010, p. 231).

Effective visuals combined with other multimedia features can transform a story. These elements can help with setting the scene, to communicating complex phenomena to a broad audience. This also signifies a deeper understanding of a topic, claim Lang et al. (2020). In our case, the digital stories complete with their multimodal elements become ethnographic embodiments of the storytellers’ analyses and insights. However, multimodal effects need not always be explicit, and storytellers are encouraged to explore metaphors and symbolism to enhance their narratives. Sometimes this involves help from

facilitators in order to “build the layers of meaning” (Jamissen & Moulton, 2017, p. 255).

At the workshop, Storyteller 7 spent time looking for “rich images” to compliment his story about youth prospects in Afghanistan. His selection of images reflected how symbolic content such as vulnerability and hope can be represented through photographs. Moreover, he wanted a visual experience that viewers remembered. This was one of a few stories that first author helped produce after the workshop, rather than just “polish-up,” working from his idea and vision and trying to capture that in the final version. After sharing a few different versions, Storyteller 7 expressed his satisfaction that the final multimodal production with images and audio effects was indeed what he had envisioned. Storyteller 7’s ownership and vision thus remained intact and the continued collaborative effort further enhanced his story.

Conclusion

We began this process to explore the potential of digital storytelling as an alternative means of communicating important ICT4COP research findings to a broad range of stakeholders. In this context, we introduced digital storytelling to a different group of users from the norm—the researchers—so they could more easily reach and engage with target groups other than their academic peers. Thus, we made some project findings more accessible than they are through standard academic journal articles. Moreover, the insights represented through the narratives may not necessarily be publishable through such conventional means where, for example, personal reflection and emotion is less common and harder to convey. By representing commonly shared experiences, our storytellers made their findings more relatable and relevant for their audience. In many cases they communicate voices that often go unheard. This could potentially address the policy/practice gap and illustrates local agency.

Our storytellers all recognized the potential of digital storytelling to present their findings and insights to their target groups. This became apparent to most of them early in the process. The response from audiences so far, for example at ICT4COP conferences, has been positive. This has also offered another opportunity for stakeholder input, to inspire reflection and debate, and to further increase the co-production of ICT4COP and post-conflict police reform knowledge. The ICT4COP research-based digital stories are accessible, digestible, and as the feedback so far suggests, meaningful for their target groups; be these international and national policymakers, police and police advisors, or community representatives in post-conflict areas. To what extent they prove useful in the future would certainly be worth following up.

Our digital storytelling process undoubtedly resulted in the rich narratives we aimed for. The extent of this may reflect the storytellers’ own backgrounds, but even for those who began the process with well-developed material, the process helped them find the core of their argument and then select the most important elements to represent it. Many commented on how they

would apply what they learned from the experience to their future work. The process enabled the storytellers to incorporate what *they* learned and how *they* felt from their experience in the field into their narratives. This stimulated deeper personal reflection not only on their data, but also how they interpret and present their findings on specific issues. We relate our examples to Christensen’s (2012) argument that the research storytelling process can indeed influence the interpretation. In retrospect, this may be unsurprising to those already familiar with the digital storytelling methodology. We recognize that digital storytelling does indeed have a place in qualitative research representation and communication. However, in our context, we also learned that digital storytelling has potential to enhance and influence qualitative research interpretation.

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Notes

1. The ICT4COP project included over thirty researchers working in four study regions: South Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan), Africa (Uganda, Somalia, Somaliland, Kenya), Southeast Europe (Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua). Norwegian University of Life Sciences in Ås, Norway was the project coordinator.
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