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**Constructing a digital storycircle: digital  
infrastructure and mutual recognition**

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## **CONSTRUCTING A DIGITAL STORYCIRCLE:**

### **DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND MUTUAL RECOGNITION**

#### **Abstract:**

Building on the principles of the digital storytelling movement, this article asks whether the narrative exchange within the ‘story circles’ of storymakers created in face-to-face workshops can be further replicated, by drawing on digital infrastructure in specific ways. It addresses this question by reporting on the successes and limitations of a five-stream project of funded action research with partners in the North-West of England that explored the contribution of digital infrastructure to processes of narrative exchange and the wider processes of mutual recognition that flow from narrative exchange. Three main dimensions of a digital storycircle are explored: multiplications, spatializations (or the building of narratives around sets of individual narratives), and habits of mutual recognition. Limitations relate to the factors of time, and levels of digital development and basic digital access.

#### **Keywords:**

**Digital Storytelling; Story Circle; digital storycircle; recognition; narrative.**

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## CONSTRUCTING A DIGITAL STORYCIRCLE:

### DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND MUTUAL RECOGNITION

7945 words inc abstract and keywords

The Digital Storytelling movement (Lambert 2006, 2013) has had considerable influence. Starting out from a belief in storytelling's transformative potential for individuals, the movement popularised the means of producing and exchanging stories afforded by digital media: the practical model of storytelling workshops was adopted successfully in many parts of the world (Hartley and McWilliam 2007a; Lundby 2008). But the practice of digital storytelling would not have developed into a wider movement if it had not grasped from the outset the *socially* transformative consequences not just of producing but of *exchanging* stories made from the fragmentary, often painful, stuff of everyday life. Lambert's (2006: xx) concept of the 'story circle' in which a group of people sitting face-to-face commit to produce stories and listen to each other's stories made this insight concrete. In this article, we build on the insights of the digital storytelling movement by asking: what do infrastructures based on digital media, and resources based in digital media, contribute to the *wider* social transformations that potentially flow from digital storytelling (indeed all storytelling)? We do so through the heuristic concept of a 'digital storycircle': we know what a digital story is, but what, more complexly, is a digitally-based *storycircle*?<sup>1</sup>

Questions however about the long-term consequences of the stories and story-related practices generated by the Digital Storytelling movement have emerged. Hartley and McWilliam (2007b) in an important early review of the movement raised questions of

sustainability; Thumim (2010, 2012) questioned the extent of actual institutional change that resulted from even the most intensive projects of digital storytelling in England and Wales; Jenkins, Green and Ford (2013)'s reflections on the limits of participatory culture around commercial media are obliquely relevant here. Lambert from early on was explicit on the links of digital storytelling to a more participatory democracy: by expanding digital literacy and instilling a greater faculty for listening to others' stories, 'perhaps we can sort out new solutions . . . by reframing our diverse connections to the big story' (2006: xx-xxi); 'storycatching will become central to planning and decision making, the foundation upon which the best choices can be made' (2006: xxi). But understanding how such consequences might work in practice, and *over the longer-term*, requires a non-linear approach which looks at an interconnected set of processes across many sites and time-scales.

Specifically, Couldry (2008: 383) argues that to understand the longer-term consequences of digital storytelling we need to follow: first, 'how digital storytelling's contexts and processes of production are becoming associated with certain practices and styles of interpretation (stabilities in the *immediate and direct context* of storytelling)'; second, 'how the outputs of digital storytelling practices are themselves circulated and recirculated between various sites, and exchanged between various practitioners, audience members and institutions (stabilities in the *wider flows* of digital stories)'; and third, 'the *long-term consequences* of digital storytelling as a practice for particular types of people in particular types of location, and its consequences for wider social and cultural formations, even for democracy itself'. We use the term '*digital* storycircle' here to capture those many levels of action, and to point, together, to the bundle of processes, many of them but by no means all digitally-based, through which stories are received, circulated, validated and put into wider use.

By adopting a wide-angled lens to track the elements of a ‘digital storycircle’ in this specific sense, we hope to offer a rich sense of the ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998) that, under certain conditions, are starting to emerge and stabilize around processes of storytelling. More subtly, we aim to show how narrative processes can under such conditions take *new distributed* (multi-actor, multi-location, multi-occasion) *forms*. In doing so, we are operating with a broader definition of narrative than has been common within the digital storytelling movement. The ‘inputs’ to a digital storycircle need not always be, indeed often *are not*, themselves fully-formed digital stories: they may be only fragmentary elements of stories-yet-to-be-formed, but they are no less important for that to the processes of mutual recognition (Honneth 2007) that can emerge through a digital storycircle. We also review some of the longer-term factors which, over time and largely beyond the time-horizon of our particular fieldwork, might generate stable ‘communities of discourse’ (Wuthnow 1989) and so carry the seeds of a wider participatory culture, analogous to the institutionalized forms of literate mobilization that, as Wuthnow shows, formed over some centuries around the printed book.

The article is based on five streams of action research conducted in the North of England between April 2011 and March 2013. These were designed within a funded research context (see note 1), whose aim was to explore the social conditions and digital platforms required for new processes of narrative exchange and knowledge production: our starting-point was therefore initially wider than the aim of running storytelling workshops, and indeed we only did so in two of our streams. We worked in a variety of institutional settings - educational (a sixth form college, a secondary school), civil society (a community reporters’ network, a tenants association in the public housing sector), social (a local club). Each of those settings was shaped by some converging factors: state regulation of education, the decline of arts and

community funding, rapid changes in the creative digital sector, harsh cuts in state support to poor sections of the population. Our entry-point at each site was the principle of digital storytelling as a tool for enabling and deepening mutual recognition (Honneth 2007). As we will see, the heuristic concept of a digital storycircle provides a useful means to register a number of different perspectives on the transformative power of processes of narrative exchange under contemporary digital conditions.

### *Digital Storycircles within the wider digital ‘revolution’*

This article concerns the transformative potential not so much of digital stories (stories told in digital form), as of digitally-based infrastructures. Such infrastructures potentially stabilise and expand the practices and communities established, in condensed form in the digitally storytelling workshop pioneered by Joe Lambert, founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling at Berkeley ([www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org)). We will not therefore recap the well-known literature on digital storytelling as such, but concentrate on the more scattered literature that casts light on what a digital *storycircle* might be. This leads us inevitably to consider wider aspects of the contemporary multiple digital ‘revolutions’ (Rainie and Wellman 2012).

Digital media, as their use and circulation has become embedded in everyday life, have generated a number of new practices: two particularly relevant to a digital storycircle are ‘showing’ and ‘archiving’ (Couldry 2012: chapter 2). Here we will concentrate on ‘showing’.<sup>2</sup> If our posting of photos on flickr or facebook after a party or holiday is a simple example of the practice of showing, a collective commitment to encourage members of a group or institution to generate, exchange and collate stories about both personal and shared conditions is a much more complex example of showing. The exact medium used is not

crucial (the storytelling elements can be images, film, blogs, tweets, webpages, weblinks). what matters is the interlinked and focussed practice of working together to show to each other how we live. Part of what is important about a digital storycircle is that it can bring multiple media together.

In this article we want to explore in more depth how such processes work and stabilise. A number of writers have reflected during the past decade on the difference that the inherently *intertextual* nature of the internet (and the inherently *interlinkable* nature of digital content) make to *social* processes of production and exchange. Geoffrey Bowker (2005) has reflected on the consequences of digital media for social and institutional archiving. Jose Van Dijck (2007) has shown how digital interfaces have transformed our habits and rhythms of remembering collectively, establishing new default options which are no longer individual but distributed: ‘we can no longer keep the lid on the shoebox we used to store in our attic; its pictorial contents will increasingly spill out into the virtual corners of the worldwideweb, where it seamlessly blends in with our collective pictorial heritage’ (2007: 121). In this sense, in the photographic domain, something *like* a digital storycircle for exchanging and commenting on photos, becomes banal, not unusual.

More pessimistically, some writers have reflected on the dangers of ‘spreadable’ digital content (in Henry Jenkins’ phrase) for the stability and viability of political institutions. Bimber (2002) alerted us to the potentially negative, even corrosive, consequences of certain types of accelerated narrative flow under certain conditions, at least for older forms of institutional power. More recently, a number of writers have begun to reflect on the consequences of a possible ‘excess’ of narrative for our social and public life: Dean (2010), Turkle (2011). Such critiques acquire particular bite when they address the commercial forces

that have already shaped *in advance* some of the platforms across which we are increasingly exchanging stories (Fuchs 2011: chapter 7; Lovink 2012; Mansell 2012; Van Dijck 2013). Such newer critiques need however to be placed in the context of an older debate that remains of importance: the concerns about the digital divide (Van Dijk 1999, 2013), which was never just about inequalities of access to basic technologies though that remains under many circumstances vitally important, but was always also about the unequal distribution of the skills, literacies and wider capabilities that would enable full use of digital resource (Couldry 2007). Such debates need to be thought about on an international comparative scale, in order to reflect variations depending on country, culture, and institutional and historical continuities as well as trajectories of change.

That said, in this article we want to concentrate on the positive possibilities (the promise) that is distinctive of digital infrastructures and their affordances when considered from the perspective not just of digital storytelling but of longer-term practices of narrative exchange. In doing so, we cannot of course resolve the question of whether the sorts of emergent practices we identify *will* have positive long-term political, social or cultural consequences: that will depend on a wider set of choices and conjunctures, a point we revisit at the end of the article.

### ***Methodology***

The research project on which this article is based was carried out over a period of two years by a multi-disciplinary research team (bringing together specialists in media and social theory, film and visual culture, urban and cultural geography, education studies, media and cultural studies, and political sociology). Given the emergent character of digitally-supported



processes of narrative exchange a longitudinal perspective was fundamental, and we worked closely with each of our partners for at least 18 months to develop, track and evaluate new uses of digital infrastructures and resources. Adopting a collaborative action research methodology (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Somekh 2006), we worked in an iterative way with our partners to facilitate a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Foulger 2010). This engaged and longitudinal approach allowed us to trace the fine-grained details of the emergent practices, processes and infrastructures that may combine to form a digital story circle, as well as the obstacles and constraints to which it may be subject.

Partners were chosen because of their expressed interest in and commitment to giving voice in various ways to their constituencies, whether college or school pupils, or network, club or association members. Taking those aims and our partners' contexts and capacities as our starting point, we devised a diverse range of interventions and experiments with the aim of setting in motion digitally supported processes of narrative exchange. These included a number of workshops, in which we provided training in the use of social media and other digital platforms and technologies; engaged participants in reflection on photographic images and archives; provided practical support with audio-visual editing, web design and managing digital platforms; as well as running workshops modelled on the 'classic' digital storytelling format. We also engaged in more sustained collaborative work with partners to support infrastructures and practices of digital narrative exchange: one strand of research, for example, involved working with community reporters' network to develop and implement frameworks for online collaborative content curation and metadata management (Couldry, Fotopoulou and Dickens forthcoming). We co-organised with our partners a series of special events, including: a public storytelling evening (at the sixth-form college); exhibitions (e.g. of the local youth club's photo archive, college students' artwork); workshops (at the secondary

school) to elicit, record and map narratives of place from local residents; a Twitter event in which students were invited to tweet suggestions about their college radio station.

In order to track the complex and often uneven processes set in motion by these interventions, we employed multiple methods. We conducted several hundred hours of participant observation (at meetings, workshops, lessons and events) and carried out a total of 147 interviews (group and individual) and recorded meetings with research participants (teachers and students at the school and college, members of the local club, staff and volunteers involved in the community reporters' network, members of the local tenants' association). These interviews and meetings functioned variously as a means for us to gather participants' reflections about the research process, feedback our own thoughts and suggestions, and collaboratively plan further action.

We also employed a variety of digital methods, including tracking and analysing research participants' use of digital platforms (including a departmental Twitter account at the sixth-form college). In our work with the community media organisation, we used web analytics to measure visitor traffic and engagement with content on their website, so feeding into further development of the site. At the sixth-form college, we also conducted a mainly quantitative online survey of students' access to, use of, and perceptions of social and mobile media. .

Through these multiple methods we gathered a rich corpus of data that allows us to develop a nuanced account of the complex practices, processes and infrastructures that combine under various circumstances to form digital storycircles, and the opportunities and constraints to which they are subject.

## *Tracking down digital storycircles*

Exploring the nature of the digital storycircle meant being in a number of varied places and times. In this section, we will review our findings under four headings that unfold the complexity of ‘digital storycircle’ as a heuristic concept from different directions: ‘multiplying’, ‘narratives of narratives’ ‘habits of recognition’ and ‘limitations’.

### *Multiplying*

A digital story exists within the boundaries of its narrative, even though of course it is inherent to digital content that, compared with analogue, it is more easily exchangeable for, and mixable with, other content. The physical story circle in which digital stories are usually generated operates within a bounded space-time that is completed when the workshop is over. Our interest was in designing and supporting dynamic and flexible processes that would extend beyond the circumscribed time and space of the workshop, drawing in more narrative agents as it did so.

Aware of the significant strengths of the three to four day workshop model that has become globally associated with the digital storytelling movement, we were also mindful that the time and resource demands of such interventions limit the institutional and funding contexts in which they can be conducted. As Klæbe et al (2006) found, the demands on participants of an intensive computer-based workshop lasting a number of days risks excluding those with other commitments (compare Eubanks 2012). As with the Sharing Stories project that Klæbe discusses, we could see the advantages of *uncoupling* the ‘story catching’ process (Lambert 2006: xx) from a specific digital media literacy agenda designed primarily to introduce

individual participants to image editing software. Instead our focus was on making storytelling practices sustainable by building capacities at an institutional or organisational level. The generative (or multiplying character of the digital storycircles we aimed to support had two related aspects. Firstly, we structured the story catching process across multiple phases over time, with formal interventions followed by more informal modes of participation. Secondly, we explored the contribution that a more open-ended communication space would make to the circulation of narrative materials alongside periodic workshops. We experimented with a range of social media platforms popularly used for the circulation of narrative materials.

Working with a volunteer-run community youth club with a long history, we held an initial storytelling workshop attended by 9 participants at the end of which participants had made an audio recording of a short story drawn from their experience of attending the Club's annual camp. This first structured workshop was followed by a more open-ended process for facilitating stories. Over the following months the club contacted members and volunteers and invited them to record a story, using occasions such as club 'open days' to make further audio recordings. Stories from the first workshop were posted on club's website, as models that other contributors could use to shape their own accounts. We provided low-cost voice recorders and, with the Club's senior volunteers taking the lead, audio stories were recorded in pairs and small groups: this conversational method of gathering stories drew in also memories of individuals no longer active in the Club.

Three months after the initial workshop, we held two further workshops focused on editing the collection of audio stories into video narratives that drew on the club's photographic and film archives. These were attended by participants from the original workshop and by others

who had joined the process later. Towards the end of the final session it was clear that the workshops had begun to equip some participants with enough skills and experience for them to assist others. The assistance that younger members gave to older participants exemplified the cross-generational dynamics found in the initial workshop. Throughout this period we provided informal support to a number of club members to ensure they could continue working on editing stories, their own and those of others. Supporting the skills acquisition of the club's project manager beyond the workshop was particularly crucial: his growing enthusiasm for the technologies and the source materials resulted over time in several further videos.

In a final intervention we engaged the younger volunteers at the club in a web-development workshop discussed in detail in the next section. Two years after the first workshop the foundations of a self-sustaining digital storycircle appeared to be in place. The club's project manager recently observed that visitors to the club, many of them former members or their children renewing contact after many years, often arrive after having seen the club's website with its online exhibition of the club's multimedia stories. They come wanting to share a story of their own camping experiences. The club's ambition is to continue adding these stories to its 'living archive'.

A different multiplication of narrative actors, and of opportunities for narrative exchange, emerged unexpectedly at the sixth form college where we worked over an 18-month period. Our initial work there engaged members of staff in media, art and design, and performing arts, and involved a series of workshops for students and staff aimed at exploring how social media technologies might contribute to opening up spaces for dialogue beyond the time-space of the curriculum. During our fieldwork we, worked with teachers to develop student briefs

that incorporated digital technologies, and organised special one-off events including a storytelling evening and a Twitter event linked to the launch of a college radio station.

During the course of these interventions a Twitter account initiated by the head of the college's Humanities department came to our notice and stood out as a successful and 'naturally occurring' example of communicative exchange beyond the classroom. The Twitter account was explicitly conceived as a tool for community building:

Our head of department, Lisa, came up with the idea as a way of lifting the profile of humanities in the college and also to create a sense of community . . . a place to discuss, share ideas . . . , have discussions and talk that was beyond the four walls of the classroom (Robert, philosophy teacher).<sup>3</sup>

Even among a spatially contiguous group of teachers and students, digital technologies can extend the spatio-temporal reach of social relations, so contributing to community formation. In a large department who do not all interact face-to-face on a regular basis, the creation of a communication space enables a degree of visibility and mutual awareness not achievable through face-to-face communication alone. Conceived from the outset as a collective effort, the [CollegeDept]<sup>4</sup> Twitter account was maintained by a core of four enthusiastic teachers, who deliberately used this rather than individual Twitter accounts to interact with their students across their combined subject areas. –

As a consequence, students who followed the CollegeDept account were regularly exposed to information and interactions that were *not directly related* to their subject area. While at first glance this might be perceived as irrelevant 'noise', such tweets, on the contrary, contributed

positively to a sense of department-wide community. Through these apparently simple means, broader contexts for the exchange of educationally useful narratives emerged, at least in initial form.

### *Spatializing: the Narratives of Narratives*

Having discussed the multiplying components and contexts of narrative exchange enabled through digital resources, we now consider, in more detail, the organised *meta*-narratives (or narratives of narratives) that, through the exploitation of digital platforms or digital tools, we were able to work with our partners to produce. These narratives of narratives used digital infrastructure to spatialize developing processes of narrative exchange, so expanding and complicating their meaning. In each case discussed, the use of digital resources was pursued within themes developed by our partners. Thematisation provided both the initial stimulus for narrative exchange, and a way of framing and assembling the individually contributed narrative materials that resulted. In addition, we anticipated that popular digital tools for displaying narrative materials could enhance the impact of such themes. In this section, the contribution of digital *infrastructure* to narrative exchange becomes more prominent.

We will discuss two distinct modes of digital practice. The first involves *identifying* stories according to attributes of space and/or time and then *displaying* them on a web-based graphic interface which is either cartographic, temporal or utilises both display functions in combination: on the geocoding and dating of videos and photos generated in the storygathering at our partner youth club and a separate collaboration with a secondary school, using the map-based tool historypin and customised google maps, to explore that school's relationship to its geographical neighbourhood. Secondly we discuss the practice of

*augmenting* an existing collection of objects in physical space with narrative content that could be accessed using machine-readable QR (Quick Response) codes. Appropriating practices more commonly found in advertising and the museum and heritage sector, art and design students at our partner sixth form college already discussed embedded stories of their creative process into a physical exhibition of their artwork.

Large-scale online mapping service-providers such as Google have made standard the practice of linking digitised data to cartographically represented place. The ease with which google maps can be customised and embedded into any website has made them a ubiquitous method for presenting data online. Similarly the ‘timeline’ has become a common method of narrativisation by linking temporally discrete communication events, as in Storify or Facebook user profile pages. Nevertheless, there remains significant potential for these tools to be developed by groups and organisations engaged in expanding dynamic digital story circles. In our fieldwork, we started from the principle that the relationship between narratives and space is complex (Sennett 1994): some spaces and places seem ‘naturally’ to encourage storytelling, while others (the ‘nonplaces’ identified by Marc Auge 1994) discourage storytelling. Maps however make the complex relationships between sites of narrative production visible across social space. Such visibility may enhance mutual recognition between storytellers. Indeed, it was this possibility of *mapping* relationships between narrative agents that had inspired our original concept of a project about a digital storycircle.

Over several months, members of our partner community club contributed to fifteen videos around the theme Tales from Camp, stored on a DVD and uploaded to a YouTube channel created by the Club. Participatory workshops involving the Club’s younger members



generated ideas for displaying the Club's narrative material online in a web-development or 'webhack' day. The collection featured a wide age range of contributors, with narrated events ranging from 1939 to 2010 (we were working in the year of the club's 100<sup>th</sup> annual camp): it was decided to embed the videos alongside pre-existing photographs on a timeline embedded on the Club's website, showing the Club's entire camping history. Meta-data relating to the dates and locations of the stories was logged ready for the tool's installation; participants used the mapping function on Flickr to geocode photographic images from each of the one hundred camps, and these geocoded images were incorporated into the timeline. The result was a framing of individual stories and photos within a narrative cartography showing how the camp had pitched its tents across various locations in rural North Wales, the Isle of Man and Yorkshire. The timeline pulled stories about camps separated in time and space into a common frame. One significant outcome of this digital storycircle constructed around Tales from Camp was its capacity to foster reflections by younger members about the Club's continuities over time, so enhancing mutual recognition across the generations.

A second way of spatializing narratives through digital infrastructure arose following discussions with staff and management of a secondary school a few miles from the Club. In a small-scale collaboration, we supported the school with training to enable a project team of staff and students to act as facilitators in a multi-phase process of catching stories linked to the school and its history. Place again emerged as an important theme in this collaboration. Having recently changed its name, the school was at a challenging transitional point during which it was also relocating to a new site within a different catchment area. We developed an inter-generational narrative-mapping project that was inspired by a particular platform, HistoryPin (<http://www.historypin.com/>). Historypin has pioneered a simple map-based interface, using a Google-base map, on which users pin photographs augmented with their

narrative texts or audio stories. There are various ways of navigating this: one is a channel containing all material posted by an individual or institutional user, with material viewed either as a tabulated list or embedded on a map; alternatively one can go directly to the map and access all pinned photo stories within an area, with the ability to limit searches to a specific year. The map view can then be delimited by specifying the year. The map gathers together narrative materials pinned by many users. When these stories are navigated and when the relationships between narrative, time and place are explored, a wider collective *story about* the individual stories emerges. The collective story does not consist of a singular perspective but can be interpreted from multiple perspectives. Points of tension between individual stories can be explored, as can the spatial and temporal relations between them.

Capacity-building within the school was followed by public workshops in which the school's project team took the lead. During the first public workshop two sisters, local residents, prompted by old photographs from the school archive pinned to the Historypin map began to share stories of the recent demolition of the primary school they had attended as children. They contributed striking photographs of brilliant red school jumpers tied to the railings of the school on the day before the bulldozers moved in. The theme of demolition and rebuilding, of dislocation between past and present, surfaced again in the second stage of our collaboration with the school. After consultation we designed a process that would explore the coexisting layers of narrative relating to the site that the new school building was built on. This reflected the school's own desire to confront directly tensions involved in its recent move. On the site of the new school there had previously been an Edwardian church, semi-derelict in recent years, with a war memorial commemorating those associated with the church lost during World War One. Following a campaign by a local preservation group, the war memorial was saved when the building was demolished and eventually reinstalled and

rededicated within the school lobby. It is important that digital storycircles can deal not just with accumulations of individual stories, but, more subtly, with potential conflicts and tensions *within* sets of stories from different space-times. Digital infrastructure proved a useful support for this.

A third way of spatializing participant narratives evolved in a project with art and design students for an open day exhibition at the College already discussed. Staff had expressed interest in working with us to give the students experience of sharing stories reflecting on their creative process. In seeking new ways to address this interest we were strongly influenced by one of the core principles of the digital storytelling movement: that the storyteller's voice is important to the story. As Joe Lambert puts it: 'In digital stories, voice not only tells a vital narrative but it also captures the essence of the narrator, their unique character, and their connection to the lived experience' (Lambert 2006: 18).

Students were given a brief to create over some weeks, a body of art work in a range of media, paintings, prints and drawings, that responded to aspects of their urban landscape. After the students had developed their ideas in the studios, and through site visits and independent research, they were asked to select one image to be exhibited and to contribute a story about that process. To help generate these stories the students were given a series of structured pointers for their reflection in their sketchbook. Using a voice-recorder students were asked to record a short audio clip, around a minute in length, about their experience of researching and creating the sketchbook. Some students found this easier to do in pairs, telling their story to a friend. The recordings were then uploaded to sound platform Soundcloud and a dedicated wordpress blog was set up for exhibiting art work and audio stories together. For the College open day we created an exhibition template. A poster was made for each student incorporating their selected

art work and a linked QR code was incorporated into the poster. The template linked student voices to their art work, with voices being accessed using a smart phone. QR-code augmented displays of this nature are increasingly common within the museum and heritage sector to deliver contextual information provided by professional experts. What the college staff appreciated about the method was the way it involved *the students themselves* in mediating between the art work and the viewer:

It's another method for the students to express themselves and it's perfect for us. It allows interaction. With artwork you look at it and maybe you don't understand it and then you walk on, you don't appreciate it properly.... But having the QR code or some information that they can listen to... it sort of brings it alive. And that's really important I feel, it's engaging the viewer and it's improving their understanding.... That's what's going to really improve the way we do the exhibitions I think.

It's very quick to get things up, it's a new way of working, we don't have to write as much, we can record, there's a lot more emotion that you can pick up out of a recording than something that's written. It's easy to misunderstand something that's written, whereas if it's recorded it's honest and I like that, the honesty of a recording.

Whereas digital stories, considered individually, can only yield collections of stories, building digital resources into a *digital* storycircle enables a large variety of narratives to be linked together, including in ways that draw on the spatial patterning of those stories' own production. Where such patterning can be expressed in easy-to-manage form online (for example, an interactive website), there are significant opportunities to stabilise *narratives of* narratives that authorise communities of storytellers in new ways.

## *Habits of Recognition*

The key principle of the digital storytelling workshop is the *encounter*: a physical circle where story-tellers and story-listeners authorise each other through mutual recognition (Honneth 2007). Can equally significant encounters be enabled using digital resources, far beyond workshop or formal teaching context, within what we are calling a *digital* storycircle?

Some of our initial hunches about where to look for such encounters proved wrong. At the College, we found that our initial idea of encouraging online debate and discussion about student work had no purchase within the highly regulated, hierarchical and time-scarce discursive environment of the College. We had to develop other leads towards narrative encounters within the College's daily life. We ran classes about narrative (for example on the narrative aspects of urban photography); we ran workshops about the affordances and uses of particular platforms (for example on twitter); we explored how some use of social media might develop around the narrative practices embedded deep within the College's curriculum-based teaching practice.

One interesting example of changed narrative habits with implications for processes of mutual recognition came from the College twitter account already mentioned. At the basic level, the CollegeDept Twitter account provided a useful tool for extending learning beyond the classroom and into 'real-world' contexts. Teachers would regularly tweet links to relevant articles and web resources:

Twitter enabled students to take an active role as co-producers rather than just recipients of knowledge. Crucial to students sharing information in this way was teachers' routine practice of retweeting all tweets directed at the CollegeDept account. This was a practical solution to limitations posed by Twitter's information architecture. In contrast to Facebook, which offers the facility to create group pages where all members can leave comments or upload images for everyone to see, Twitter does not enable the creation of demarcated communication *spaces*. While most tweets are publicly available, what each user sees on Twitter will be different; there is no central "place" where related tweets from different users can be gathered.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, tweets sent by students to @CollegeDept, while publicly searchable, did not appear on the CollegeDept Twitter homepage. Retweeting gathered students' tweets in one place and makes them visible to CollegeDept's other followers.

Aware of the teachers' habit of retweeting student tweets established a *shared repertoire* (Wenger 1998: 229), students often tweeted, knowing that, if they directed their tweet at @CollegeDept, teachers would share it with their (students') peers. Teachers often followed up retweeting with a further tweet praising the original contribution. Retweeting can be seen as a form of public acknowledgement, and (reinforced by the follow-up tweet) validates the student's status as a knowledge source. Such practices, whose very banality makes them both easily readable and repeatable, *enact* the process of acknowledging others as having 'capabilities of . . . value to a concrete community' that, for Honneth (2007: 139) is core to recognition. Similar if less formal encounters evolved at our partner community club around the gradual editing and reusing of narrative materials originally focussed through our storytelling workshops.

As discussed earlier our initial workshop at the club with a wide age range of members and volunteers followed the digital storytelling method closely. When participants later reflected on this initial face-to-face session they emphasised various dynamics of recognition resulting from the space for intergenerational listening and exchange provided by the workshop. Older members in particular remarked on the opportunity it provided for them to understand the perspectives of younger members.

It was interesting to listen to the stories of the young lads....It's interesting to hear their perspective [...] sometimes, their take on things is obviously different to ours. [...] You don't really know what's going through [their] minds and what they've got out of it. You see them having a laugh and a joke but you don't know what bits have actually stuck in their mind until you hear the stories, and you might think oh, I wouldn't have thought of that.

But dynamics of intergenerational recognition were also observed in the mediated encounters that took place when digital stories were shown. Younger officers in their late teens described the impact of seeing digitised footage showing about older officers, men now in their sixties and seventies, when they were young men. Coupled with the contemporary stories that individual participants told, this provided an important opportunity for reflection on the *accumulated* experience of older officers and the club's *enduring* traditions of cooperation:

They've been there themselves, so they know exactly what to do. I'm not being funny but they're not all qualified youth workers, but they do just as good of a job because they've been there and they've seen how it's done properly, and then they just grew up into that, that's what it is (Aidan).

And it does show us kids what camp was like and how people like John and Frank [senior officers] and everyone like that have made it better for us so without their hard work it wouldn't be better for us (Jason).

These insights in turn yielded a deeper awareness of how it was *collective* effort that accounted for the club's persistence over time. Habits of recognition in these cases were nurtured where there was strong link between mediated (online) communication and face-to-face social interaction. The digital storycircle does not of course replace the relationships built through face to face contact but provides a means for sustaining and amplifying them.

### *Limitations*

It was too much to expect that, even within the extended collaborations of our fieldwork, the sorts of long-term 'communities of discourse' around narrative exchange that Wuthnow (1989) found in the emergence of modern literate societies could be achieved. This would require a longer process whereby successful forms for generating, displaying and commenting on, digital stories, and wider collections of stories, are repeated over time, enabling the accumulation of knowledges and literacies, and the accumulation of wider framings and contexts- that would legitimate and stabilize those achievements. Some of those framings require political context and opportunity, a long-term factor that was not particularly favourable during our fieldwork. In the UK in 2011-2013, the Conservative-Liberal Coalition government's Big Society agenda was, in a loose way, favourable, but its combination with drastic cuts in local and regional government funding, hitting particularly



hard in the North-West of England where we were working, was anything but favourable to supporting the sorts of long-term community processes in which we were involved.

We have shown however how, at least in the community club, college and school where we worked, there were the beginnings of digitally-supported processes of narrative exchange that might, if extended over time beyond the period of our fieldwork, generate such communities of discourse, albeit, in the educational cases, subject to the inevitable limitation of the continuous turnover of schools and colleges' student population.

In our two other fieldwork sites, more basic limitations constrained even the early stages of a digital storycircle. With our partner community reporters' network, the lack of a developed digital infrastructure (ie a sufficiently interactive website for collecting community reporters' stories) meant that wider *spaces* and processes of exchange and mutual recognition were not yet developed during the period of our fieldwork. As a result, the processes of offline mutual support sometimes found between community reporters in a shared neighbourhood were not replicated on any larger scale. During our fieldwork, we helped a process of re-inventing the network's website, acknowledging the need of community reporters to be visible not only to one another, but to wider audiences too. The redesign created a new requirement on community reporters to learn the skill of commenting on each other's new stories and adding tags to their posts. A website relaunch, introducing additional functionalities of community tagging and content curation, aimed to cultivate an environment of discussion and mutual support. But the long-term consequences of these changes will only become clear in the longer-term, after the close of our fieldwork.

At the tenants' association with which we worked, the constraints were more basic. Lacking collective resources beyond one old computer in a corner of the public entrance to a residential tower-block, and with uneven connectivity across its tenants, our efforts at gathering local stories did not have a digital context within which to connect and from which the elements of a digital storycircle could start to be built, although the leaders of the tenants association had initially hoped otherwise. At the end of our fieldwork, a website for collecting some tenants' stories had been built with our involvement, but it is too early to say if practices of narrative exchange can be built around it. This brings out the continuing importance of fundamental digital divide issues (Van Dijk 2012) in the planning of such projects.

### *Conclusion*

The principles of the digital storytelling movement endure, because they are based in deeper principles of social cooperation and democratic organization (Honneth 2007); digital storytelling's workshop techniques remain crucial building-blocks of processes of narrative exchange. But digital infrastructures promise to sustain narrative exchange (and their benefits of mutual recognition) beyond the contexts of story production in face-to-face workshops into longer-term and broader processes of narrative exchange across and between linked sites and groups.

In this article, we have explained some of the successes and limitations of an attempt to build 'digital storycircles' across five sites of collaborative work. Our account brings out the various ways in which the storycircle concept itself might acquire a digital dimension. This operates, first, through multiplying the elements of the storytelling process (its actors,

contexts, time-contexts) and the course of that multiplication enabling new shared perceptions of the meaning of such narrative exchanges to emerge. The second way builds on the first, by using digital infrastructures to thematize the connections across whole *sets of* stories, in particular using online organizational tools such as mapping and time-lines to bring out a spatial story of how narratives have been produced by a population of narrators: since narrative always emerges from and about spatially specific life-contexts, such further spatialization matters. The third way involved subtle changes in the everyday habits of producing narrative and recognizing each other as actors with narrative skills: the materials in question may fall far short of a completed rounded story, but the habits that build through their online exchange are important as distributed ways of recognizing the act of *collective* narrative production.

The limitations of such processes are also important. Some derive from time alone: the need for long periods of time to develop communities of discourse that can provide a stable long-term context for digital storycircles as meaningful and legitimate activities. Political times also may or may not be favourable to such developments. Other limitations relate to the material circumstances of the partners worked with: the degree of development of their web presence, as in the case of the national community reporter network that was our partner, or basic levels of computer and online access in our project with the tenants association of a public housing block in a very poor location. The long hand of the digital divide continues to shape many of the landscapes in which, as researchers, we seek to intervene.

It is however just this mixed picture - of early if variable successes and enduring limitations - in the process of building digital storycircles that, we hope, will be useful to scholars of digital storytelling working in contrasting locations across the world.

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed discussion of the collective memory and archiving aspects of our research, see (Macdonald forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Names changed to protect anonymity.

<sup>4</sup> Name anonymised for confidentiality.

<sup>5</sup> Hashtags were developed by early Twitter adopters as a response to this, as an easy way to render conversations about a particular topic searchable.