Sustainability through engagement: Storytelling strategies as incentives for participation

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Global society can be seen as a place of conflict. This conflict can be rooted in competition for natural resources, for personal growth, or for liberty. It can be motivated to end poverty, to stem the warming of the earth. It can revolve involve trade protectionism or employment rights. It is evident that issues of empowerment and emancipation are of great concern to the populus at large. Some people care deeply, and some of those people take action. The values that underpin caring may motivate people to become active members of online communities. However, it's the communication of this caring through authentic narrative that can generate sufficient momentum to overcome the demands of daily life that so often hinder participation. Furthermore, this communication can motivate the reciprocal dialogue that is so important to building better understanding. When this process occurs, it can inform effective action online and, ultimately, contribute to the better functioning of wider society.

Purpose, identity and individual participation

Online communities need many things to become established and to survive. Not the least of these is a genuine and evolving purpose (Preece, 2000). Yet a clear and genuine purpose by itself is not enough. Online communities and social networks invariably constrain interactions between their members and facilitate social control at the level of the group (Wellman et al., 1996). When online, the elemental properties of community (sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, norms, and a social identity) are realized in tension with these constraints. Once individuals have identified at least a preliminary understanding of purpose, they need to understand the nature of the constraints that will apply to them and their degree of impact. Wellman conceives of a positive feedback loop between the technological development of computer networks and the societal transformation into social networks (Wellman, 2000). The feedback process requires that individuals see and act upon a variety of possible connections between one another. Groups, social networks, communities: all must be considered as ecological systems with both a steady (lifecycle) state and a viable developmental path for their members to follow (Arrow, McGrath, & Berdahl, 2000).

What motivates people to get involved and stay involved? The perception that there is a "way in" to the community is critical. This motive then needs feeding if it is to stay alive. Forms of expression and exchange in which people are already expert can provide such motivation, none more so than the form of story. For social action communities, the actors must be kept in a vital tension.

Incentives for participation in networked collectives for social action

The globalization of trade and growth of transnational corporations has thrown into sharp focus the value of persistent online interactions, both for the material and commercial benefit of the trading communities who participate. The common currencies of dollar, euro and yen underpin these transactions: the benefits of membership are easy to articulate if not always easy to realize. Motivation is characterized in terms of extrinsic reward so that action is thought about as a matter of earning credit.

   Since the use of the French telecoms system Minitel to organize the student revolution in the 1960s, citizen groups and social activists have seen the benefit of communication technologies for organizing protest and taking political action (Hill & Hughes, 1998). Activist groups and agencies for social change have organizational needs and coordination practices that interact with communication technologies. These interactions are most notable in terms of how ingrained passion and conflict is in their workings (Hubert & Caremier, 2000; Mouffe, 1999). Social action groups are marshalling their resources on a global scale that parallels the movement of capital, whilst having a very different dynamic (Watts, Nugroho, & Lea, 2003). For example, UK Disasters Emergency Committee and Countryside Alliance are two umbrella identities with online presences[2] for other activist groups who see common benefit from cooperation. The anti-globalization movement is equally collective but less focused, with many instances of online presence, such as **mindfully.org**, but which are no less *sustainable*. So what is the basis of this sustainability? To quote from **mindfully.org:** "it takes work to be informed. Action makes that information valuable". It assumes people are ready to take action (the 'goal state') and that the real problems are to do with the work required to become informed and to act. They are intrinsically motivated: action is taken to create social change. Persuading people to take action is the lesser part of the challenge in the not-for-profit, activist world. The bigger problem is to *enable people to engage with one another*, to define desirable outcomes, to learn what action could be taken, and to take that action. Without the mechanisms for harnessing that energy, people have no incentive to participate. This paper is concerned with that issue.

Narrative and drama for stimulating personal participation and maintaining group engagement

There is a need to foster deep participation in debate, dialogue, and inter-organisational cooperation, if struggle is to be a vital force in society rather than more fuel for division and destruction. New narrative methods and resources could help to

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[2] http://www.dec.org.uk/ and http://www.countryside-alliance.org/

bridge between widely different people and groups. Digital storytelling represents attempts to use digital media and electronic publishing to achieve just this. For the past ten years it has been a growing area of interest in the not-for-profit sector[3], with an established international association[4] and regular conventions[5]. New media present opportunities for people to encode and share their stories where they lack the necessary literacy skills to engage in conventional forms of self-expression. It has much to offer but the potential of storytelling extends beyond the construction of narratives as static, linear, self-contained exhibits.

Dramatic expression can be described in many ways, including the interplay of many voices, breaking conventions of sequence. At a recent TSA workshop, Ann Light[6] put it this way:

> *"The drama in the first few minutes must be powerful enough to **captivate** the viewer. So some **conflict**, or problem, builds and builds until the good guy (protagonist) decides he has to solve it. In a well plotted Act II, **the tension rises** as the conflict gets bigger and bigger.*
>
> *Conflict is the root of drama. The friction of conflict **seduces** the audience into anticipating a significant moment. Conflict provides thrill, excitement and **potential risk**. All the special effects in the world cannot compete with the tension created by conflict. When live and in real-time, an audience experiences conflict through all of their senses.[7]"[emphasis added].*

The conflict of voices wanting different things can mean some people are put off entering the arena; energy fizzles out before action can be taken. People have stories to share, to mutually express their excitement and their grievances. The ability for people to engage with one another through storytelling provides a mechanism for individuals to see open doors for themselves and for communities to build momentum. So what might be said about opportunity to share and debate through storytelling? Sustainable communities are communities that support one another to disagree just as much as to look for consensus.

A conflict-centred viewpoint on incentivizing participation

The issue for this paper is that incentive may not be to do with finding ways to get people to carry out actions that they already know they can achieve but may not otherwise wish to do. It may be more to do with finding ways to show people that they can achieve things that they wish to do but may not otherwise know how to carry out. The underlying motivation of the individual is rooted in their own beliefs about

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[3] http://electronicportfolios.com/digistory/, http://www.storycenter.org/about.html ,

[4] http://www.dsaweb.org/01associate/who.html

[5] http://www.dstory.com/dsf_05/

[6] See http://www.transform-ed.org/

[7] "Themes and Challenges: Narrative, drama, and social change", TSA 2, Sheffield Hallam University, June 2005.

[25]Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1992). *Flow: The psychology of happiness*. London: Rider.

the issues at stake, along with the their perception of their ability to act on them.

Controversy: Vital tensions

Another way of talking about mechanisms that incentivize action is to consider the role of a mechanism in the context of its deployment. Mechanisms are meaningless without considering how they fit into a strategy or plan for achieving a recognizable goal. Strategies for contribution are required to launch and sustain such communities. For social action, the primary context is one of conflict and controversy. Conflicts arise between people as they identify with one another and sections of society. Effective strategies must assume controversy and build on it as a necessary part of social action.

Another key element of social action is given by power distance. Social action groups are typically short of resource, infrastructure and composed of small numbers of dedicated volunteers. We are concerned for those groups who attempt to give a voice for the voiceless or to find new ways to include citizens who would otherwise be excluded from participation in some aspect of the functioning of society (Dearden, Walker, & Watts, 2005). The disempowered and silenced can be empowered and given a platform, provided their experiences are recognized and valued.

Educational emancipation through controversial exchange

Stories can have power and be told as a form of social action. In order to be recognized and taken into account, they must find an appropriate medium for expression. Storytelling, in both narrative and dramatic forms, is a pancultural phenomenon and can be treated as an appropriate strategy for social action. By providing a virtual platform for contentious communication, through storytelling, contributions to society from isolated, marginalized or alienated citizens could be made visible and meaningful. The visibility and presence of an audience for a person's story is a powerful incentive for it to be told.

Contexts of emancipation and engagement

Communities have been developed for learners from primary school through to higher education, and within the professional domain from voluntary to formally constituted online groups. The current paper specifically considers Talking Heads a head teacher online community researched and developed for Britain's National College for School Leadership (NCSL).

The HIV case study

Within the Talking Heads online community, the compelling nature of authentic story generated increased participation on numerous occasions. Members of the community faced complex and potentially explosive situations and their colleagues sprang to assist them with their own knowledge and experience. In so doing, they also contributed to the community's professional knowledge, sometimes drawing it to a

new coherence. This was possible because the sense of community allowed a level of disclosure that grew in response to the sharing of these dynamic narratives. This also led to increased reflection and depth of learning (Chapman, Ramondt, & Smiley, 2005). One example of this occurred at the end of the Easter holidays in 2002. A head teacher was confronted with an urgent, sensitive and potentially litigious situation described online in the following terms;

I have an EBD student Y8 with very challenging behaviour who is also HIV positive, when he flips he does and has bitten me, I and a small number of support workers know about his condition. His foster mum - health worker, knows all the answers is adamant that his HIV must remain confidential and will sue if this is broken, while I realise the risk of cross infection is small to minimal I am on the horns of a dilemma, do I make the HIV issue public to staff - as a health and safety issue and risk a court case or do I respect mum's wishes and risk the possible union and other backlash should he bite or scratch someone, I'm getting a whole host of conflicting advice.

Members of the community, recognising both the urgency of the situation and the relevance to their own schools, were quick to respond with comments and professional suggestions grounded in their own experience and practice. Areas of contention and disagreement were debated and clarified and the final conversation was drawn together into a summary by the online facilitator (see below). This instance of spontaneous professional development cohered into a document that, although not as exhaustive as a textbook account, was informative for school policy and professional practice.

HIV conversation conclusions for practice

- All students are potential infectious disease carriers (eg HIV and hepatitis) and therefore every student should treated the same way
- Following from this, school needs to establish clear policies and procedures for first aid and sterile procedure eg dealing with bodily fluids
- Reassure and train staff to de-escalate volatile situations, and to use self-protection such as long sleeved clothing and holding techniques
- Consult all interested parties ie LEA, unions re H&S and legal issues, without revealing the child's identity
- Inform the parents of the school's policies and explain that the child is there within those parameters
- Enlist the support of the parents in developing the protocols, reassuring them their child isn't being singled out
- Don't put your staff or students at risk

Authentic narrative as a stimulus to online participation and real world action

Despite many disparities, head teacher communities and social activist communities share a commitment to the public good. The HIV case study shows how the power of an authentic story can lead not only to increased online participation, but a plan for good practice that translates into everyday professional life. There is increasing

evidence that reciprocity within communities can generate better solutions those at which individuals can arrive at unilaterally and that compelling stories provide the impetus to generate this participation (Suroweiki, 2005; Trevino & Trevino, 2004).

Incentive foundations for sustainable online communities

Our core assumptions are that sustainable empowering communities are those that both stimulate and make accessible:

a)   mechanisms of empowerment- a climate of strength and confidence that encourages participants to develop the skills to be partners able to take an active and formative role

b)   agreed purpose and principles, so that action is in alignment with the group's vision

c)   dialogue, as a means to achieve understanding, respect and inclusion of diverse standpoints

d)   collaboration as a process which leads to a more robust and effective outcomes because (unlike cooperation) it is founded in the innovation inherent in engagement[25]

e)   reciprocity, based on the understanding that generosity by all participants leads to a wealth of resources within the community

f)   active participation in decision making, leading to a sense of ownership and commitment.

g)   engagement, especially as the participant's skill is challenged by an interesting task equal to and slightly in excess of their skill level [26]

   h) learning, through active participation in problem solving and design

The generation of creative conflict is especially vital for participation in social action networks. New research and innovation is needed into mechanisms and practices of controversy that balance the need to accommodate and air disagreement alongside matters of shared belief.

About the authors

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   Leon Watts and Leonie Ramondt are members of the UK **Technology and**

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[26] ibid

[31] http://www.technologyandsocialaction/

Social Action[31] research cluster. TSA is working to foster dialogue and collaboration between activists in social movements. Its constituency includes agencies that may variously be described as belonging to 'civil society', or as engaged in 'social action', such as voluntary and community organizations. Its aim is to technologically empower. Its goal is to investigate and support **effective ways of designing and using technology** to support social action, and of ensuring that technological innovation **responds to social priorities**. TSA has focused on three themes to this end: *Free (Libre) Open Source Software*, *Organisational Evaluation and Learning*, and *Storytelling and Engagement*.

Acknowledgements

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[32] http://www.design21.dundee.ac.uk/home.html