Using Stories to Build Stronger Communities

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Few cultural practices are quite as universal as sharing stories. While stories do serve to entertain, this purpose is not exclusive. Parents tell fables to children to instruct their morals, communities share religious tales to strengthen bonds around a common history, and people consume fiction to gain perspectives about unknown experiences. Stories are a mechanism for change. Communities have always come together to create stories - not just to reflect on their past, but to shape their future.

In fact, decisions regarding local policy development and urban planning derive from topical civil discourse, shaped by the dominant narratives present in a community. These narratives reflect cultural values and signify what is important. Today, technological advances have made it such that it is easier to share stories with a large number of people than ever before - but that does not imply that we are using stories in more effective ways. Storytelling mechanisms may exclude participants, resulting in public narratives inconsistent with the beliefs of relevant social groups and in policies that lead to more fractured communities.

In this research, I consider the role that storytelling plays within the public discourse surrounding policy development and urban planning. Disadvantaged groups often lack the ability to have their voices heard, resulting in decisions that cause harm to their communities. In building an understanding of the factors that contribute toward empowerment through storytelling I provide guidance toward making storytelling mechanisms more inclusive.

To this end, I analyze several projects that involve collecting stories from the American populace with an emphasis on historically disadvantaged groups. The first of these is StoryCorps, a national organization that aims to record and preserve America's stories with the expectation that others will gain empathy and perspective as they listen to these oral histories. This project reveals the qualities of stories that are most important to evoking emotion, as well as

how to elicit these important stories from a community. A second case study is the Mapping Prejudice project run out of the University of Minnesota that has sought to understand how the Minneapolis housing code enforced structural racism for decades. Researchers interwove studies of housing records with personal stories, and they intend to use this information to reshape the community's underlying narrative to influence modern policy. An analysis of this project reveals how stories connect to contemporary politics on a local scale.

I apply my findings from these case studies in the examination of how the city of Charlottesville could implement a digital location-based storytelling mobile application using the framework of value sensitive design (VSD). Charlottesville is a representative small American city that has significant racial and socioeconomic historical tensions between social groups. A storytelling application would provide a platform for residents to document stories and memories, having their voices heard and connecting these to physical locations so that others may experience these personal narratives. Value sensitive design allows for the justification of the digital media as directly relating to the social norms it seeks to encourage.

Literature Review

By 1965 the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts had superficially killed Jim Crow laws across the United States, yet their legacy continues to survive through structural racism which imposes restrictions upon African Americans. This structural racism is present as a component of systematic wealth inequality which owes its roots to discriminatory practices in mortgage markets and housing codes, in addition to labor market discrimination. Together, these result in an economic cycle that limits upwards economic mobility among African Americans in particular (Hanks, 2018). Wealth inequality has wide ranging effects, including destabilizing family lives and limiting the political power of poorer social groups. The American Political

Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy formed in the early 2000s to explore the link between wealth inequality and limitations to political power. The task force suggested that "rising inequality will solidify longstanding disparities in political voice and influence, and perhaps exacerbate such disparities" ("American Democracy", 2004). This reinforces the notion that efforts must be made to provide more inclusive channels for disadvantaged groups to affect the political process.

To further understand the exclusion of African Americans from aspects of society, we can look to other methods used by African Americans to form communities and express culture. In particular, Black Twitter is a cultural phenomenon involving great numbers of African American Twitter users expressing thoughts on relevant current events. Black Twitter forms a digital counterpublic space for "uniquely black discourse" analogous to the physical spaces of the black church, barbershop, and beauty salon (Graham, 2016). Notably, Black Twitter is not just characterized by topical differences in discussion, but rather in the actual means for discussions. In particular, Black Twitter users have developed communication practices in line with "signifyin'," a method of oral linguistic performance emblematic of African American culture (Florini, 2014). Users take advantage of topical hashtags and real time public replies to formulate robust discussion, separate from the rest of Twitter. The development of this space for racial discourse demonstrates that voices part of historically disadvantaged social groups are not quiet. However, these voices may still need to be lifted into greater visibility within a more public sphere in order to more directly influence the narrative of physical spaces.

Storytelling certainly plays a powerful role within local politics and urban planning. Professor Sandercock of the School of Community & Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia goes so far as to claim that planning is performed storytelling (Sandercock,

2003). She recognizes that as we use stories to organize knowledge, narratives serve as catalysts for change in urban environments. Importantly she also notes "we need to be attentive to how power shapes which stories get told, get heard, carry weight" (Sandercock, 2003, p. 12). It is not enough to recognize that stories are connected to development. Instead, we must be conscious of which social groups' stories are heard, and we must recognize that there are barriers to the dispersion of narratives told by groups which lack significant social power.

Storytelling mechanisms within urban development favor stakeholders with significant economic and institutional power. As Söderström, Paasche, and Klauser note in a 2014 paper, IBM's quest to become integrated within smart city development is a challenge of building a narrative about their necessity. IBM, in particular, seeks to establish themselves as an obligatory passage point (OPP) for cities seeking to modernize. The paper characterizes storytelling in planning as being about power, as it asks "who has the power to give meaning to things, to name others, to construct the character of collective identities, to shape the discussion of urban politics?" (Söderström, 2014, p. 310). Therefore, in framing the stories about the role of smart cities (and the purposes of the private companies embedded in them), IBM is claiming power over the smart city discourse. By forming a basis for the contemporary conversation about smart cities, IBM is defining the role of the private company. This is not to say that the company is necessarily being malicious, but rather to suggest that deeper thought about how public-private partnerships are formed is warranted. Through careful storytelling, it appears that IBM may have skipped over this.

A popular modern technological solution to building narratives about communities involves harnessing enormous quantities of data to reveal seemingly innate truths using charts, graphs, and diagrams. Data driven storytelling appears a model form of communication.

However, those seeking to manipulate opinions can selectively present data, and the supposed innate truth of data makes refuting faulty arguments challenging. Cathy O'Neil documents this phenomenon in *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. The book details how black box models used within the banking, insurance, and education industries (among many other) leverage vast amounts of data in ways that often increase inequality while being essentially immune to questioning or validation by domain experts. In particular, the book describes how data is used to discriminate, as models that are 'color blind' in that they operate only on raw data still encode a developer's assumptions and contain their biases (O'Neil, 2017). Essentially, a series of numbers cannot accurately encode complex human stories.

Case Study: StoryCorps - Preserving America's Stories

Overview

Today StoryCorps is a large national organization that has recorded and archived over two hundred and fifty thousand personal interviews and has garnered forty-five million views of selected stories posted online (StoryCorps 2018). The organization has reached incredible numbers of Americans, providing for personal connections among loved ones and disseminating moralizing stories among many more.

StoryCorps is analyzed here as an exemplar of how crowdsourced stories can be brought together to create a positive change. The organizations mission is "to preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world" ("About StoryCorps", n.d.). While the project is less tied to place or to concrete goals than the planning and local political purposes outlined in this paper's introduction,

StoryCorps still provides a basis to understand how stories can lead to create positive change, as well as how to elicit high quality stories from the community.

Founding and Initial Reception

The project began on a much smaller scale in 2003 with the creation of a storytelling booth in Grand Central Station in New York City. In the soundproof booth, an interviewer and a relative or acquaintance have a conversation for 40 minutes and leave with a CD of the interview, while the organization archives another copy in the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. Inspired by the oral histories recorded by the Works Progress Administration, a component of the New Deal in the 1930s, David Isay sought to start a movement encouraging others to share and preserve their individual histories (Edwards, 2003). The celebrated oral historian, Studs Terkel was present at the ribbon cutting for the storytelling booth, where he proclaimed "today we shall begin celebrating the lives of the uncelebrated" (Gross, 2003).

Two oral historians visited the booth in 2005 and reviewed their experience. They found that interview format provided for a very open conversation, as "the intimacy of the setting made him want to be honest, and opinions, biases, and some strong personal feelings came to the surface quickly" (Lamothe, 2006, p. 173). By this point, StoryCorps had started harnessing the power of their stories by airing them on NPR, and the historians note that the stories "resonate with the broadest themes of human experience" (p. 173) and "force a democratic understanding of history" (p. 173). Though they question the usefulness of a vast archive of story recordings, they recognize the liberating nature of telling these stories for the interviewee and the emotional impact the stories may have on the listeners and the broader audience.

Individual Story Study

In order to more deeply understand the power contained in the stories assembled by StoryCorps, I analyzed "The Saint of Dry Creek" a video presented by the organization and the reception it received. "The Saint of Dry Creek" is a 3-minute excerpt from a longer interview of a gay activist, Patrick Haggerty, by his daughter, in which Patrick describes growing up on a farm in rural Washington. He tells of a day in high school that he dressed in drag for a school show, until he hid when his father came to the school. Afterward, his father told him "don't sneak," and instead to be proud of himself (Galeno, 2015). Many listeners will never know the feeling of growing up as a closeted gay person in a rural farming town, but they can feel the power of the father's words in telling his son "don't sneak". While YouTube comments are widely satirized as a collection of incoherent thoughts, the reception of this story is in stark contrast, with one commenter even writing "he has become a father to us all". Another online review of the short story suggests that the emotions evoked in the listener come not just from the words of the story but also from the "timbre of his voice and the awe and appreciation – both for his father and his own resolve – that it conveys" (Horton, 2017). The story is a brief window into someone else's life, inviting the listener to share an experience with the storyteller and feel the emotions that they felt. The intimacy of the StoryCorps recording booth setting, as described earlier, encouraged Haggerty to share a very personal and revealing story, and the audio captured and reflected his emotions, providing a solid basis listeners can connect to.

Impact

On a national scale, StoryCorps is reframing individual conversations and raising awareness about important issues. The project doesn't have a very focused goal; it is not trying to solve any one problem or offer any solutions. Instead, the project elevates the national

discourse, defining to listeners what is important and making people more empathetic. In evoking emotions, it inspires human connection instead of making abstract appeals to data.

From surveys of NPR listeners and StoryCorps podcast followers, StoryCorps has tabulated some metrics demonstrating the impact the stories have. They note that 96% of respondents report that they are able to better understand and empathize with people who are different from them from their exposure to StoryCorps, and that 62% of online listeners were inspired to speak with others about social or political issues (Performance, n.d.).

By sourcing deeply personal stories from the community which speak to the wider variety of human experience and by thrusting these stories into the national attention via NPR, StoryCorps has provided a platform that inspires deeper thought about human relationships.

Case Study: Mapping Prejudice - Understanding Race in Urban Settings

Overview

The Mapping Prejudice project was initiated at the University of Minnesota in order to better understand how structural racism has propagated housing inequality within Minneapolis and to share this information with the community in order to influence future policy development. The project pairs together data sourced from housing deeds with personal stories in order to weave a narrative about racial issues endemic to the city ("Mapping Prejudice Project", 2016).

Mapping Prejudice was created to explore the reasons underpinning why Minneapolis has the lowest homeownership rates among African Americans in the country. Such a designation might have been anticipated to belong to an area deep in the Jim Crow South, not in Minnesota, where slavery has been banned since the state's inception. The project generally attributes the low ownership rate to the use of restrictive covenants in home deeds and to redlining financial

practices. Furthermore, the project goes on to demonstrate the harmful effects of these practices today, over sixty years since they were deemed unconstitutional. The project hopes that in sharing this information with the community and increasing awareness of these issues, they will be able to influence public policy and create a more equitable city ("Mapping Prejudice Project", 2016). Here I analyze the project in order to explore the role that stories may directly play in shaping policy.

Political Impact

Minneapolis politicians have seized on Mapping Prejudice as a tool to spread awareness about inequitable housing practices in the city. Philippe Cunningham, the city councilperson for Minneapolis Ward 4 writes a monthly column for North News, a local newspaper. In the January issue he focuses on the longstanding inequities in the Minneapolis housing system and recommends his constituents take 30 minutes during the upcoming time to learn more about this history. He provides Mapping Prejudice as a primary source for the residents to use to understand the recent history (Cunningham, 2020). Cunningham is not defining any new policies here, but he is taking advantage of Mapping Prejudice as a tool to define a new narrative in the city.

Every 10 years, Minnesota cities craft 'master plans' in accordance with state legislation. These plans dictate how land will be used and developed, how housing will be used, how public facilities will be developed, and how infrastructure will need to be updated. As can be imagined, these plans are enormously complex, and take several years to design. Significant effort was recently put forth in Minneapolis on Minneapolis 2040, the confusingly named plan which went into effect January 2020. The first of 11 goals which the plan seeks to accomplish is to eliminate disparities such that "all communities fully thrive regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, country of

origin, religion, or zip code having eliminated deep-rooted disparities in wealth, opportunity, housing, safety, and health." It is evident that the ideas developed and spread via the Mapping Prejudice project played a role in defining this goal. The policy section of the Minneapolis 2040 engagement website directly references the Mapping Prejudice project as informing the planning phase about racial inequities in the city (Phase 3, n.d.). So too does an article encouraging citizens to learn about the planning framework on Wedge LIVE, a 'hyperlocal' news site which show maps created by Mapping Prejudice to demonstrate the significance of the 2040 plan (Edwards, 2018).

A key component of this legislation is a new zoning policy that bans single-family zoning in every neighborhood. Single-family zoning locks neighborhoods into low density housing that naturally increases home costs and values, forming a barrier to home ownership for residents who do not already own a house in the area. The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy cites Mapping Prejudice as revealing that single-family zoning was initiated following bans against racial covenants in home deeds (McCormick, 2020). It is evident that in entering stories and comprehensive housing data into the public conscience, the Mapping Prejudice project has been able to reach the ears of local government and national think tanks. This demonstrates the power that elevating a narrative already common to African Americans and poorer residents to a wider audience can have.

Use of Stories

As the name implies, the primary deliverable of the Mapping Prejudice project is a series of maps which illustrate the spread of racial covenants in housing deeds over time in Minneapolis. While these maps show the scope of the issue, their presentation of the data may seem impersonal and academic. Crosslinking the maps with stories sourced from the community

adds a degree of humanity and a point of connection to the more abstract data, inviting people to consider the issue more tangibly.

To understand how the Mapping Prejudice Project harnessed the power of stories more deeply, I spoke with Kirsten Delegard, the project's director. When she presents on Mapping Prejudice to community groups, she relies on stories in order to provide a basis for the audience to connect to. She shares her own family's story as immigrants to Minneapolis and is able to describe the unfair advantages they had over others due to their white skin color. Her story is very tangible and grounded to place, forming a stronger means of connection. While the raw data evidences the scope of the inequities, the stories bring them to life. In her presentations, she notices that including stories "ignites their imagination. It opens them up to new policy, to thoughts about how policy has to change by that personalization," and that telling stories "invites people in, in a way, to be part of this and say 'look, this is part of my history too'" (personal communication, February, 19, 2020).

The key power of the Mapping Prejudice project is in its ability to raise awareness. The stories and the data do not solve issues by themselves, but they bring into the common discourse ideas about what is important. Delegard noted that when she goes out into the community, "where I do get pushback, legitimate pushback, is from African Americans … they're like 'why is your story more important than my story? Why are people listening to you? My family has been telling these stories for two generations and no one has been hearing what we have to say'" (personal communication, February, 19, 2020). This frustration is very valid, that the housing issue became prominent recently when an educated white woman brought it up. Importantly, this frustration speaks to the entire point of the project, to lift the voices of those who have been kept quiet or ignored. Mapping Prejudice elevates voices from historically disadvantaged social

groups, allowing them to speak for themselves. The Mapping Prejudice Project demonstrates how in the focused context of housing inequity, using stories in education affects the local political process, an important step on the way to true racial equity.

Discussion

The StoryCorps and Mapping Prejudice case studies make the potential impact that spreading community-sourced stories can have apparent. When we tell meaningful stories, we can elevate the national discourse and focus on significant aspects in the shared human experience, and we can also use stories to drill down on a specific topic to exact a certain change.

These two modes of storytelling seem at odds with one another. While these stories are all meant to encourage thinking, some stories induce us to open our minds wider and wonder, while others cause us to narrow down and think more critically. In the context of the local planning process both of these modes have their uses in changing the existing narrative underlying a community.

Both StoryCorps and Mapping Prejudice make use of significant institutional power in sharing their stories. From its founding StoryCorps allied with the Library of Congress, and shortly thereafter formed a key partnership with National Public Radio to spread stories to a very broad audience. Several universities collaborated to support the work of the Mapping Prejudice Project from its founding. In both cases, members of disadvantaged groups were already telling their stories, but they were not always effectively integrated into the public discourse until these powerful entities helped to lift them. Replicating the success of these projects without similar powerful stakeholders certainly poses a great challenge.

Storytelling Application for Charlottesville

As a thought experiment to explore the challenge of exacting change via stories without a powerful underlying stakeholder, I consider the implementation of a digital location-based storytelling application for Charlottesville. The application could allow community members to record brief oral histories and pin them to specific locations, allowing them to define and contextualize a space. Others could travel through the city listening to anecdotes and experience place through the eyes of others. As a concept, this is a very decentralized system, removing an institutional force as a facilitator and allowing storytellers to link directly with those that would benefit from listening. Throughout its history Charlottesville has experienced significant divisions based upon race, class, and education status, so it provides an interesting backdrop for this discussion of empowerment in local politics.

Sociotechnical Framework

In this research I consider the employment of a digital storytelling application in Charlottesville with the purpose of empowering historically disadvantaged groups through the lens of value sensitive design (VSD). This framework explicitly provides the means to account for how a community's value system connects with facets of technology, and so is applicable to this conversation as the proposed application is a direct expression of community values.

Friedman, a researcher in the field of human-computer interaction, developed the framework of VSD in order to study how moral values may be present during systems design (Friedman, 1996). Within this project, I present and analyze a selection of societal values that should be expressed in a storytelling application for Charlottesville. I will further demonstrate how these values may be translated into norms governing the development of such an application. However, a full enumeration of design requirements stemming from these norms lies outside of the scope of this research.

Application Design

  The StoryCorps project has found ways to evoke emotional responses to community sourced stories, and the Mapping Prejudice project has woven stories together with data to influence public development using physical space as a context for understanding racial challenges. Within Charlottesville, I consider the development of a storytelling application that shares components with each of these projects. This digital technology should provide a means for Charlottesville residents to record their history and alter the existing local narrative in order to influence policy development, but without as narrow a focus as the Mapping Prejudice project. In its simplest form, this application could consist of a collection of geotagged audio recordings, tying personal narratives to locations in Charlottesville. These recordings could additionally be linked thematically and tied to data, to build a fuller picture of regional development. For instance, a story of racial discrimination in the workplace in the 1980s might be linked to current or historical jobs reports in the area and to information about current city political proposals.

  Important values that should be upheld in the development of a storytelling application for Charlottesville are: a commitment to diversity such that the stories truly reflect all components of the community, a commitment to accessibility so that anyone can have their voice heard and everyone has the ability to listen in, and a commitment to education and integrity such that hearing stories will contribute to people's awareness of their surroundings.

  A commitment to diversity ensures progress toward resolving tensions with Charlottesville based upon race, class, and the division between the University of Virginia and the rest of the town. Developing an understanding of similarities and differences between typical experiences in distinct social groups provides a basis for more rational and measured discussion. To this end, the application must incentivize participation from disparate social groups and

should provide opportunities to learn. Thought must be given to possible impediments toward some groups using the application so that these may be removed.

A commitment to accessibility dictates that a storytelling platform is a shared resource which is open to anyone. To promote this, the design of an application should involve community stakeholders from the beginning, particularly with an eye to the design of the user interface. Developers must seek to understand the different ways that community members could use the application and remove any potential barriers which would make it challenging for some to become involved.

A commitment to education and integrity reflects the belief that stories should be told in good faith, rather than to intentionally manipulate. While the platform must remain open, a robust moderation system may be necessary to prevent abuse of the system by any users wishing to sow discontent in the community. In terms of education, developers must give thought towards the audience that will be consuming the stories via the application. University of Virginia students could use the application to learn about their role in their temporary home, or application use could form a component of curricula in primary education so that children in the area can develop a more nuanced perception of local history. The application should also provide means of structuring information so that users can seek out specific topics and locations, rather than just being inundated with loosely connected stories.

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

Eliciting high quality oral histories from the community is challenging, but it is an important exercise in asset-based community engagement. The knowledge of local problems is generally already present in the community, and local social groups often hold clues to the solutions. A platform that can encourage the dissemination of invisible narratives and bring them

to light holds immense power in connecting disadvantaged social groups with the political and

planning processes, promoting general public equity.

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