

KAREN WORCMAN

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Karen Worcman is an historian, and founder and director of the Museu da Pessoa (The Museum of the Person). Founded in São Paulo in 1991, the Museum has developed a method for collecting and systematizing personal statements and has carried out numerous projects in the areas of business memory, education, culture, and community development.

The portal <http://www.museudapessoa.net/> offers a virtual museum.

Transcript

I want to tell you a little bit about the Museum of the Person experience, but first I will just show a little bit extract of the video so people can tell you some of their views of the Museum.

[plays video clip]

To start, I want to present myself as a historian worried about using historical narratives for social change. The group that founded the Museum of the Person was really worried on how we could change the way we view and experience history in our society and how this was connected to social change. So before telling a little bit of how we dealt with this in practice and strategies, I want to explore three main questions:

The first question - why digital storytelling is connected to social justice? Why we thought that this had to do with the concept of history in itself? In general, we think history is about the past, but it's mainly about the present. It's the narrative that creates the patterns and values of the society. In general, this narrative is created and mediated by some institutions, some historians, the media, etc. To change the way we build our historical narrative, creating multiple narratives, is to democratise social memory. Therefore, we could have many 'histories', many different 'values' and 'patterns'. So, in our vision, this was a way of working for a new and more just society.

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The second question: why this has to do with community building? I want to point two things. The first one is to understand or feel the 'value' of one's life story. This can be the first step to understanding that each one of us is an agent of historical change and an important part of the changes within a community. The second one is about listening. If we really work to make these life stories social information then we help communities to understand each other and or to create their own history.

The third question: why digital? Why not just create a historical archive and make books and exhibitions? Because the idea of creating a multiple historical narrative, in which each person can be an author and a reader in his/her own way, needs a different concept of space, of sharing and of authoring. And, all these digital techniques, mainly the Internet, help us because they allow us to 'produce' our own content. They are not mediated and they open the possibilities for us to create a new global community. Not a community based only on territories and beliefs, but on empathy with other persons' lives.

So these three questions gave birth to the concept the Museum of the Person in Sao Paulo, with the goal of creating a network of life stories. Today the Museum of the Person is a portal. The archive is digital and has more or less 5000 testimonies. We have like 36,000 visitors and we receive like 200 stories a month. We are also totally self-sustainable. Our team has about 50 or 60 people in Brazil. We do not receive any money from the government and we develop products and services that give sustainability to the Museum of the Person. It's also a network made out of four nucleuses: Canada, United States, Portugal and Brazil. They share common goals and common methodology, and all of them are concerned with using the power of life stories to bring communities together, and to create a different social memory.

Now I will make a brief review of how, on the story of the Museum of the Person, we develop different strategies to deal with the challenge of creating and disseminating our view of History. The Museum of the Person was founded in 1991, in Sao Paulo. In the beginning there was no Internet and we were focused on collecting all sorts of life stories. I call this period *changing voices in history*, and it was from 1991 to 1997 more or less. We developed many initiatives, like, for example, movable video booths to collect testimonies in squares, subway stations, everywhere ... they were open to any person that wanted to tell his or her life story.

We did more or less 200 of those cabins, all over Brazil. We were also one of the first to do CD-ROMs in Brazil. We did thematic CD-ROMs about famous soccer teams, histories of commerce in Sao Paulo, about different unions ... we thought about organizing all these CD-ROMs in juke boxes and to distribute them in many public places in a way that anyone could listen to those stories and switch from one theme to another. But, finally Internet came. We made our entrance on the net in 1996. One year after we became more interactive with a session called 'tell your story', open to any person that wanted to send his/her story.

Before going on, I want just to show you another small video of one of our interviewers, just to give you an idea. He's the oldest interviewer of the Museum of the Person.

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[plays video clip]

He died. He was 125 years old and, at this time, he was a professional bagger. He lived in a slum in Sao Paolo. He moved to Sao Paolo when he was 90 years old, looking for a job.

So, continuing with our history. At this period we were really involved in all these activities: working with the Internet, we were doing these CD-ROMs, editing books and exhibitions ... but then we started to question ourselves. In a country like Brazil, where less than 20 per cent of the country has Internet access, are we going to become just content producers? How can we really spread this initiative? How can we really mobilize people so as we can really change the way we do history in our society?

These questions started a new phase on our history that I call *changing the way history is built*, and this period was from 1997 to 2004. We created a program called 'Agents of History', which was training old people to interview other old people. Then we started to work with public schools and, today, we are already developing this initiative in five different states of Brazil. We involve all the schools for a two years program during which teachers and students of elementary school produce their own local memory, interviewing people from their communities. This program became an important strategy to deal with literacy and digital inclusion, two big challenges in Brazil. After that we started disseminating our methodology in unions, companies, NGOs, communities and so on. Also, during this same period, we made partnerships with radios and TV to increase the use of our archive. We had a daily radio program called Minutes of the Citizen, and when the city of Sao Paolo completed 450 years, a TV station used our archive to tell the story of the city through the common people.

[plays video clip]

I'm going to skip to another example, which is a documentary we produced for TV, telling the story of immigration in Sao Paolo through immigrants' life stories.

[plays video clip]

So, to continue our trajectory, we were doing these partnerships with TV and radio and developing different training programs, working with schools... then we started thinking: how can we really create a net, a real network of life stories? How can that net become a real community based on empathy and mutual respect? How can all these life stories really have the force of social change? It had to be something that would connect people: those that HAVE to have the opportunity to tell their stories with those that SHOULD/HAVE to listen to these stories.

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Then we started a new phase on our history, a phase called *creating the net: building bridges between tellers and listeners*. And we started doing some experiences on that. One of these was the partnership we had with the Movement of Recyclable Garbage Catchers. Recycling involves over 600,000 people all over the country and makes Brazil one of the world recycling champions. When we explained to them the idea of the Museum of the Person they said: "Yes, we have to use these stories to mobilise other fellows to become part of our movement and also to tell the society we are not garbage." So, they have a focus and a need and we could mediate that, help them to have this in a virtual community, but also in the streets in many ways. This was one of our first experiences.

The second experience is being developed now. It consists of developing a special methodology to spread the initiative in a way that communities, institutions and NGOs could use memory as a tool to empower their work – from communication to sustainable development.

But these are just experiences. It is really an open question. A challenge I leave here: what else can we do to create a real chain between tellers and listeners? How can this chain help with real social change? How this can really change the way we create and understand History? Who has to listen?