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# Discussing the Weather: Digital Stories, Communities and the Climate Change Conversation

MICHAEL WILSON and KAREN LEWIS

**Abstract:** Between 2010 and 2012 researchers at the University of Falmouth and Glamorgan in the UK collaborated with White Loop Media Company and the UK Government's Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) to explore whether storytelling might provide a framework for improving engagement in the public climate change conversation. Project ASPECT built upon earlier work with flood communities and in the broader disaster management arena on the use of digital storytelling to build community resilience. Taken at its starting point a particular problem; the more DECC promoted climate change science, the more the public became disengaged. The idea was to use digital storytelling to subvert the knowledge hierarchies and expert-driven discourses that typically characterize communication in both the science and policy arenas.

This paper reflects on ASPECT and related work by showing examples of the stories created and also by theorizing the practice of digital storytelling as a sustainable cultural practice/cultural practice for sustainability. Thus it explores notions of authority and credibility within personal storytelling and the potential for creating deeper levels of public engagement in complex policy-making areas such as climate change, whilst interrogating the democratizing potential of both storytelling as a form and Web 2.0 as a platform.

**Keywords:** Climate change, digital storytelling, personal narrative, ASPECT

## 1. Heather's Story

My name is Heather Rogers and
I've been living and farming here
with my family since they moved in in 1948 and
I was born a few years later and
apart from going to college
I've been living here ever since.

So now we just have beef breeding cows and
they're young stock.
So it's all grassland and
we make silage in round bales.

Basically I think I always though[t] I'd work on
the farm
because when I was a little girl
my greatest delight was to go out with my father and
whatever he was doing, I'd be
his shadow, I think.

I think my favourite job
when I was a young girl
was when we were lambing.
If we had any orphan lambs
my job was to
help feed them.
And that often meant helping myself as well
to the milk.
(laughter)
I used to keep going round the corner
and as soon as I got round the corner
I've got a picture of me in there now
with my bonnet on.
At the top of the camping field
I think that was taken.
In the snow.

I keep a daily diary.
I've kept a diary ever since I came back from college
when I was twenty-one.
But my mother kept a diary
when we were little.
I write what we do every day
cos my memory's getting
more cloudy
and
always a weather report
and I only looked up the other day
and this would apply to this spring
and we actually had hotter days
on the 19th February and March
than we had on the 19th July
which makes no sense whatsoever.
Fine weather at the right time
of
growing your crops and
rearing your animals is
vital because
if you have it too dry and hot in the Spring
your crop yields are down
and also
if you don't grow grass in the Spring
animals are effected and you don't have the winter fodder.

If we have too hot a weather
it seems to
soon become
a problem, do you know what I mean?
Your grassland
or your crops
they seem to be stressed out quickly.

Over the past few decades we've noticed that
we have more extremes of weather.
We used to be able to rely on fine weather
in the summer to make hay, but
now we seem to get
either extremely heavy rain
or extremely windy
or extremely hot spells of weather
and likewise milder winters than we used to have so
we don't seem to have definite seasons now.
They're not defined like they used to be.
Consequently I think there is
a definite change
in growing patterns.

Probably in the last twenty years
I think we've seen
bigger changes.

## 2. Introduction

This is the text of a digital story made by Heather Rogers, a farmer in West Cornwall in the United Kingdom (UK), as part of Project ASPECT in 2011. It is transcribed using a practice that was developed by the Northern Ireland writer Leon MacAuley in the 1990s as a way of capturing the rhythms, emphases and natural poetry that exist within everyday speech. Quite simply the transcriber starts on a new line whenever s/he senses a pause in the oral testimony. A more substantial pause warrants a line break and the start of a new 'stanza'. It is not a flawless approach and it relies on the rather heavy editorial intervention by the transcriber—or it at least suggests a creative dialogue between the speaker, the transcriber and what is spoken. Nevertheless, it captures the quality of spoken word that is not captured by a straightforward, accurate prose transcription.

Heather's story was one of a number of stories that was made for this project and makes a good illustrative example of what the project was trying to achieve. It raises critical issues about the way that the public conversation around climate change is conducted in the UK, who carries the authority within that debate and how issues around climate change can be most effectively communicated to a largely un-persuaded (or at least variably skeptic) public.

Project ASPECT began in 2010 when Paddy Feaney, the Director of Communications at the Department of Energy and Climate Change in London, one of the key Government ministries in the UK, approached researchers at Falmouth University in Cornwall and the George Ewart

Evans Centre for Storytelling at what was then the University of Glamorgan in South Wales, with a particular challenge. Subsequently, we embarked on a creative exploration on how this challenge might be addressed. Simply put, the problem was this:

- In spite of extensive (and expensive) campaigns to raise awareness around Climate Change, skepticism around and/or disengagement with the subject appeared to be on the increase.
- A communications strategy which was largely driven by climate change science and expert opinion did not seem to be engaging the broader public in the climate change debate. In fact, the opposite seemed to be the case.
- Government policy consultations only ever engage a small proportion of the public. Regarding climate change, it was largely those representing the polarities of the debate who had become included, leaving about 80 per cent of the population who, in DECC terms, are 'hard to reach' (Wilson 2012).

From the discussions we had, arose a specific research question: 'By recasting the public conversation into a narrative framework, can storytelling, and specifically digital storytelling, broaden and democratize the debate around climate change and encourage deeper and wider levels of engagement?'

With funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and building upon previous work we had conducted with flood communities in England, we established Project ASPECT, an eighteen month pilot project during 2011–12, which set out to use storytelling (ultimately in both its mediated and live forms) to work with a range of community groups from lifeboat crews in West Cornwall to young rappers in Peckham to explore the issue of climate change (see www.projectaspect.org).

Over the lifetime of the project, we created a bank of eighteen digital stories with community members, dealing with issues relating to climate change, but not addressing them head on, such as food security, renewable energy, recreation and the natural environment. In the belief that in the context of social discourse, one story often leads to another story, these digital stories were then used in community workshops to initiate and provide a narrative framework for a wider conversation about climate change. These additional narratives were then captured (largely on audio) for analysis.

Whilst there is not time in this short paper to report fully on the outcomes of the project, Project ASPECT has demonstrated how digital storytelling has the capacity to bring fresh, previously unheard voices into the climate change debate arena and thus, facilitate deeper levels of public engagement in a subject that has, up till now, been the domain of the expert. This in itself has raised interesting questions around authenticity and authority of voice, as well as the ability of personal storytelling to subvert the knowledge hierarchies that typically exist in the expert-driven discourses that are often found in both the science and policy arenas. It is this democratizing potential that we wish to focus on today and the possibilities for applying the methodology to broader issues of public policy-making.

## 3. Digital storytelling and sustainability/digital storytelling as sustainable practice

So what exactly do we mean by the term 'digital storytelling'? As the world of digital and online communication has been transformed over the past decade, this term has begun to be

used more widely, often attributed to any kind of narration within a digital context. But for our purposes, we refer to a recognized form of authentic first person narration, using digital tools to create and share the story in multi-media format. The process of digital storytelling is one of personal curation of archive and memory, resulting in a 'bricolage' that offers a glimpse into the life of the individual and often, their local community (McEwan *et al*. 2013). It is a creative form particularly suited to individuals who have a story they wish to share but who has never before ventured into the world of creativity and/or the arts.

The economy of the form (the script is usually between 250 and 500 words) coupled with the intimacy of the use of personal photographs from one's own archive, creates an opportunity for anyone who has a story to share, to produce a lasting artifact in a relatively simple way. Current technology makes it possible to create these 'mini i-docs' without the use of a video camera, lights and expensive video editing systems, simply by utilizing an accessible computer hardware and software and one's own voice and photo album. It is a form that has evolved as a move towards democratization of the media, allowing access to wider audiences for voices that are often hitherto hidden or unheard. Burgess says:

> 'It [digital storytelling] aims not only to remediate vernacular creativity but to *legitimate* it as a relatively *autonomous* and worthwhile contribution to public culture. This marks it as an important departure from even the most empathetic 'social documentary' traditions' (2006, p. 207).

Amidst the current proliferation of web based vernacular narratives, watching a digital story continues to surprise. The dominant creative methodology employed by today's citizen journalists or multi-media producers, is one of video clips or blogs that have immediacy and resonance with an audience but that borrow their structure and execution from traditional mass media forms—moving images edited together with sound tracks; pieces to camera; hurriedly composed text in traditional journalistic style—whereas a digital story is different. It is created with still images, often taken from a photograph album and scanned into a computer and a sustained first person narrative with no interruptions from interviewers. The resulting multi-media piece offers a very different viewing experience to the audience.

It is perhaps the sustained use of a single voice throughout that is the most powerful attribute of a digital story, as the audience feels 'drawn in' to the inner, private world of the storyteller. Even when viewing a digital story online, the sense of intimacy is powerful and the voice of the storyteller often remains with the viewer for some time to come.

The process of creating the story is highly reflective, as the storyteller often uncovers memories and emotions that perhaps have been buried for some time. The teller has the power to create a representation of his/herself to be shared with a wider audience and once created, this version of self is finite. Unlike oral discourse or live performance, the presentation of self is fixed in a moment in time.

Traditionally digital stories are created by the writing of a script, by the storyteller, which is then read aloud, recorded and edited against a selection of still images. Within Project ASPECT, this methodology was modified to suit the needs of the groups and individuals we were working with. Many of the stories created, including Heather's, were produced from the edited version of a recorded interview, along with photographs from the individual's archive. This is a collaborative, rather than an individual process, as the facilitator (in this case one of Project ASPECT's researchers) works alongside the storyteller to co-create the piece, as

choices regarding audio editing and selection of images are made together. Skills are transferred from researcher to participant, engendering a deeper understanding of the tools of media production and the opportunities offered for this to become a sustainable practice for individuals and groups.

Digital storytelling is still something of a nascent form, but has rapidly developed as a recognized media methodology over the past decade, as understanding and knowledge of creative digital tools and distribution platforms is no longer confined to the rarefied world of professional media producers. Anyone with access to a smart phone and the internet can create their own digital story and share it with the world; a process that was unimaginable even fifteen years ago. This rapid increase in the accessibility of digital media tools, along with a free online platform from which to broadcast, has revolutionized the ways in which we produce and consume media and it seems unlikely that the clock will ever turn back.

The notion of digital storytelling as a sustainable practice was uncertain even ten years ago. The cost of digital media equipment was prohibitive to most people and online platforms for freely sharing content were still embryonic ideas in the minds of brilliant young Californian geeks. And then in 2005 came YouTube, swiftly followed by a plethora of story sharing platforms and the phenomena now known as user generated content and social media were born. Since then, the cost of digital technology has come down substantially and we have become accustomed to the idea that anyone can create media content and share it with the world.

And yet there remains a large percentage of the population for whom this social media activity remains alien; either because they choose not to engage, or because they are excluded from the digital revolution by lack of access to technology, or maybe because they feel they have nothing to say. In order to sustain digital storytelling as a practice amongst this sector of society, it is crucial that skills are developed and passed within a community setting allowing otherwise excluded voices into the digital world. This is a key component of many digital storytelling programmes both nationally and internationally. It was an aspiration of ASPECT to leave skills behind wherever possible, as a legacy of the wider research project. We are not just talking about digital media skills here either—the confidence building of individuals and communities, who believe that they have no stories to tell of any interest to anyone, is critical if digital storytelling is truly to reach its potential as a tool for democratizing the media and building capacity within communities.

The challenge of finding an audience also lies at the heart of making digital storytelling a sustainable practice and ensuring that those who have the most to gain from listening to these new voices, hear them. All stories need listeners and in the case of ASPECT, this would include policy makers, opinion formers and members of the wider public—particularly those who have yet to find themselves engaged in any way with the climate change conversation.

The days of linear media distribution have long gone. A story can be produced digitally and shared widely within a matter of minutes. Once ‘out there’ in cyberspace, there is no knowing just how far it will go. By using tags, meta-data searches, hyperlinks, and so on, one digital story such as Heather’s can reach thousands, if not millions of people across the globe. But does this mean that her voice will be listened to? If digital storytelling is to be a sustainable practice and a useful tool to uncover hitherto unheard voices, then it needs to have a route to its target audience that is more direct than the random distribution offered by the vagaries of the worldwide web.

The stories created in Project ASPECT have of course been made freely available online, via accessible channels such as YouTube, but they have also been shared at conferences, meetings, in community settings, and workshops, allowing for a contextualized viewing followed by discussion. It is in this arena that some of the real listening may need to be done, as unexpected voices are foregrounded in narrative spaces that are usually the preserve of the scientific experts and trained, professional communication specialists. We argue that, by listening to—and engaging with—the stories of individuals such as Heather, policy makers can begin to think differently about how to engage the wider public in the climate change debate.

The engagement that we witnessed when screening the digital stories to community groups, individuals, staff at DECC and other informed professionals convinced us that something different happens in the room when an audience is confronted with a voice that carries such authenticity and quiet authority, based on lived personal experience. This, we argue, is what storytelling does. Once policy makers and communication experts begin to see the potential of quotidian stories to engage audiences in debate then they can perhaps begin to think differently about some of their approaches. And so the digital stories created in the project remain available online as a set of resources to be used by anyone, but are particularly useful, we hope, to policy/decision makers and other stakeholders who wishes to 'trouble' the existing hierarchies of authority and knowledge within the wider arena of climate debate discussion.

## 4. The authoritative voice within the scientific debate

The personal or autobiographical story is a challenging concept for scientific debate. Whilst the personal narrative is primarily a recounting of events that actually happened, it is at the same time deliciously unreliable because such kinds of storytelling are closely linked to memory and memory is fallible: 'Our very memories fall victim to our self-making stories' (Bruner 1986, p 4).

Likewise the very rendering of real-life events is itself an act of fictionalization. As a source of a single truth it may be untrustworthy, but it's also what makes storytelling very useful for an area that is riven with debate and contradictory opinion, because storytelling is the forum in which we test out ideas and learn to discriminate between truth and falsehood. The storytelling lens is one that simultaneously distorts events and brings them into a sharper and clearer focus.

A distinction also needs to be drawn between the ideas of 'truth' in storytelling, which usually relates to the material content of the narrative; 'believability', which is more dependent on the performance of the storyteller; and 'authenticity', which focuses on the persona of the storyteller and their relation to the story. There is also the curious contradiction in personal storytelling in that the more flawed the storytelling performance is through contradictions, inaccuracies and lapses of memory, the more authentic the storyteller appears to be and the more believable the story becomes. We know about the unreliability of the memory and the fallibility of the human being and if the story appears to be *too* polished, *too* rehearsed, *too* perfectly rendered, then we begin to doubt its authenticity as if it were *too* good to be true.

So, let us return to Heather's story, which appears at the beginning of this paper. Of all the digital stories created during the project, this was the one story that the community groups we worked with most readily engaged with. It is also the story that has generated the highest number of hits on the projects YouTube channel. Yet Heather's voice is not normally a voice that is heard in the climate change debate, at least not in policy forums, where it is the narratives of climate change science and the voices of the climate change scientists that dominate, so that the debate becomes one around claim and counterclaim about what the science does or doesn't tell us. The strong hierarchies of knowledge that are generated by this serve to exclude many from the debate because they do not feel equipped to engage in it due to a lack of specialist scientific knowledge, or an inability to relate climate change science to their own experience. The issue around climate and weather serves an interesting case in point.

During the project we met a number of very smart, very enthusiastic and energetic young environmental scientists who were doing a fantastic job in climate change research. Some were, however, rather discomforted by Heather's story because they felt it failed to make the fundamental distinction between climate and weather, a popular confusion which was the single greatest source of their frustration with the lay person. What Heather's story demonstrates, we would argue, is that whilst the difference between climate and weather is not in dispute, people (at least people in the UK) experience weather in their day-to-day lives, not climate, and can engage with climate change only through their experiences of weather—or at least their experiences of extreme weather events.

We would argue that Heather's voice is an authoritative voice—at least the communities we worked with thought so—a voice shaped through years of experience of working the land, rather than the carefully measured voice of the politician or academic. It may be a voice that is unschooled, textured by a strong Cornish accent and lacking academic authority, yet this is what gives it authenticity. It is these very attributes that distinguish her from the more commonly heard voice of scientific expertise and lend her greater authority, believability and trustworthiness. She speaks from subjective experience, not objective data, and her expertise is derived from her experience, rather from scholarly endeavour. She is truly the expert of her own world.

## 5. Policy impact and DECC

In many ways it is too early to understand the full potential policy impact of Project ASPECT. We are certainly not claiming that digital storytelling is some kind of golden bullet that will solve all challenges around climate change communication and public engagement. It does seem to offer an additional tool in the box however, and has been successful in supporting significant engagement in the climate change discussion by individuals and groups that have previously not been engaged. The Department of Energy and Climate Change certainly think so and are now working with us to embed the learning from the research more centrally and fundamentally into their communications strategies. The work has also generated interest from other government departments who face their own challenges around public engagement, active citizenship and participative democracy. What Project ASPECT has emphasized is that humans are storytelling animals. We live by our stories and it may come as no surprise then, that if we reframe public policy debates as exercises in narrative exchange, we may be more successful in introducing new and varied voices into the arena.

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