

DANIEL MEADOWS, LISA HELEDD, CARWYN EVANS

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**Session: How public broadcasting serves the public interest in the digital age (Broadcast convergence: new forms of storytelling), 5 February 2006**

Daniel Meadows has developed the *Capture Wales* Digital Storytelling project with a team at the BBC in Cardiff that includes researchers Lisa Heledd and Carwyn Evans. This BAFTA-winning citizen media project has been online since 2002 and the site now hosts more than 400 stories made either in monthly workshops or in partnership with community organisations. The project contributes Digital Stories to radio and television schedules in the UK at a rate of about five per week as well as 24/7 for the BBC's Your Stories "red button" interactive television service.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales>

### Transcript

#### Daniel Meadows

Hello, I am Daniel Meadows. I work at Cardiff University and I'm the one who thought up the BBC's Digital Storytelling project *Capture Wales*. Since its inception five years ago, I have also been its creative director.

What we do is give people a voice.

Lisa Heledd and Carwyn Evans – here – are my colleagues and today we are going to look at the question of "how public broadcasting serves the public interest in the digital age" from the point-of-view of those of us who are charged with delivering Digital Storytelling for the BBC. I'll begin by showing you one of my own Digital Stories. It's called *Polyfoto*.

[plays video clip: POLYFOTO 2 min 15 sec.]

*Polyfoto*, made in the spring of 2001, was the first Digital Story I made. True, earlier – in November 2000 – I had made a story under Joe Lambert's tutelage while attending a "bootcamp" at the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley California, but *Polyfoto* was the first story I made all on my own. In Berkeley I learned

## DANIEL MEADOWS, LISA HELEDD, CARWYN EVANS

the most important lesson of being a Digital Storytelling facilitator and it's this: it doesn't follow – simply because you have attended a workshop and successfully completed a Digital Story – that you will be able to make another Digital Story unaided. Making Digital Stories is something you must learn by yourself.

And more... learning how to help others make Digital Stories is something you have to do in a team and over time.

Don't get me wrong, the workshop is vital – absolutely vital – for it is the place where storytellers get their courage and inspiration, it is where we learn the importance of listening and sharing, it's the place where we find out what's possible. In the workshop we lose our fear and gain the confidence to believe that our stories are worth telling. In the workshop those of us who only sit and stare can thrill to the notion that we, too, might have a voice. The workshop is our home, it's where we're from and it's where we must return from time-to-time. It's the mother ship. But there isn't a workshop facilitator in the world who can teach us to make a Digital Story. Yes we can be shown how to make a Digital Story. But actually doing it... that's something for us individually and it something we do alone, often with a manual and always with a lot of patience.

This early lesson was important because, from the word go, an ambition of the BBC team was to "roll-out" Digital Storytelling across Wales, to help people get the habit of making their own stories without any hand-holding, to run their own workshops and to spread the skills.

Some of you will have been present yesterday afternoon when our community partner Kate Strudwick talked about her terrific *Breaking Barriers* project in Caerphilly. Well, all five members of Kate's early team passed through BBC *Capture Wales* at one time or another and theirs is the story of how we've gone about "serving the public interest" and – even though it's been going on for five years – it's a story that has only just begun. For, ever since 2001, our little team of digital expeditionaries has gone, once a month, out on the road to a different part of Wales and, over five days, helped ten people at a time to script, edit and screen their Digital Stories. We work with all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds with all kinds of abilities and disabilities. And yes we have a great time. More importantly though – as indicated by the scholars who have been following our work for two separate PhD projects – the workshop participants also have a great time.

So here we are, February 2006, with almost 500 *Capture Wales* stories in the bag and a further 400-plus stories completed by our community partners. Here, then, are almost a thousand people who now know that – if you can do media for yourself – there's no longer any need to be done by it. And it's an inspiring body of work, a gaggle of invisible histories which come together in the ether of the Internet to tell the bigger story of our time. These are stories which validate each of our unique experiences of the everyday. For the BBC the goal has been to connect more closely with the communities it serves, but the great achievement of the project has been to change the balance of power in Wales between the broadcaster and the broadcasted.

## DANIEL MEADOWS, LISA HELEDD, CARWYN EVANS

There never was any television like it. In 2005, 400 stories were aired: 20 on radio, 130 on television and 250 on the 'interactive' television service *Your Stories* (programmes which can be viewed via digital satellite by pressing the red button on your remote control). For the first time in media history a major player has put the tools of both production and editing into the hands of the audience and been glad... for what came back was not only good to watch, but won it prizes; an innovation award in 2002 and a BAFTA Cymru in 2003.

Last year, another landmark was passed: because of *Capture Wales*, more Digital Stories were made in Wales without the BBC than with it. We've come a long way.

Let me sum up what we've learned:

If citizens are to make their own TV on the kitchen table – as it were – then it is imperative that Big Media provides them with forms which can be readily learned, elegant forms which allow for an articulate contribution. We should make good Digital Stories, not bad television;

This kind of work can be spread only through the running of community workshops;

The quality of the finished stories depends – for the most part – upon the quality of the facilitation provided.

There are no quick fixes. Digital Stories are indeed multimedia sonnets from the people but let's not kid ourselves that they grow on trees.

*Capture Wales* Digital Stories have a running time of about two minutes, they are written in the first person – I, me, mine – in a script of around 250 words. They make use of the source materials which the storyteller already has (photographs mostly) and they never steal anyone else's copyright. It's a scrapbook aesthetic for a scrapbook kind of TV, a development of Dana Atchley's original Californian model which pays double attention to production values and triple attention to script development.

Without doubt training our own team was the hardest job. Our early facilitators were all BBC staffers who came to us "on attachment". Brave to step out of the mould, they were generous with their knowledge and time and we learned a lot from them. But we knew that they were only passing through. Jody Abramson had worked as an associate producer in documentaries. Here's her Digital Story.

[plays video clip: BEING BORN, 2 min 2 sec.]

Most of our early team members had careers in 'VT' or 'IT' to which they eventually returned. For Jody, though, it was the call of home which took her away and back to Minnesota.

## DANIEL MEADOWS, LISA HELEDD, CARWYN EVANS

One BBC full-timer from those early days who has stayed with us is Gilly Adams from the writers unit. She helped us develop the Story Circle. Like Simon Turner our musician – in this next piece playing guitar to his own composition – Gilly works with us just a few days each month. But they are important days. Let me give you a flavour of Gilly's work.

[plays slide show: STORY CIRCLE, 1 min 38 sec.]

Once we got past the 'pilot' stage of our project, Karen Lewis – our founding producer – made it her business to recruit facilitators who had experience of working in the community and, inevitably, that meant going outside the BBC. Karen had a unique talent for spotting potential and bringing people on. And we were very choosy. More than 40 people came through my training-the-trainers workshops before we finally settled on the team of 5 full-timers and 4 part-timers which we now have.

Lisa and Carwyn, here, came through this process. Nominally they are 'researchers' but, just as importantly, they are also workshop trainers, drivers, sound recordists, script facilitators, image editors, post-production experts, counsellors, web assistants... and Welsh speakers.

Here is Lisa's story. It's called *My Two Nains*. You should know that in Welsh 'Nain' [pronounced 'Nine'] means Grandma; and 'Taid' [pronounced 'Tide'] means Grandpa.

[plays video clip: MY TWO NAINS, 2 min 1 sec.]

'Serving the public interest' brings with it some grim-but-necessary jobs which are spared the community practitioner. For instance, in order to meet the demands of television, radio, the Internet and interactive services, it is necessary to post-produce seven separate versions of every Digital Story made. This job now mostly falls to Huw Davies who spends at least two weeks of every month making and checking output files and video tapes as well as looking after the kit; enough to drive anyone completely crazy except... except that his other role is as a trainer where his quick wit, humour, inventiveness and mastery of the many creative processes of Digital Storytelling have made him the golden heart of our workshop activity. He has also devised a two-day Digital Storytelling taster session known as 'Shoobox Stories', writing a manual for it and producing his own training film.

Another big responsibility we have is adherence to BBC editorial policy guidelines: impartiality, fairness, privacy, truth, taste and decency. And also making certain that we comply with government watchdog Ofcom's regulations. Although the ultimate responsibility for this lies with our producer, much of the business of going through all the stories frame by frame, thinking legal, considering child protection issues and copyright clearance falls to our 'other' Lisa – Lisa Jones – someone who, on most BBC projects, would probably be thought of as just another part-time production assistant. But Lisa, with her law degree, is

## DANIEL MEADOWS, LISA HELEDD, CARWYN EVANS

invaluable for she not only writes the schedules, books the hotels, arranges for hire cars and servicing of the van... she also provides a vital pair of fresh eyes to scrutinise each Story before it goes public. Here's her own Digital Story.

[plays video clip: THE COMMUNION DRESS, 2 min 28 sec.]

Okay, at this point I want to bring in Lisa and Carwyn here...

Lisa, over to you.

### **Lisa Heledd**

As Daniel mentioned Carwyn and I both work on the BBC's *Capture Wales* project as researchers and, as we both work very closely together, we thought we'd do this presentation together.

During this session we plan to share our experience of finding participants for our Digital Storytelling workshops, focusing on the importance of representing the diverse and often hidden voices of Wales.

So, when we're not facilitating on a workshop, our roles are primarily about finding the participants for our next workshops. We felt very early on in the project that the only way to be truly representative and fair when it came to finding participants was to make the workshops open and by application. This means that much of our time is spent letting our next location know that we're on our way in the hope of getting a number of applications that allows us to choose a group of ten people that is balanced and representative of that area. For that we do many things – we speak to the local authority, charities, youth groups, churches, mosques, post-offices, model-railway clubs, we put up posters, send out information packs, set-up DVDs on loop in the local libraries, host open evenings, we phone-bash and most importantly, we spend time in the area, meeting and speaking with people...

### **Carwyn Evans**

And filling a workshop isn't easy. It is assumed that people are desperate to make Digital Stories – free training, free food, a chance to be on the BBC. Well, it's not like that. You have to realise how afraid people are of terms like "Workshop", "Digital", "Storytelling" and, in our case, "the BBC". We know we could fill workshops with media students and people wanting to be famous, and we're not rejecting those people outright – indeed, everyone has a story to tell – but if you don't go out there and approach and encourage all aspects of that community to apply, then you're missing out on a wealth of stories, and a range of voices that otherwise would never even consider putting themselves forward. The amount of times we hear "it's not for me", "it's for young people", "oh no, I'm not interesting enough" and it our job to convince those people

## DANIEL MEADOWS, LISA HELEDD, CARWYN EVANS

that their voices are as valid, and important, as anyone else's. This is the only way we get people like Bob on our workshops.

[plays video clip: MY PASSIONS, 2 min 24 sec.]

### **Lisa Heledd**

Bob is 84 years old, he had never used a computer before coming onto our workshop. I first spoke to Bob when I was given his name from a lifelong learning tutor in his area. He said that he could never come on the workshop: "You don't want an old codger like me," he said. We persuaded him otherwise and he was an asset to that workshop, he was the first there every morning and kept everyone entertained with his war stories and banter, and he made a beautiful story in his own voice.

But we have had to learn the best ways to approach these hidden voices.

For a comparatively tiny country, Wales is incredibly diverse, in its landscape and its people and BBC Wales, as a public service broadcaster, needs to represent and celebrate that diversity and Digital Storytelling plays an important role in that. And that's where Carwyn and I come in, trying our best to get the applications to represent this diversity.

### **Carwyn Evans**

There are two main languages in Wales: English and Welsh. Welsh being its indigenous language and after many years of oppression, it's now the minority language, but it is on the way up again. We hold workshops in both the Welsh and English language and, up until very recently, we've struggled to fill our Welsh language workshops. We were working twice as hard and twice as long to get people on board, and we now think we've cracked the reason why. On our most recent workshop in Caernarfon in North Wales, we took away the name of the Welsh language project – "Cipolwg ar Gymru" with means "A Glance at Wales" – from the literature sent out about the workshop and asked people to think of an object that held significance to them as a starting point for their Digital Story.

With comparatively little effort, we had a pile of applications. We were astounded. But why?

It is our belief that, by calling the project "A Glance at Wales", the Welsh speaking community believed that their Digital Stories would need to be about Wales, about being Welsh, and along with that goes a whole host of other issues especially relating to the quality and accuracy of ones Welsh. Well, if you feel that you're representing your country, you want to make sure you do it properly. That has meant that many of the people applying for our Welsh language workshops have been the typical village representatives; Mr. Thomas who

## DANIEL MEADOWS, LISA HELEDD, CARWYN EVANS

feels it's his duty to make a story about the area and not Mrs. Jones from number 43 telling you a story of how she loves to dance in her kitchen. Because of this, some of our Welsh language stories have had a slightly historical tone. Up until now.

In this last workshop, we had ten completely different storytellers, from all backgrounds and of all ages and each one had a totally unique personal story to tell. And by telling us those personal stories we, the audience, get far more of an insight into the Welsh language community and are able to see Welsh as a living, breathing, spoken language, rather than a minority language to be preserved or one of education and history. Here's one of those ten:

[plays video clip: SEREN WÎB, 1 min 9 sec.]

### **Lisa Heledd**

As it is true of the Welsh language community, it is also true that more time and thought is needed in approaching and representing other minority groups in Wales.

Because of this, there is a temptation to run workshops under themes. This is a temptation I understand, as it does seem a straightforward way of ticking the diversity boxes. Yet, from *experience*, we have found this isn't the most effective way of finding true, personal and interesting Digital Stories from minority groups. As soon as you theme a workshop by such things as race, gender, age or disability, you're giving the impression that those are the themes you want discussed during the workshop. No matter how many times you stress the point that they can talk about anything they choose, most participants will see it as their duty to represent their "party" as it were.

When you group ten people from a similar background into a workshop, it is inevitable that they will concentrate on the "issues" of their background and begin speaking in general terms about what it is like to be a drug user, or in a wheelchair or having mental health problems and, instead of looking to the things that make us unique, the common factors will come to the surface and each film can share similar phrases and often cliché about that experience. And instead of breaking down stereotypes, you only succeed in reinforcing them.

This is especially important in a television context, where many minority groups are only ever seen talking about being a part of that minority group. How often do you see someone in a wheelchair not talking about disability issues, or an elderly person not talking about pensions or heating bills in the winter? Digital Stories can change and have changed this, we have had stories go out on television where a young boy with cerebral palsy speaks about his passion for witchcraft; Abi, a woman of African origin telling a story about being short and, of course, Bob who talked about the incredible love he had with his wife Kit.

## DANIEL MEADOWS, LISA HELEDD, CARWYN EVANS

By being personal and specific, it is easy for us to empathise and listen, when a story is general or vague, it is easy to switch off. And that isn't going to help any cause. (Digital Storytelling can be a powerful way of making people see the human in a person rather than the label that usually defines them.)

On our workshops, we try and select ten participants from different ages and backgrounds to create a balanced and interesting group and, through the individuality of the people and their subsequently personal stories, you will get truly fascinating glimpses into different cultures and histories. And it isn't just about the stories, it's also about the participants, we believe that the workshop experience is a much richer one when you're learning and sharing stories with people you may have never considered getting to know before.

Our next Digital Story was made on a recent workshop where Anita was a participant with, amongst others, a man talking about his passion for driving the mobile community library and another about a holiday that changed his life.

[plays video clip: PINKY, BABY AND ME, 2 min.]

### **Carwyn Evans**

Of course, if you're encouraging people from all backgrounds to apply, it does mean you sometimes have to adapt the workshop to suit people's needs, and this is no bad thing. As long as you have selected your participants carefully to ensure everyone gets fair play, then it should only succeed in making the dynamic of the workshop even stronger.

This is what we discovered when we worked with Mary Matthews. Mary is blind and autistic and absolutely fantastic. Mary came along with her carer, Lesley, and experienced every step of the Digital Storytelling process to hers and all of our delight. We did need to allow extra time for her to record her voice and she wasn't able to write a script in the "normal" way and we made sure that there were enough computer literate people on the workshop to allow space for a member of the team to explain each step of the process to Mary as we went along. And I guess, ultimately, that's what serving the public interest is all about. And working with Mary was magic!

So, to finish, here is Mary's Digital Story.

[plays video clip: A MUSICAL LIFE, 3 min 21 sec.]