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Voice, Listening and Social Justice: a Multimediated Engagement with New Immigrant Communities and Publics in Ireland

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'Voice', listening and social justice: A multimediated engagement with new immigrant communities and publics in Ireland

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Abstract

This article foregrounds the methodological and curatorial concerns of a cross-sectoral public media programme titled the 'Forum on Migration and Communication' (FOMACS), which produces film, photographic, digital storytelling, print media and radio stories on the topic of migration into Ireland. Framing two key FOMACS projects using animation and digital storytelling with young children and asylum seekers, this article centrally engages with an ongoing problematic situated across the nexus between participatory media, the 'politics of voice', and the politics or ethics of listening. FOMACS' deployment of participatory research methods – aimed at prising open a space for collaborative media production, facilitating the articulation of diverse immigrant and non-immigrant 'voices' – instantiates the problematic notion of 'giving voice', a practice associated with media advocacy and community development projects. This article addresses the question of how to negotiate a working dialectic between a 'politics of voice' and 'political listening', specifically within the field of participatory media production and in the context of challenges posed by the FOMACS mission, which aims to engage diverse audiences by creating a continuum between production, dissemination and reception, together with impact on public policy through the advocacy work of its migration NGO partners.

Keywords

voice

listening

social justice

animation

digital storytelling

asylum seekers

FOMACS

Ireland

Introduction

> Much of the analysis of mediated communication is modelled on *a politics of expression*, that is, of speaking up and out, finding a voice, making oneself heard, and so on. Taking listening as a starting point implies moving to *a politics of impression…* a move in which mediated communication more readily presents itself as a relational space of intersecting practices and identities, a space of recognition and refusal, connection and contestation, representation and re-presentation. (O'Donnell et al. 2009: 423, original emphasis)

The need for an accomplishment-based understanding of justice is linked with the argument that justice cannot be indifferent to the lives that people can actually

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live. The importance of human lives, experiences and realizations cannot be supplanted by information about institutions that exist and the rules that operate. Institutions and rules are, of course very important in influencing what happens, and they are part and parcel of the actual world as well, but the realized actuality goes well beyond the organizational picture, and includes the lives that people manage – or do not manage – to live. (Sen 2009: 18)

Launched in Ireland in 2007 and housed in a third-level academic institution, the Forum on Migration and Communications (FOMACS) is a collaborative cross-sectoral public media programme, producing film, photographic, digital storytelling, radio, animation and print stories on the topic of immigration into Ireland, with the aim of not only reaching, but engaging, diverse audiences. It offers a productive point of departure from often hermetically sealed discourses on migration, produced in the interdisciplinary field of 'migration studies', within public policy research or within the NGO/advocacy sector.[1] The central objective of FOMACS is to amplify voices and personal/collective stories previously sensationalized or marginalized in Irish dominant media representations of immigration, while the ambition of FOMACS, strategically constituted as a production-based research and creative hub, is to depict through audio, visual, print and online media the identity formations and social, cultural and political networks forged by economic migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and their families.

FOMACS builds on international grass-roots educational cultural and arts initiatives such as the Sydney-based 'Information and Cultural Exchange' project and 'Active Voice',

situated in San Francisco,[2] where media production not only provides a foundation for a range of social justice campaigns across areas including migration, criminal justice, sustainability and healthcare, but is further and necessarily framed by a community social engagement approach. Clearly, print and broadcast media alone cannot transform public policy, but it can influence change, create social awareness and make more accessible the language of government legislation. Significantly, well-crafted mediated stories have the potential to render real the relationship between government immigration policy and its impact on the everyday lives of diverse migrant constituencies. A practical aim of FOMACS, therefore, is to design and maintain a 'living archive' of migration into Ireland during the past two decades, making digitally accessible its cross-platform media projects to a diverse set of constituencies and interested publics, disseminated online and via print and audio-visual formats, whether exhibition, DVD authorship, film series/festivals, educational toolkits or community engagements resource guides.

Offering a much needed and distinctive human-interest angle on the question of in-migration into Ireland with an initial focus on stories surrounding the programmatic thematics of 'family reunification' and 'irregular/undocumented migration', the multimediated work of FOMACS is conducted in partnership and multiply affiliated with a diverse range of stakeholders, including among others five key Irish migration NGO partners collectively servicing the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants; targeted immigrant constituencies; primary school educators concerned with questions of cultural diversity in the classroom; museums, galleries, cinemas and Irish radio and television; European cultural institutions; and social and policy researchers.

Fundamentally conceived as a broad-based coalition bringing immigrant and non-immigrant media practitioners and NGO service providers into a production-based collaborative framework, FOMACS has from the outset strategically adopted a practice-based research orientation engaged with representations and representatives of civil society – a conjuncture acquiring the form of a 'social justice praxis' (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 807), to borrow a phrase from the cultural studies and education practitioner Handel Wright. The term 'social justice' is used here in the context of what philosopher Nancy Fraser defines in her ongoing conversation with Axel Honneth as a 'two-dimensional conception of justice that can accommodate both defensible claims for social equality and defensible claims for the recognition of difference' – what she calls a 'reconciliation and integration of the politics of redistribution and recognition' (2003: 9).

Both Fraser and Amartya Sen, the latter in the epigraph above, point to prevalent tensions within mainstream discourses on social justice. For Fraser, what is urgently required is a conception of social justice capable of negotiating a politics of difference (race, gender, religion, ethnicity and race) alongside a politics of equality (class, labour, health, education and civil rights). That these two justice claims are often 'decoupled', as Fraser puts it, is symptomatic of how egalitarian claims have primarily dominated debates about social justice, with the more recent politics of identity and difference offering 'a newer paradigm of justice that puts recognition at its center' (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 7). The political and operational challenge is not, Fraser suggests, to privilege one paradigm over the other. Instead, she argues for a strategic integration of both sets of political claims so that cultural rights, mostly enacted through systems of representation, interpretation and

communication, are intrinsically linked with debates and practices advocating for socio-economic rights. 'Only by looking to integrative approaches that unite redistribution and recognition', writes Fraser, 'can we meet the requirements of justice for all' (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 94).

Sen's understanding of 'accomplishment-based' understandings of justice based on the 'actual behaviour of people, rather than presuming compliance by all with ideal behaviour', highlights another dichotomy in the thinking about social justice. Mainstream theories, according to Sen, have prioritized a form of justice based on the notion of basic organizational arrangements, laws, institutions and regulations, captured in the ideal of a social contract to which societies strive to adhere. He warns against an increasing distance between two approaches to justice: one emphasizing behavioural rules and principles, the other focused on a comparative understanding, indeed r*ecognition*, of the diverse lives that people negotiate. For Sen:

> The question to ask in this context is whether the analysis of justice must be so confined to getting the basic institutions and general rules right? Should we not also have to examine what emerges in society, including the kind of lives that people actually lead, given the institutions and rules, but also the influences, including actual behaviour, that would inescapably affect human lives? (2009: 10)

Fraser and Sen's respective focus on the need to bridge rights claims about identity with claims for socio-economic parity, together with a forceful acknowledgement of a bottom-

up approach to human rights work, echoes FOMACS' programmatic emphasis on cross-sectoral collaboration, allied to the development of participatory media-driven projects with new and established migrant communities in Ireland.

Thus, a central and dominant methodology explored within FOMACS is the practice of 'participatory media' in which participants generate representations of their own lived experiences, hitherto 'apparent in areas such as health care, social policy and childhood studies' (Buckingham 2009: 634). FOMACS' deployment of participatory research methods aimed at prising open a space for collaborative media production, facilitating the expression and articulation of diverse immigrant and non-immigrant 'voices', instantiates the classic and certainly not unproblematic notion of 'giving voice' – an orientation often associated with media advocacy and community development projects. However, working in parallel with this notion of facilitating diverse 'voices' and who gets to speak and when is the added challenge of 'who is actually heard, who is listening, and indeed to what end.' In some respects this is a standard, somewhat run-of-the-mill question for media practitioners, but arguably one that acquires a more political resonance when framed in the context of a public media project that aspires to open up communicative channels for diverse sets of publics, in what has traditionally been in Ireland to date a 'persistently monocultural broadcasting environment' (Browne and Onyejelem 2007: 13).

What follows and by recourse to unpacking the production and post-production concerns inherent in two FOMACS projects using animation and digital storytelling is the exploration of an ongoing problematic situated across the nexus between collaborative

participatory media, the 'politics of voice' (Couldry 2009) and the politics, ethics and 'art of listening' (Back 2007). For it has become increasingly clear that cultivating a space for 'voices' to be spoken is arguably much easier to negotiate (though not without its methodological and ethical challenges) than is the challenge of creating or indeed opening up spaces for 'diverse' voices to be listened to, and, in the words of Charles Husband (2009), to be 'understood'. He writes:

> Understanding is not, and cannot be, a fixed entity: a discrete informational bundle; a morally weighted product of listening. Understanding is a process, and as such it is a catalyst that actively, even dangerously, interacts and changes whatever it comes into contact with. (Husband 2009: 443)

For Husband, writing in a *Continuum* journal special issue titled 'Listening – New ways of engaging with media and culture', whose various contributions collectively inform the polemical direction of this article, 'listening' and therefore understanding cannot be read as a self-evident public good, expressed in the form of liberal politeness and tolerance.[3] To read as such neutralizes potential for civic action. Insightful listening, as he puts it, transposes into a form of active listening – a crucial component in the constitution of a multi-ethnic public sphere, resulting in a form of 'praxis rather than as commodity' (Husband 2009: 443). The notion of listening as a form of commodity conjures up the figure of the well-meaning but ultimately self-serving liberal – for Husband, the journalist or academic, who 'perversely removes the *understood* as active agents in the process of how they become understood to others' (2009: 443, original emphasis).

Tellingly, Husband echoes a caution raised by Gayatri Spivak two decades ago when, in an interview with Sneja Gunew, she warns:

> 'Who should speak' is less crucial than 'Who will listen'. 'I will speak for myself as a Third World person' is an important position for political mobilization today. But the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously; not with that kind of benevolent imperialism […] There are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing. That is when a political consciousness comes in […] But when the card carrying listeners, the hegemonic people, the dominant people, talk about listening to someone 'speaking as' something or other, I think *there* one encounters a problem. When *they* want to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, a Third World woman speaking as a Third World woman, they cover over the fact of the ignorance that they are allowed to possess, into a kind of homogenisation. (Spivak cited in Spivak and Harasyn 1990: 60, original emphasis)

What essentially is posed in this discussion is the question of how to negotiate a working dialectic between a 'politics of voice' and what Dreher describes as 'political listening' (2009: 449), specifically within the field of participatory media production and in the context of challenges posed by the FOMACS mission, which aims to engage diverse audiences by creating a continuum between production, dissemination and reception, together with impact on public policy through the advocacy work of its migration NGO partners. Further reflection is necessary surrounding the nexus between 'voice' and

'listening' in order to make sense of both the limitations and the transformative potential posed by participatory media practice. The notion of 'horizontal receptivity' and 'receptive engagement' coined by political theorist Romand Coles offers a useful intervention when he points to the lateral nature of listening and its dependency on rituals of reciprocity and exchange:

> I emphasize the term 'receptivity' rather than using the term listening because I think that the former term evokes a broader notion of responsiveness and helps attune us to a broader range of practices […] Listening is less a single capacity than a complex art that must be developed in a variety of different kinds of relationships. (Coles 2004: 220)

Arguably, Coles' sense of listening as a 'complex art' reflects the notion of listening as a form of 'praxis', as suggested by Husband (2009) – a cognitive and social process shaped as much by the potential for conflict and tension as by mutual and collective understanding. Yet Coles goes on to argue that 'listening' in itself constitutes a 'democratic sensibility', which in the context of doing participatory media work is a core, if not defining, principle. Specifically addressing the work of the grass-roots political movement, the Industrial Areas Foundation in the United States, Coles argues:

> This accent on listening isn't just a means to voice, just judgement, and power – though it certainly is these too. At least as important, however, it is an important democratic sensibility in and of itself. It is an approach to the world in which

[…]if things aren't going well, if democratic relationships are poor or lacking, if you are politically dissatisfied, if power is odious and unresponsive, if work with others seems impossible, if the city is in decline – only part of the problem concerns a lack of voice. A big part of the problem too, is likely to be that most of us do not listen to one another well if and when we listen at all. We have not only marginalized the arts of voice, we have, relatedly and perhaps even more so, marginalized the arts of listening. (2004: 687)

The contingencies surrounding the politics of 'voice' and 'listening' expressed in diverse and sometimes overlapping ways by Couldry, Dreher, Husband, Spivak and Coles are key challenges in designing and curating participatory media projects. Added to this productive tension between 'voice' and 'listening' is a related question about what constitutes in media practice a politics of 'collaboration' or what is called 'collaborative ethnography', which in many respects is the methodological bulwark for participatory media projects and media advocacy. The ensuing discussion and its framing of two key FOMACS projects is therefore underpinned by the intersecting concerns of the politics of collaboration or collaborative ethnography, the 'politics of voice' and the 'politics of listening'. The term collaborative ethnography is used selectively since it captures key considerations inherent in the methodology of participatory media, as outlined by Luke Eric Lassiter:

We might sum up collaborative ethnography as an approach to ethnography that *deliberately* and *explicitly* emphasizes collaboration at every point in the

ethnographic process, without veiling it – from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing [media production] process. Collaborative ethnography invites commentary from our consultants [social actors] and seeks to make that commentary overtly part of the ethnographic text as it develops. In turn, this negotiation is reintegrated back into the fieldwork process itself. Importantly, the process yields texts [media objects] that are co-conceived or co-written with local communities of collaborators and consider multiple audiences outside the confines of academic discourse, including local constituencies. These texts can – and often do – include multiple authors; but not exclusively so. Collaborative ethnography, then, is both a theoretical and a methodological approach for doing *and* writing ethnography. (2005: 15, original emphasis)

While for Lassiter writing constitutes the final stage of a collaborative ethnographic study, in FOMACS the outcome of a single project results in a heterogeneous 'object' – a cross-platform media product acquiring different versions, depending on the content, the mode of production underpinning it and, crucially, its projected broadcast, exhibition and curatorial outlets for multiple audiences. Yet Lassiter's reference to texts being co-conceived or co-written, and here one needs to add co-produced, typifies the mode of labour deployed in the design and implementation of FOMACS' mediated projects, explored here in the context of a three-part animation film series titled *Abbi's Circle*, addressing the thematic of 'family reunification' and the complexities of migrant family life in Ireland. Whereas in a second project, media collaboration is examined through the prism of a digital storytelling project with asylum seekers housed by the Irish state in

Direct Provision Centres dispersed across the country. In foregrounding these two productions, the discussion reveals some of the unavoidable faultlines and restrictions prevalent within the field of participatory media methodologies, allied to the democratizing or emancipatory principles that it often claims to formulate in relation to facilitating 'voice' and reaching diverse publics.

Abbi's Circle: An animation series and primary school learning resource project

Figure 1: *The Memory Box*.[4] [WHOLE SEQUENCE COLOUR IF POSSIBLE]

Figure 1: *Team Spirit*.

Figure 1: *New Beginnings*.

Abbi's Circle, a FOMACS series of three short animated films (*The Memory Box*, 2007; *Team Spirit*, 2008 and *New Beginnings*, 2009), involved a production collaboration between animators, young primary school children, migration NGOs, a dramaturge, a sound recordist and primary school teachers working in a Dublin non-denominational school. The series follows the adventures of Abbi, a young Nigerian girl living in Dublin and her circle of friends. Against the backdrop of graduation ceremonies, gruelling football matches and high school musicals, Abbi and her friends negotiate what it means to be 'Irish' and immigrant, living in contemporary Ireland. In *The Memory Box*,[5] Abbi wants her father to visit for her graduation ceremony from primary school, but discovers

that he is refused a visa to visit. During a game of football in *Team Spirit*, Abbi and Lucy learn that their teammate and star player, Sadiq, is a refugee from Darfur, and is waiting for the rest of his family to join him. Despite the battles on the pitch, Sadiq's mind is elsewhere – with his family who have been left behind, waiting for their visas to be processed. In the final part, *New Beginnings*, Abbi and her friends form a band at school and are rehearsing for their 'Winter Concert'. But when they learn what it means for someone to become 'undocumented', they realize that Sanjay might not be able to take part. The band needs him to perform, but his presence is contingent on the outcome of his father's work permit application.

The series emerged in the context of a dialogue with two NGO partners of FOMACS, endeavouring to communicate the often arcane and legalistic language shaping their case files on 'family reunification' to audiences outside of the migration advocacy sector. Behind every case file is a human subject wishing to be reunited with a spouse, children or sibling, yet who is vulnerable to the intricacies and contradictions of immigration law in Ireland. How to get beyond the appropriate legalistic anonymity of the case file, rendering the issue visible and audible in the eyes of public audiences, constituted the production problematic and vision in the making of *Abbi's Circle*. The core idea for the project further emanated from a serious omission in an immigration bill in Ireland titled the 'Immigration, Residence and Protection Bill 2010', which does not guarantee family reunification for legally resident migrants to be joined by their family members in Ireland (see Houses of the Oireachtas 2010). Given the fact that 'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights' expressly recognizes that 'the family is the natural and fundamental

group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State' and that the family is also defined and protected in the same manner within the Irish constitution, the NGO partners of FOMACS have been arguing for a statutory right for family reunification, drawing on similar provisions applying to refugees.[6] In this regard the NGOs have strategically brought two competing sets of discourses together – the universalist claims of human rights language, which in many respects is nation-less and free-floating, together with what has historically been a deeply conservative definition of the family outlined in Article 42 of the Irish constitution; put differently, two competing sets of rights claims were being deliberately reframed for the purpose of making legislative and policy change. However, it is also the case that while refugees are entitled to family reunification, the application process is lengthy and filled with bureaucratic roadblocks, resulting in hardship and the pain of separation for families, in particular children (see e.g. FLAC Report 2010).

FOMACS chose a research and communications strategy of working with immigrant and non-immigrant children, as media collaborators in the animation project, as subjects in the animation, and as interlocutors for the vocalized expression of the lived reality of separated immigrant families. Recognizing young children as key spokespeople reflects acknowledgement of the role that youth constituencies play in generating and promoting an awareness of cultural diversity. In conceiving the animation series, FOMACS was advised at an early stage by practising teachers that the content of the films should 'avoid an overt human rights language', since such rhetoric was potentially cumbersome to the teacher in the primary school classroom. In order to embed the project within the national

teacher training curriculum, the challenge, as they put it, was to communicate the principles embodied in human rights claims by using a different register, one that could better reach the teacher in the classroom and simultaneously attract the attention of the young primary school student. A decision was thus made to mainstream the message of 'family reunification', acknowledging the relevance of the young schoolchildren and their teachers, together with the appropriate language use in messaging.

Narrative agency was firmly placed in the hands of a group, aged between 9 and 12 years old, attending a non-denominational school in Dublin. The reach of this agency was extended further, however, since each of the three films in the animation series was accompanied by a 'Teaching Pack', written by teachers for teachers and designed to move across the curriculum through subjects such as English, Geography, History and the Visual Arts, providing a comprehensive set of materials for lesson plans on topics including diversity in the classroom; sport and racism; child labour; people in exile; and home and homelessness.[7] The term 'docu/mation' was coined to frame the series, a strategic blurring of the genres of documentary and animation, since the scripts developed out of original NGO case files that, while written in the third person, were based on authentic accounts.[8] Significantly, it was abundantly clear from the outset of the project that media representation could not 'reveal' the identity of immigrant families, who for obvious reasons did not wish to jeopardize their application for 'family reunification'.

The production dynamics of the collaboration was tested through a constant re-versioning

of an original NGO case study – at one level preserving its phenomenological force but nevertheless taking it through a detailed process of translation. With the scripting, in the first instance, co-written by a primary school teacher and editor of Irish children's literature and the director of the animation, a backstory is stylized and rendered quietly dramatic, marking out a textual space for a cast of characters with immigrant and recognizable Irish accents. The move from the textual to the visual is mediated through detailed storyboarding, hand drawn and transferred to a Flash programme on the computer. The casting for characters was then conducted by a dramaturge, who carefully choreographed the voices. It is here that the characters come alive activating a set of transnationalized spaces, reflecting what Roger Rouse calls the 'transnational migrant circuit' (2002: 162) – spaces linked through familial, social and economic ties, comprising multiple yet interconnected networks. Most challenging in this work has been the insertion of what Hamid Naficy, borrowing from Raymond Williams, calls 'accented structures of feeling' (2001: 26) – in this case the emergent Irish-accented voices of the young migrant children performing the animated characters and who are part of a growing cast and network of co-producers illustrating the behind-the-scenes production team. Naficy works with a fluid concept of 'accent' as a trope emphatically shaped by a combination of not merely linguistic conventions but also histories of dialect, together with migratory and diasporic specificities of aesthetic and media production.

With a view to questions of impact and ongoing feedback from teachers during the production phase, the collaborative circle was widened further with the piloting of the project in primary schools across Ireland. Since the 'Film and Teaching Packs' were not

prescriptive in their design, teachers could pick and choose sections to work with. The feedback reflected a range of perspectives, with some teachers actively embracing the entire content, while others were more selective and strategic in their usage. The reception of the material was in the main positive, and any reservations tended to stem from hesitancy and insecurity in relation to discussing cultural diversity issues with students. The pilot stage of the project resulted in the recognition of the role of the teacher training colleges, namely, the importance of targeting student teachers before entering the mainstream classroom. A further and critical measurement of *Abbi's Circle* was conducted through an appraisal as to how the project was being taken up by various educational initiatives, for example, the Irish Film Institute's 'Education and Access' nationwide programme.

In strategically distinguishing between a purely law-centred human rights approach and what Sen calls a 'recognition route' (2006: 2919), the series has arguably enabled a more inclusive audience attentive to the transnational human dimensions of 'family reunification'. For the NGO partners of FOMACS, the critical challenge remains how to straddle the significance of legislative and policy change, alongside advocacy/service delivery, in addition to communicating the urgency of 'family reunification' to different publics. *Abbi's Circle* potentially offers a way forward, on the one hand, illustrating respect for the validity of the legal and policy route in relation to 'family reunification', while on the other, introducing mediated educational content for opening up discussion across diverse public spheres, evidencing what Sen describes as 'interactive ways and means including social recognition, informational monitoring and public recognition'

(2006: 2927).

Given the intense level of production collaboration in *Abbi's Circle*, the notion of 'voice' is rendered more complex, since this is a multivocal and multimediated work symptomatic of the many layers of discursive translation underpinning it. The bridge between 'voice', 'listening' and 'understanding', as Husband puts it, is continuously being tested by way of the public channels in which the animation series moves: from the primary school classroom, to the animation film festival circuit, to projected mainstream television broadcast. How to make sense, then, of that crucial distinction that Husband makes between 'understanding as praxis or understanding as commodity?' (2009: 442). For if listening is merely the 'necessary precursor to understanding' as Husband argues, 'understanding, on the other hand, is an act of *empathetic comprehension*, a willing searching after the other's intention and message' (2009: 441, original emphasis).

Yet crucially, for those straddling the borderline of theory and practice and who use audio-visual participatory research methods in the context of transcultural education, it is often difficult to maintain or facilitate that very intersubjective or receptive space invoked both by Husband and Coles beyond the circumstantial and material conditions under which the 'voice' is produced – a space characterized by the alleged destabilization 'of the power relationships between researcher and researched' (Buckingham 2009: 636). What is not suggested here is either an idealization of the 'politics of voice' or the politics of listening, for the specificity of media projects whose aim is to reckon with questions of social justice is always imbued with practical concerns mired in the hegemony of

curatorial protocols and media conventions not always readily surmountable. For example, museum and gallery conventions, in addition to broadcast programming criteria and educational curricula, often anticipate audience reach and reception in advance, despite progressive programmatic intentions and policies. Moreover, regardless of how 'participatory' the media production was/is in its design and scope, the real and urgent task of opening up diverse public spaces for transcultural dialogue and 'political listening' to unfold – invoking Coles' provocative notion of 'horizontal receptivity' (2004: 220) – is all too often easier to negotiate in theory than in practice.

Digital storytelling workshop: 'Living in Direct Provision'

This longitudinal practice of developing a self-selected autobiographical story, crafting the script, designing the storyboard, making the images and editing the final audio-visual composition, impacted significantly on people's lives – if only for two hours a week, only for providing a sanctuary of possibility. (Alexandra 2007)[9]

[INSERT FIG 2]

Figure 2: 'Living in Direct Provision' digital storytelling workshop.

On behalf of the 9 participants in this 'Living in Direct Provision: Nine Stories' project I welcome everybody to today's public screening. What you are about to watch today might not make sense in today's Ireland which is burdened by serious

economic challenges, but we have strived through our collective efforts to present

to you not just a documentary, but a template and a powerful tool to work with in

creating tomorrow's Ireland. (Joyce, Digital storytelling participant, 29 May 2009)

With these opening remarks, Joyce, a digital storytelling workshop participant, publicly

launched the FOMACS screening at the Irish Film Institute of nine stories created by

asylum seekers during a three-month digital storytelling workshop in collaboration with

two of its NGO partners. The workshop participants came to Ireland seeking refuge and

were living in Direct Provision Centres across the country (referred to as detention or

reception centres in the United Kingdom). The Direct Provision scheme, introduced by

the Irish state in 1999, houses asylum seekers in targeted accommodation on a full board

basis supported directly by the state in contrast to receiving an allowance, which would

allow asylum seekers to live independently. They currently receive €19.10 per week with

an added sum of €9.60 for children. The dispersal system works to accommodate asylum

seekers around the country with no consultation with either themselves or with local

communities, resulting in high levels of poverty and social exclusion. The nine

storytellers, originating from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, engaged in a collaborative

process integrating storytelling, creative writing, photography and the use of multimedia

technologies, whose outcome was the DVD production of individual three- to five-minute

digital stories. The mediated perspectives generated in this workshop practice depict a

variety of everyday difficulties affecting asylum seekers and families who have lived or

are currently living in the Direct Provision system: painful experiences of separated and

fragmented families; the lived effects of exile and social segregation; the impact on

children growing up in the Direct Provision system (sometimes for four to five years due to bureaucratic backlogs); a collective sense of wanting to contribute through work and thereby obtain recognition in Irish society; in addition to hopes for the future and new beginnings. Exiting the Direct Provision Centre every week was for some a full day's journey to Dublin, as described by Joyce in her opening address:

> Travelling every Monday morning from the countryside of Kiltimagh in County Mayo to Dublin was quite tasking, much more difficult was sieving through my book-sized life experiences to create a 3-minute documentary. But I had the drive, as a writer, mother and an individual who has been living in direct provision for 4 years. (29 May 2009)

Significantly, 'travelling' to and attending the digital storytelling workshops, deliberately conducted in a third-level educational institution, proved to be a crucial component of the participatory media process, resulting in the creation of a 'community of practice', in this instance, asylum seekers as storytellers, working with a facilitator and media makers in an institutional context. For as Etienne Wenger writes:

> Over time […] collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of communities *communities of practice*. (Wenger 1998: 45, original emphasis)

In the timing and selection of the digital storytelling method enabling asylum seekers to use digital media in the creation of short stories, the 'Living in Direct Provision' FOMACS project was conducted in appreciation of how John Hartley and Kelly McWilliam frame digital storytelling: 'At this moment in time in media history, digital storytelling represents an important fulcrum […] It is at once an emergent form, a new media practice, an activist/community movement and a textual system' (2009: 4). While it is widely practiced globally in expanding institutional and community development contexts with diverse constituencies, Hartley and McWilliam (2009: 14–15) draw attention to critiques of digital storytelling partially summarized as follows: 'as a form', its tendency is to focus on sentimentalized, 'individualistic, and naively unself-conscious' stories through therapeutic narration and rendition; 'as a practice', the delivery is 'too teacher-centric'; and 'as a movement', its distribution and 'dissemination strategies are useless'. Despite the legitimacy and provocation of such misgivings, the workshop facilitated a vital opening-up of educational and media resources to a disenfranchised constituency barred by law in Ireland from obtaining access to education or the labour market.

[INSERT FIG 3]

Figure 3: 'Living in Direct Provision' digital storytelling workshop.

This state-imposed prohibitive context thus played a significant role in choosing 'digital storytelling' as a participatory media method, since it offered possibilities to render public a set of lived experiences hitherto represented through second- and third-party

channels, whether NGO service providers, immigration lawyers or journalists, which is not to naively assume, however, that digital storytelling is an unmediated storytelling method. Rather, the consciously formulated workshop with its collaborative 'story circle' and facilitator-led structure offered at the very least the possibility for a transformative educational programme to emerge, if only within a three-month period. More importantly, it promised, as Couldry notes, paraphrasing Joe Lambert (founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, CA), to create 'links to democracy, particularly the practice of "storycatching" which through meetings of "storycircles" in particular communities catches stories which otherwise would not be exchanged' (2008: 55).

Nevertheless, the use of terms such as 'community' and 'democracy' are very much contested, for the claims made by Fraser for a two-dimensional conception of justice in the 'reconciliation and integration of the politics of redistribution and recognition' are scarcely approachable for asylum seekers secluded in the Direct Provision system in Ireland. Participants in the digital storytelling workshop were therefore struggling with two sets of rights claims: recognition and redistribution. It was clear that the compulsion or obligation to 'listen' emerged or was structurally intertwined at an earlier stage of the production process and prior to the post-production curatorial phase – an imperative framed by the structure of the 'story circle' in which participants work collectively to craft, reflect on and share their 150–200-word creative scripts, which are then recorded, since it is the 'voice' of the storyteller that drives the final media product. In this respect the notion of a 'politics of voice' is reconfigured in the context of what Couldry calls:

[A] *second-order value of voice* that is embodied in the process of mutually recognizing our claims on each other as reflexive human agents, each with an account to give, an account of our lives that needs to be registered and heard, our stories endlessly entangled in each others' stories. (2009: 580, original emphasis)

What Couldry refers to here is the 'implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening' (2009: 580) and critically not a conception of the 'politics of voice' in isolation. In Couldry's *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism* (2010), he elaborates on what he means by voice as a 'value' and the importance of voice as a 'process' in 'organising human life'.[10] Here 'value' arguably contains a politics of social justice or what, following Fraser, constitutes a two-dimensional notion of justice:

Treating voice as a value means discriminating *in favour* of ways of organising human life and resources that, through their choices, put the value of voice into practice, by respecting the multiple interlinked processes of voice and sustaining them, not undermining or denying them […] Valuing voice then involves particular attention to the conditions under which voice as a process is effective, and how broader forms of organization may subtly undermine or devalue voice as a process. This reflexive concern with the conditions for voice as a process, including those that involve its *devaluing*, means that 'voice' […] is a value *about* values or what philosophers sometimes call a 'second order' value. (Couldry 2010: 2, original emphasis)

In this regard the digital storytelling workshop space embodied an attempt to implement 'the value of voice into practice' and the parallel process of listening as a form of 'receptive engagement' – a mini-rehearsal for the added challenge of locating the stories beyond the institutional pedagogical context with a view to reaching potentially disinterested and, more likely, disbelieving publics. Unlike the animation series *Abbi's Circle*, which carries within it the potential for educational impact through the mediation of young schoolchildren as agents of change, the participatory media method as practiced in the 'Living in Direct Provision' digital storytelling project seems, at first glance, limited in scope. How to move beyond the workshop space and the individual story? How to collectivize and democratize the process, whereby the mediated 'voices' move towards a larger public reception? In what ways can digital storytelling act as a mediating tool bridging ultra-marginalized voices with communities of listeners? What potential do stories have in the construction of a public space for modes of 'empathetic comprehension' following Husband, or, as Coles puts it, 'engaged receptivity'?

Despite eloquent and pertinent readings of the 'politics of voice' evident in the dialectic between voicing and listening, what is less clear and most challenging is how to move beyond the 'co-construction' and participatory media practice mode of 'constituting' voice, steering a pathway towards creating multiple public spheres for the reception of mediated projects in the realm of social justice. While the process of 'mutually recognising our claims on each other as reflexive human agents' (Couldry 2009: 580) is genuinely supported by curatorial and media programming as well as anti-racist

educational strategies, it is imperative that these exhibitionary strategies do not simply replicate levels of polite tolerance and well-meaning liberal empathy in an embrace of a 'politics of recognition'. As media practitioners/activists, how do we engage with entrenched modes of curatorial practice prevalent in many cultural institutions and media spheres – museums, galleries, national broadcasters and school curricula – tolerant yet ideologically resistant to the structural and material inequalities that continue to shape public policy debates surrounding the rights and entitlements, in this case refugees and asylum seekers?

Perhaps the seeds of an answer lie in acknowledging the structural precariousness of the cognitive and material space between the process of 'voice' and 'listening', together with the corresponding bridge to 'understanding' or indeed 'comprehension'. Does the potential of the digital storytelling method emerge in the 'not knowing' of where and how the 'voice' is positioned and ultimately anchored and therefore 'received?' In many respects the digital story embodies a particular version of what Lassiter calls the 'co-conceived' nature of collaborative ethnography, yet it cannot claim the full status of the ethnographic method.[11] In opening up institutional spaces for stories to be co-crafted and facilitated, in the context of a workshop with asylum seekers living in the Direct Provision system across Ireland, whose status is currently one of exclusion from the rights and entitlements of the democratic sphere, listening is dialectically linked and indeed central to the 'co-construction' of those multiple heretofore silenced 'voices'. As Spivak suggests, political consciousness emerges when one inhabits 'many subject positions', as illustrated in the content of Joyce's digital story. The title of her story

'Crossing Over' is apposite, not least because of its obvious reference to moving across and into mainstream Irish society – moving out of a 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005) – but also because the metaphor of 'crossing' describes Joyce's own role as 'mediator' within the Direct Provision Centre. At the time of the digital storytelling workshop, Joyce had been living in a Centre in County Mayo for four years, with her three sons. As an active member of a residence committee, she has continuously negotiated and translated the claims for other asylum seekers. An accomplished writer in her own right, she is acutely aware of the many contradictions that shape the co-residents' everyday lives and the public discourse of 'mistrust' that surrounds asylum stories and histories.

[INSERT FIG 4]

Figure 4: Still from Joyce's digital story.

A transcription of Joyce's digital story reads as follows:

> I woke up this morning with a bit of 'hot head' and shivers, even though the room was heated. It is one of those days in Ireland when the sky empties her icy grains. Going to the GP is out of the question. I have seen him five times in one month. I know this is the pulse of frustration, whose height can't be measured nor bounds determined by a mere stethoscope. This is my third year in the Direct Provision hostel and I have learned that asylum seekers visit the GP four times more frequently than normal Irish people. The pressure in here is so high that everybody seems to be furious over little things. If you ask me I would say most of our

ailments are stress-related. I look up; it's Funmi. Not again. It is her 5ᵗʰ year in the

hostel so she's a 'bag of trouble'. Being a member of the residents committee, I am

confronted with all kinds of situations. Most times, I get so furious about whom to

direct my anger at. Is it the asylum system that piles up people together for years in

idleness? Or our greedy country leaders who send their youth scrambling for

safety? Despite my headache, I counsel Funmi. Just then Carolyn bursts into my

room, raging, swearing and cursing. 'What again?' I ask. 'Do you know that my

solicitor said my case would be great if I wasn't a Nigerian?' I stare at her,

wondering how my country got to be a 'sinful nation' in the eyes of the world.

'Funmi! Funmi! Funmi!' I hear the lady in room 10 calling out, 'you have

registered post!' There is a drop-pin silence. This is one moment that every asylum

seeker dreads, it is the decider – either you are in or you are out. We all cluster

round Funmi. Her heartbeat vibrating like a Nokia phone. After five stressful years

Funmi received her leave to remain. What a situation! Five years of being on the

waiting line and one minute of crossing over.

As Joyce stood on the stage of the Irish Film Institute cinema delivering her welcome

address, it was clear, evident in the tenor of her speech to the audience, that she was

performing a mediating role, negotiating the sentiments expressed by her fellow digital

storytellers and the no less complex collective sentiments of an audience gathered to

listen to the stories. Anticipating this sensitive and precarious receptivity, she reflected:

    These are our stories, written from the heart, with no guards on our emotions, our

experiences, or our ideas as single women, fathers, mothers, Asian, African, non-English speaking, Christian and Muslim people living in direct provision centres across this country. Our stories might be different, but the frustrations are the same. Dreams have been shattered, self-esteem destroyed, talents wasted, the steam and fire of our labour years put out, except for that familiar label: 'a bunch of asylum seekers'.

Having left the relative security of the digital storytelling workshop and despite the fact that the cinema was strategically packed with invited spectators from the NGO, educational and creative and cultural industry sectors, Joyce understood the risks involved in these stories publicly circulating – hence her curation logic was both intuitive and targeted. She turns the popular dismissive phrase of 'bunch of asylum seekers' on its head by naming and countering it with reference to the harsh reality of long-term social isolation and the tangible psychosocial impact on individuals and families living in the Direct Provision system. For arguably what state policy has engineered in denying asylum seekers access to education, to the labour market and therefore to contribute to Irish public life is akin to a denial of the two-dimensional notion of social justice proffered by Fraser (Fraser and Honneth 2003). In positing a bridging of the rights claims of recognition and redistribution, Fraser anticipates the challenges facing forms of participatory media practice today regardless of how well meaning and politically progressive it claims to be. As Joyce continued her role as curator in her final comments, she further projected how the audience might respond, evoking Husband's (2009) distinction between 'empathy', 'comprehension', and the collective and ultimately

reciprocal process of public 'understanding'. Her concluding words personify 'voice' as an embodied, social process crucially involving both 'speaking and *listening*' (Couldry 2010: 9, original emphasis), invoking the imbrication of individual and collective narratives that are nonetheless negotiated through systemic unequal social and power relations:

> Of course, I can go on and on, but I would prefer our images and sounds to do the job. As a final word I have to emphasise here that the 9 storytellers did not participate in this project to evoke the sympathy that we have been given over the years, but to remind this society that the mental health of every individual, even that of an asylum seeker, is an important decimal in the economic data of any society. On this note therefore, I beg to leave the stage for our films to speak our words.

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Notes

[1] FOMACS (www.fomacs.org) is funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies under the auspices of its programme titled 'Human Rights and Reconciliation' to both produce and disseminate a variety of mediated products whilst building the capacity of its partners to use communication effectively within their advocacy activities surrounding migration. Its partners include the established immigrant newspaper *Metro Eireann*, together with five major migration NGOs in Ireland. It is led by the Centre for Transcultural Research and

Media Practice (www.ctmp.ie), Dublin Institute of Technology.

[2] See 'Information and Cultural Exchange' (www.ice.org) and 'Active Voice' (www.activevoice.net), respectively.

[3] In their introductory article titled 'Listening, pathbuilding and continuations: A research agenda for the analysis of listening' to the *Continuum* special issue, which emerged out of a series of workshops organized by the Listening Project across Australian universities in 2008, O'Donnell et al. 'posit "listening" as a rubric for reframing contemporary media theory' (2009: 423). In so doing, they draw attention to the influential work of political theorist Susan Bickford (1996) on listening and democracy and media scholar Nick Couldry (2006) in which he recuperates a cultural studies approach to listening, calling on scholars to be attentive to those audiences, voices and cultural practices ignored by a global media system characterized by the 'profound *inequality* in the distribution of symbolic resources' (2006: 91, original emphasis).

[4] All images copyright courtesy of FOMACS.

[5] The inaugural screening of *The Memory Box* occurred in The Stranger Than Fiction International Documentary Film Festival (2007, Irish Film Institute), where the film won the audience award for 'Best Irish Short Film'. It has subsequently been screened in numerous animation and documentary film festivals in and outside Ireland. *Team Spirit* (2008) was shortlisted for the 'Human Rights Film School' competition showcased at the Lighthouse Cinema in Dublin.

[6] See Article 16 of 'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml

[7] In her review of the *'The Memory Box*: Film and teaching pack' in the monthly magazine *InTouch* (2008), a publication of the Irish National Teachers' Organization, Barbara O'Toole writes:

The pack is a treasure trove of suggestions and ideas for the classroom […] Teachers will find that *The Memory Box* contains child friendly and teacher-friendly material on subjects which are of critical importance in Ireland today […] It is a refreshing new resource in a medium sure to grasp children's attention. It will be a welcome addition to every teacher's portfolio of materials for intercultural education in the primary school classroom.

FOMACS' teaching packs are currently in use in primary school classrooms across the country, and have been taken up by the Irish Film Institute's Education programme with the aim of running training workshops for teachers.

[8] For discussion of the long-standing and contemporary relationship between the genres of animation and documentary film, see Ward (2005).

[9] Darcy Alexandra (Creative Director and Workshop Facilitator) creatively directed and facilitated the first FOMACS digital storytelling workshop titled *Undocumented in Ireland: Our Stories* (2007) in collaboration with the 'Bridging Visa Campaign Group of the Migrant Rights Centre', Ireland, a partner of FOMACS. For discussion of this workshop and a critical appraisal of digital storytelling as a transformative practice, see Alexandra (2007).

[10] In *Why Voice Matters*, Couldry conducts a sustained critique of neo-liberal thought and its democratic shortcomings, offering the concept of 'voice' as a '*connecting* term that interrupts neoliberalism's view of economics and economic life, challenges neoliberalism's claim that its view of politics as market functioning trumps all others' (2010: 2, original emphasis).

[11] See O'Reilly (2005, 2008) for an account of the ethnographic method.