

# Barrie Stephenson

[digistories.co.uk](http://digistories.co.uk)

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This presentation was delivered at the 2nd Asian Digital Storytelling Congress in Singapore in September 2010. The congress was organised by the National Book Development Council of Singapore

*In the complex world of technology, social networking and mass media, effective communication is still best served by a simple story. Its power, to bring others into our experience and to transport us into theirs, drives us on to discover new ways of telling them. So as digital storytelling leaves infancy and those of us who nurtured it look to the future, what's its potential and where will it take us? After a decade of practical workshops, Barrie Stephenson looks ahead to see how we might develop our craft and whose stories we may be shaping. As newer technology and emerging networks come within our grasp what will they tell and how will they tell it?*

# The Beginning

- BBC Wales
- Workshop - not Boot Camp
- User Generated Content
- Daniel Meadows - [www.photobus.co.uk](http://www.photobus.co.uk)

## Biog/history

My *digital* story began at an editors conference when I was Managing Editor of a BBC Local radio station. We were being shown stories from the first digital storytelling workshop held by BBC Wales. (we decided workshop was a better word than Boot Camp to describe the non competitive experience of storytelling)

It was under the agenda heading of *User Generated Content*. I was riveted and thought to myself - If ever there's an opportunity to work in this area I want to be at the front of the queue.

# TELLING LIVES

digital storytelling

stories no-one else can tell

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[www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives](http://www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives)

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12 months later I was in a BBC Wales Training Trainers workshop with Daniel Meadows - and eight other people recruited to what would be BBC Telling Lives - we would soon be gathering stories from the English Regions.

In that training workshop I made my first digital story - Sleeping Under Cover: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4vDw3UQ0xA>

# Digital Storytelling

## More

- Intimate
- Honest
- Authentic
- Interesting
- Engaging

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I had been a BBC producer and journalist for many years but no one had ever asked me for my story before.

I soon came to realise that this process of producing television was different. More intimate, honest and authentic.

I was used to telling other people's stories - in fact I took away other people's stories, processed them and delivered them back in a voice the original storyteller didn't recognise.

Now I was giving the storyteller editorial control and the skills to tell the story themselves.

The stories felt more interesting and engaging than many of those produced day in day out by the "professionals".



# A lot of heart

There's not much heart in a newsroom - there's a lot of heart in a digital storytelling workshop.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives/ww2/2004/leeds/01\\_leeds\\_ww2\\_more\\_from.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/tellinglives/ww2/2004/leeds/01_leeds_ww2_more_from.shtml)

# Trams at War

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This is one of my favourite stories from this time

<http://tinyurl.com/2ve6tp3> (Sadly this digital story is no longer available on the BBC website – just the background text)



# digistories

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Telling Lives lasted three and a half years and then the BBC brought it to an end. *"We've pioneered the process and now if anyone wants to produce this kind of television they can put in their bids for commissions."*

So I left the BBC and started *digistories*. No team or back up - I took to the road with an estate car full of kit and helped people across England to tell their stories and I'm still doing it.

Every workshop is a surprise. There's always a point when I say "I never knew that!"

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid\\_5150000/newsid\\_5158500/5158542.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_5150000/newsid_5158500/5158542.stm)

# Neema Begum

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I have little - no - no experience of Asia - but I meet lots of people who trace their roots here - who now live in Britain. I was working with a group of young people in The Bangladeshi Community Centre in Walsall in the English region called the West Midlands. I was nowhere near Bangladesh!

In the story circle Neema was the last to tell her story. Up to now the young people had all been interesting in their own way but I wasn't expecting this:

Right vs Wrong <http://tinyurl.com/32dfy75> (This is a link to a text version of Neema's story. The digital story is no longer available on the BBC Website)

Neema told that story about ten months after the event. Her father told me that she'd never spoken about her experience before and he was really thankful that the workshop had helped her tell it. She didn't just tell it for her own benefit - or his - it was broadcast on BBC1 Newsround on the first anniversary on the July 7th bombings in London.

- **Social Networking - Facebook, Twitter**

- If Facebook was a nation it would be the third largest on the planet by population
- Twitter has 105,779,710 registered users sending 65 million tweets a day

- **Video sharing - YouTube**

- People are watching 2 billion videos a day on YouTube and uploading hundreds of thousands of videos daily.
- Every minute, 24 hours of video is uploaded to YouTube.  
(YouTube Fact Sheet [http://www.youtube.com/t/fact\\_sheet](http://www.youtube.com/t/fact_sheet))

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Since 2006, when Neema's story was told, the world of technology has changed considerably. Social networking and cloud computing were almost unknown terms. Mobile phones had cameras - even video - but today they have almost as much computing power and as many media tools as a home laptop did then.

Today facebook is one of the largest "community of communities" in the world.

105 million Twitter users send 65 million messages every day.

YouTube has become the most watched video platform in the world - perhaps evidence that many are bored with the real time feed of television chosen by the schedulers and prefer to "pick their own"

*People are watching 2 billion videos a day on YouTube and uploading hundreds of thousands of videos daily. In fact, every minute, 24 hours of video is uploaded to YouTube. YouTube Fact Sheet [http://www.youtube.com/t/fact\\_sheet](http://www.youtube.com/t/fact_sheet)*

But few of those videos are digital stories and we need more to stand alongside the professionally produced television, promotional and "how to" videos and the self indulgent trash that has sadly become the trade mark for User Generated Content.

# The Template

- A personal narrative
- 200 - 300 words
- 12 - 20 pictures

The Template

# Breaking the rules

- You can only break the rules after you've learned what they are
- Who is breaking the rules?
- Young people are .....

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And I'm a believer that you can't break the rules or push the boundaries if you haven't discovered them in the first place.

So who's breaking the boundaries?

I think young people are. If I'm leading a workshop of young people they always teach me things - some of them I'd rather not know - but they are great experimenters.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMxtVOyE37o>

# Let Young People Lead

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I trained a team of museum workers in the North East of England who went on to run a project called Culture Shock. <http://www.cultureshock.org.uk> Essentially they are museum staff, using objects in their collections to inspire stories from the local community which are then added to their collection. I taught them how to work to the a “template” which they adopted for Culture Shock.

They invited me back after a year to listen to what they'd learned. Like me - they'd discovered that young people like to push the boundaries.

Thomas Elwick told me about his experience.:

Clip:Constraints <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMxtVOyE37o>

I'd love to see more director's cuts!

Treat Me Good by Rebecca Jones  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxMq2qhkVM8>

# Stepping Out

a project for people with learning disabilities

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I am also keen that in the future we make digital storytelling more accessible to people with disabilities. It's too easy to let the literate and capable fill our workshops.

As part of a series of workshops for young people I was asked to work with Stepping Out, a program to prepare young adults with learning disabilities for college courses.

When Rebecca was first asked to share just her name and something interesting with a larger group she was lost for words and simply broke down in tears.

This is perhaps what she would have liked to have said:-

Film: Treat Me Good by Rebecca Jones - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxMq2qhkVM8>

These young people had limited skills - but some were regular Facebook users and most enjoyed processing images from their cameras and making digital scrapbooks. It's was a short step from there to being able to tell a digital story.

# The future

- Integrity
- Personal
- Vulnerable
- More **Now** stories
- On the spot stories

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So now I've started - let's look to the future

When I was first asked to speak in Singapore I started to think about technology - the toys and gadgets pouring onto the market that increase the range of tools we can use for digital storytelling. But to be honest they are grey boxes incapable of creating anything without the spark of human imagination driving the smaller and smaller buttons and screens! We need people who can say - wouldn't it be great if we could .... and then go out to make it happen.

Can I suggest that in the future we need to hold true to the ethos of digital storytelling.

Everywhere I go people ask if they can make informational or promotional films in my workshops rather than telling a personal story. For me the integrity of digital stories is in their genesis - the truth as I see it - a personal narrative - yes it's dramatic, yes it's told as a story, yes it's structured to hold the audience, but at the end of it people are transformed in their view of the world and their understanding of individual experience.

I love history - but it's weakness is that it's usually the story of the successful, the winners, the powerful. And those stories - the promotional, the didactic, the big picture will continue to be told. But we have the means for telling and recording the story of the small, the weak, and the powerless. Let's not squander it.

If you, as digital storytellers, want to use your skills to make this happen then you too should be willing to be weak and vulnerable and to tell your story .. and then to encourage others to do the same. Every time I show "Sleeping Under Cover" I wonder what people will think - of me. But it's who I am - think what you like!

# Why do teachers have to talk like this?

by Lewis Knight

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQ1NRJYz-0M>

## No archive - no problem

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In the past we've depended on the past as the resource or the mine of our digital stories. Fuzzy black and white or faded colour snapshots of families and children, memories of growing up and childhood days. I find that many young and vulnerable people don't have lots of photographs. The means to capture images has never been more prolific - but that makes them cheap and disposable.

My house overlooks a visitors car park and most tourists who come to the city of York start their walking tour right under my nose. I'm always amused at the people, mostly from this part of the world, who stand at the end of my very ordinary street and enthusiastically take pictures and videos. I often wonder what happens to those images - and what they say when they get back home! I guess most of them never see the light of day again and end up in some digital trash can to make room for the next hastily snatched images of somewhere else. I say this to illustrate how we gather pictures today. Many are not stored - some may be uploaded to Facebook - if we're lucky.

So the future of digital storytelling may have to be about now rather than then. The workshop would include image taking - going out and capturing the pictures to tell the story and not depending on a non existent or chaotic archive.

In my experience young people live in the now and the future. The past is a messy collection of embarrassing situations and confused feelings of the process of growing up. But now and the future is where their lives are lived.

Lewis had no pictures to tell his story in a project called "The Truth About Youth". He knew what he wanted to say so he and his friends took the pictures during the workshop.

Play: Why do teachers have to talk like this? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQ1NRJYz-0M>

# Lessons from Africa

## Designing with Mobile Digital Storytelling in Rural Africa

*Bidwell, Reitmaier, Marsden and Hansen April 2010*

- Alternatives to the story driven approach to digital storytelling
- Accounts were often prompted by landscape, ancestry or images. Villagers often found it difficult to think of stories without such resources
- <http://tinyurl.com/mobdigst>

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I'm not an academic and I usually find academic papers a bit dense and dry - but this one about a digital storytelling project in Africa caught my imagination. They had to find alternatives to the story driven approach to digital story telling because people they were working with needed the visual promptings of their surroundings to fire their imaginations. So their workshops were based on pictures taken in a single week. On the spot

I think that need for this kind stimulus isn't just confined to Africa.

# Who are we telling our stories to?

- Put all stories “out there”
- Let them loose - into the wild
- Who are we doing this for?
- Publish, publish, publish

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A final question: Who are we telling our stories to?

As a journalist I think all stories should be "out there".

I know that many gain valuable therapy and personal realisation through exploring their own story. They end up being unfinished or unpublished. They are made for the benefit of the storyteller rather than for an audience. I made it a rule of engagement to ask how the stories made in the workshops would be published. I wanted to know. I have turned jobs down where the results were only for “internal use only”.

So I want to challenge you. Make stories for publication. If we make our stories for publication - will it it lessen personal value? If, by the process of storytelling (essentially a process to communicate with others) we are better able to place ourselves in the community in which we exist, will we not all be better understood and equipped. Equipped to explain who we are and what matters to us in all areas of life?

Unpublished stories are incomplete - they are children never brought to birth or at best they exist only for the parent. Unrecognised in their own right.

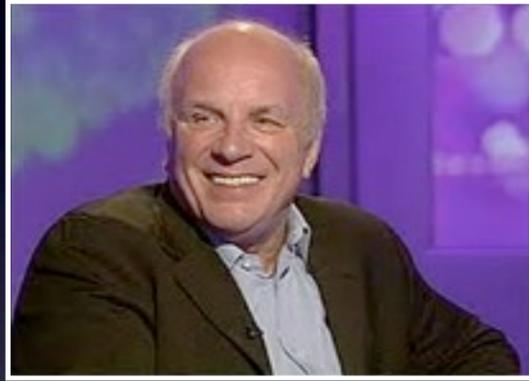
Let stories serve their purpose - let them loose into the wild - publish them.

In the process of producing stories for an audience you will be more disciplined. You'll think of others. Will they watch? What will they think? What will they discover? Who am I doing this for? What do I really want to say?

And yet too many stories remain hidden away on hard drives, DVDs and memory sticks - while the glow of the workshop slowly fades and the experience of it is swallowed up in the more pressing demands of life.

# Greg Dyke

as BBC Director General



"I watch hundreds of hours of television in the course of my job and most of it is soon forgotten so tell me Barrie, why can I still remember the first digital story I ever watched?"

It's called "Scratching the Surface"

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/yourvideo/pages/debbie\\_rideout\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/yourvideo/pages/debbie_rideout_01.shtml)

When Greg Dyke was the director general of the BBC, asked me this question.

*"I watch hundreds of hours of television in the course of my job and most of it is soon forgotten so tell me Barrie, why can I still remember the first digital story I ever watched?"*

That first story was about domestic violence - perhaps the kind of narrative that might have been kept under wraps. But it was published on the BBC Capture Wales site. It's called "Scratching the Surface" told by Debbie Ridout who used to hide bank notes behind the wallpaper so that her violent partner didn't find them.

You can watch it now - it's still there in the BBC Capture Wales collection.

<http://tinyurl.com/363bw8f>

# The Future

- Be Vulnerable
- Give the unheard a voice
- Tell about NOW
- Publish Publish Publish

So As I look to the future I say:

Be vulnerable  
Give the unheard a voice  
Talk about now  
and  
Publish, publish, publish.

*Barrie Stephenson, Sept 2010. <http://digistories.co.uk/>*