

The Challenges of Community-based Digital Storytelling

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Research Objectives: Vulnerable Communities, Vernacular Knowledge

- *Vernacular, community or locally-constructed knowledge* defined as the cumulative body of knowledge and beliefs articulated as experience and/or transmitted as stories.
- Vernacular knowledge as 'concealed stories', often eclipsed by 'stock stories.'
 - *establish sustainable, collaborative mechanism for integrating community-based and scientific knowledge, so that more informed decisions can be made.*
 - *Opportunity to deconstruct stock stories through comparing them to concealed stories, identifying different perspectives and knowledge, and potentially developing a fuller picture.*

Vernacular Knowledge & Community-based Collaboration

- Community-based collaboration: locally-based process in which parties who have a stake or interest in collective decision making come together to systematically collect, preserve and disseminate local knowledge.
- Collaboration entails joint ownership of the process of knowledge production and the collective responsibility for its maintenance and use.
- Why do they form?
 - need for diverse knowledge sources to address complex nature of urban social conditions.
 - public-private partnerships that favor multiple sources of information and types of expertise.
 - community distrust of authorities and experts, including academics.
 - demands to reframe 'knowledge' in more inclusive forms, introduce values to discussions with being labeled irrational, beyond technocratic approaches and solutions.
 - legitimization of local stakeholders, based on their participation and their ability to help implement solutions.

Vernacular Knowledge as a Community Asset

- For communities long silenced or 'spoken on behalf of,' vernacular knowledge production is a proactive measure alongside other efforts to control the narrative of how a community defines what it was, what it is, and what should come next.
- *For action* -- as community asset, resource, tool
 - A core objective is to deploy a humanities-based approach that leads to clear, tangible outcomes for community life on the ground: **reproducing and enhancing rapport among residents, strengthening communication pathways between residents and community leaders, normalizing (and preserving) the sharing of views and perspectives on city life, and identifying otherwise neglected opportunities as well as its challenges.**
- Locally-identified purposes :
 - K-12 and higher education curricula
 - Community health awareness (esp environmental-related illnesses)
 - Platform for civic engagement and cross-generational dialogue
 - 'Placekeeping', community development and planning

Vernacular Knowledge as 'Data'

- *Of action* – storytelling as artefact, ethnographic data
 - The project provides researchers evidence of approaches and methods for systematically collecting the voices of culturally, ethnically and racially diverse subjects and their self-described awareness and capacity to critique the structural conditions that marginalize their voices.
- Approaches the construction of knowledge as **plural and complex**, as a collective enterprise involving diverse voices.
- Allows for collaborative forms of knowledge produced in spaces **outside the university** – in public school classrooms, senior centers, city parks, coffee shops and restaurants as well as in residents' living rooms and kitchens.
- **Divergent and even contradictory** understandings of past and present events, social problems and solutions are likely to be uncovered, providing richer 'data' for scholarship.
- Presents real possibilities for researchers to **upend the expert-subject relationship** by systematically empowering 'research subjects' as experts of their own experiential situation.

Digital Storytelling: community asset *and* data

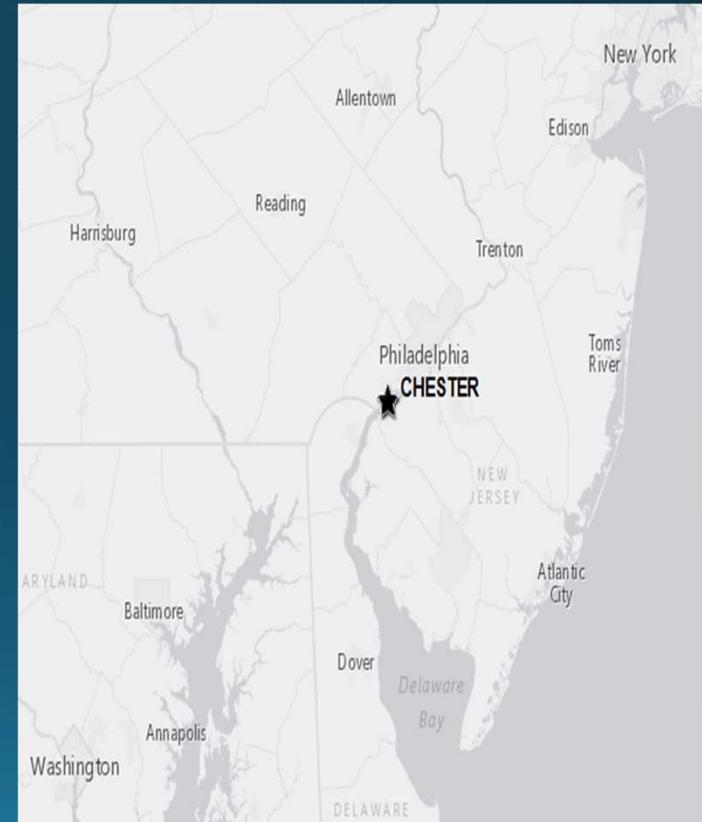
- Digital Storytelling (DS) involves the creation of a multimodal, digital text that combines photos and voice (and sometimes moving images, sound effects, music, or text), which is created through the use of computer video-editing software.
- DS referred to as an art form, a genre, a practice, and even a social movement. More recently, as a method in social science research that demands a multi-disciplinary approach drawing on fields of film studies, media production and communications, humanities and the arts.
 - [The Redline Project](#)
 - [Drexel University Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice](#)

Challenges of Digital Storytelling

- Collaborative project to create to create a state-of-the-art digital space for collecting, preserving and sharing the ideas, memories, perceptions, and expertise of residents of Chester, PA.
- Collaborators include Chester Made, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, digital librarians and myself.
- Completed planning stage: the 'architecture' of story collection, preservation and dissemination
 - - to address concerns of ownership & control (asset)
 - - to allow for systematic collection & preservation (data)
- Raises issues of voice, the construction of knowledge, tensions regarding content as advocacy tool or research data.

Chester as prototypical 'Decline-belt' city

- Chester is a small city (4.8 square miles) of thirty-six thousand persons located on the Delaware River, just 15 miles south of Philadelphia. It is Pennsylvania's oldest city.
- The city has lost half of its population since its peak size in the 1950s.
- 35% of residents live below poverty level and blacks comprise 80% of population — surrounded by very wealthy, majority white suburbs, where blacks comprise just 18 percent.
- Signs of 'spillover gentrification' from nearby Philadelphia



Chester's exceptionalisms

- A storied civil rights history – “Birmingham of the North”
- Landmark environmental crises – 2nd Superfund; environmental racism legal history; today, largest trash-to-steam incinerator on east coast.
- *Ad hoc* neoliberal economic development -- incinerator, soccer stadium, state prison, Harrah's casino within a ½ mile along waterfront



Collaboration: concerns, limits, challenges

- Tensions revolve around **co-creation** of local knowledge, community inclusion in storytelling, **ownership**, and **control** over the digital product and restrictions to access to residents' stories.
- Sources of concerns
 - Rebranding efforts by corporate developers; appropriation of content (experience of DC and other cities) – control over dissemination
 - Long history of residents as “research subject” and Chester as “laboratory” by surrounding universities

Story Ownership & Issues of Access

- Current technology is inexpensive and user-friendly, allowing local communities to produce knowledge as a self-defined asset. [StoryCenter's Listening Station](#) provides individuals options to restrict or limit public access to their digital stories.
- Access restricted to non-commercial use. But control also includes digitally preserving their cultural heritage while limiting access and use per the concerns of community stakeholders.
- [Mukurtu](#) content management system (CMS) manages public access to digital stories and signals how story content is to be handled, marking certain content sensitive and limiting viewers' access and use.
 - [Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums](#)

Digital technologies address control of storytelling as a community asset

	Activities	Technologies	Key Providers
Co-creation	Recruit residents as storytellers from existing and new social networks; digital storytelling training; develop story themes and prompts; collect digital stories	StoryCenter's Listening Station	Chester Made; Pennsylvania Humanities Council; local colleges and universities; residents and volunteers; ties with the YES Center, Delaware County Historical Society, senior centers and local libraries.
Storage	Develop, manage and maintain sustainable storage and preservation of digital content; assure community-based management of content, as well as backup for preservation.	StoryCenter automated storage; Reclaim Hosting storage; Faculty Data Repository, University at Buffalo	Digital librarians – UPenn; Swarthmore; UB
Access	Develop, manage and maintain sustainable community and public access to digital access, per principles of co-creation and community-based ownership	Mukurtu	Chester Made; Pennsylvania Humanities Council; Digital librarians-- UPenn; Swarthmore; UB

Storage & Access

Here is a break down of the pros and cons of some of the more common ways you might share your data:

Method	Pros	Cons
Share upon request	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You have total control over who looks at your data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You have to keep track of the data You have to check your email and respond to requests Hard for you data to be cited consistently You may leave your institution and be un-findable for anyone hoping to work with your data
Link to data on personal/lab website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It can be listed with your other works in one location Data can be cited with some consistency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You're in charge of making sure links continue to work If you leave the university/lab, you might lose access and/or the site might disappear If the university/institution changes servers links may not be updated
Journal publisher website (supplemental material)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data is connected to the publication it supports Data can be cited Citations can be tracked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publisher may charge for others to access data You may lose control of your data Publisher may decide to discontinue hosting data
Commercial repository	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discoverable Data can be cited Citation can likely be tracked, depending on service Use is probably measured 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Company may change its terms of service Company may go out of business and stop hosting data May cost money to deposit May or may not provide long term preservation
Discipline repository	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discoverable for people in your field Data can be cited Citations can likely be tracked, depending on service Use probably measured 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May go under and stop hosting data May cost money to deposit May or may not provide long term preservation
Governmental repository	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discoverable Will likely continue to be supported Data can be cited Citations can likely be tracked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repositories do not yet exist for all types of data May or may not be prepared for long term preservation
Institutional repository	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will likely continue to be supported Data can be cited Use can be measured 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less discoverable than discipline repositories Penn's Scholarly Commons may not be able to take your data at this time

Source: University of Pennsylvania Digital Scholarship

Digital Storytelling: tool for advocacy and research method?

- Emancipatory knowledge' that addresses social, cultural, and political inequalities and injustice.
- Voice, authority and legitimacy of what constitutes 'knowledge' (or data), on which humanities and social science research depends.
- Agency of participants in the research process, thereby opening up the production of knowledge as a popular/vernacular form and challenges traditional ethnographic practices.
- Sustainable model for the collection & curation of data that are currently underrepresented or unrecognized.
- Fiduciary and professional demands of funding agencies.