FILMING ON THE FRONTLINES: USING THE LENS OF DECOLONIALITY IN THE PRODUCTION OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES WITHIN IMPACTED COMMUNITIES

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As Anthropologists, we all, I would hope, understand quite clearly the powerful understandings that are inherent within, and that can come from the personal story. We will all, or have all at some point written papers, articles, ethnographies, produced multi-media content, presented on, spoken about, or taught lessons based in many ways upon the personal stories of others (and our own as well).

And the use of those stories has never been unproblematic within the field, even if at times acknowledging this truth hasn’t always been so popular to do. Questions of power dynamics, asymmetrical value creation, the various crises of representation through anthropology’s history and calls for decolonization within the field are expository of the notion that personal stories hold for people not just symbolic value, but also produce tangible and transactional political, economic and social currency as well.

In short, many of us seem to understand quite well that the ability to tell a story that compels others towards some kind of action, be it to think a new thought, purchase a new toy, or make specific policy related decisions is a valuable tool. one that deserves to be recognized, honored, and paid for (although this may not always come in the form of money).
These understandings are not new in Anthropology. As referenced by the idea of decolonization and crises of representation I spoke of a bit ago, it has long been clear to many practitioners, from Antenot Firmin to WEB Dubois, to Michel Rolph-Troilullot to Faye Harrison and Kamala Visweswaran, (see Allen & Jobson 2016 for a broader discussion) to name of few, that there must be earnest and intentional steps taken to ensure that not only do we question the ethnocentric epistemologies at work in our own academic spaces, but also the work we are producing in conjunction with others. We must ensure that the stories we collect don’t recreate models that ignore the transactionality taking place, reproduce “top-down” hierarchies of knowledge making, further traumatize our interlocutors, or pretend as if our work exists in some magically static vacuum where the historical and political contexts in which it is being produced don’t affect or matter in that process. Doing such kind of work involves a number of steps, many more than can be discussed in this short discussion, but a few of which I will highlight here as important to this project.

In her article on the use of community based participatory action research as a decolonized methodology, Christine Stanton (2014) reminds us that one of the key requirements in producing ethical projects is that of respect. In highlighting some of the ways in which we can incorporate this simple notion into our work, she signals the following practices: understanding that our time constraints as professionals may be completely at odds with those we want to work with; that community members may not have unlimited energy to spend or desire to work on a project with us; that trusting relationships can take years to develop; and that those with whom we engage should have an active role throughout the research process, not just at the groundwork or data collection phase.
The use of the personal story has a long history in the world of political messaging. Politicians have long recognized that being able to connect their personal story to their aspirational goals is important to winning popular support. However, as a tactic used by “the masses” to organize and sway public opinion it has a much shorter lifespan. Many of us are familiar with the calls of second wave feminists in the 1960s who demanded that indeed the “personal is political.” This kind of revolutionary thinking about how our personal stories were indeed part of a political web, and that they carried real political weight was illuminating as it opened the door for new ways of conceptualizing political protest and system change.

This kind of storytelling, thus, of sharing one’s personal pain for political purposes cut its teeth as a child of rebellion, and for a long time was most commonly associated with grassroots organizing. The aim was generally to expose common struggles which had long been hidden from the public view in order to build political power within locally centered networks based upon specific issue fights. It is important to note that such uses of the personal story were generally produced in more organic settings, where those sharing their stories were doing so in order to earn wins around core political fights, like that of civil rights generally, abortion rights, or equal pay, and done so often alongside neighbors and friends.
And, then came Obama, smart technology, and social media. Largely credited to his background in community organizing and thus training in using personal stories to gain political victories, Barack Obama’s 2008 and 2012 election campaigns ushered in a new age in the use of digital storytelling as a Washington standard for building political credibility and capital. Obama’s campaign which was launched via youtube, was heavily invested in creating new forms of communication among voters that was centered upon them sharing their personal stories, engaging with the stories of others via his platform mybarackobama.com, and using those stories to drive the agenda rather than the other way around. And while all of this may seem completely familiar to all of us in today as our social media feeds feature politicians daily, our neighbors are being featured in videos demanding action and we receive DM’s from Bernie, this was a gamechanger in the political world (Gupta-Carlson 2016).

With the recognition that one could use the personal stories of voters directly to speak to other voters, rather than to some passively listening politician the incorporation of digital storytelling that comes straight from those within impacted communities has become a central benchmark within the world of high-stakes and multi-million dollar political campaigning (McGuire 2018).

This has led to a situation in which there is now an almost obsessive relationship within political organizations across the nation for the gathering of personal stories. Millions of dollars are spent on both the hard side (meaning candidate campaigns) and independent side (meaning C3s, C4s, PACs and Super PACs) to search the community for a diverse array of storytellers who are willing to go on camera, write opeds, travel to state capitols or DC,
and share their struggles with the ultimate goal of convincing others in their communities (be those real or imagined) that they should vote for certain candidates, and believe in certain issue fights (and thus vote for certain candidates).

The important distinction here to take away between the first iterations of storytelling as a grassroots organizing tool, and it’s use in political campaigning is that these stories are often now delinked from dedicated grassroots fights, their scripts may come from someone in DC that person has never met, and once the story has been captured the relationship between the campaign and they storyteller is for the most part over. These transactions are often extremely one-sided. The storyteller, who is often actively living within a dire situation (i.e. debilitating sickness and no healthcare, debilitating poverty and water shutoffs, debilitating environmental pollution and no ability to move) is compelled to share their darkest moments, and most intimate details of their life, and the campaign only has to offer the promise of a potential “win” if their story is good enough to compel others to vote the right way. Money is generally never given over for these stories, follow up is extremely rare if it happens at all, and if the campaign loses, oh well, we’re on to the next.

And, given that people aren’t fools, this has lead to a situation in which many people who are grassroots organizers have become leary of such attempts and have an inherent mistrust of political actors who seek to gain access to their stories. They may refer to such political organizations as “astro-turf” and far from being seen as a way to turn their story into political power, they see their participation with such work as selling out, or handing over their political power to Washington outsiders who they feel could care less about the real concerns and issues facing them on a daily basis.
I remember reading the job description that my friend sent to me before I took the position I now hold. As I read over what they were looking for, generally something like someone who knew how to collect stories, who knew how to assess a community, who understood how use research to identify goals and targets, etc.. I kept thinking “huh, what they really want is an anthropologist.” And, sure enough, they didn’t know it at the time, but they did. Two years ago when I began working with the organization, the program was still developing.

Without the fundamental training that we’ve come to establish in the field of applied anthropology as it relates to how you capture stories within a community, and do so in a way that actually builds good will, and do so in a way that causes as little harm as possible some of the organizers they had hired were having a hard time. Indeed, for example, because they had underestimated the kind of trauma that was taking place in a community like Flint, and just how abused many residents were feeling by political actors who often swooped into town for a photo op, to make empty promises, to get their name in the press and then move on, they made in fundamental mistake in hiring a white 21 year old northern MI and sending her in to Flint to collect stories. And, while I am always uncomfortable with the idea that certain aspects of our identity preclude us from being able to access certain spaces, or being able to cultivate trusted relationships within certain communities, this is where downplaying historical and political contexts for the work that we are doing can set us up for failure, and cause further harm within impacted communities. Unfortunately, given the racist contexts in which the Flint water crisis took place, sending a skinny blond outsider from an elite background, to collect stories within a three month time span revealed a gap in organizational awareness about what people’s stories actually mean to them in politicized and racialized contexts.
As I began earnestly to push back against the model that had been established for the program via Washington, and as the videos that I and other organizers who understood their role within their community became the most resonant for our audiences, slowly it became clear to my higher ups that my continued refrain “you know there’s a whole field of academia that talks about how to do this properly, right?” began to sink in. Our model, over which I now have been able to give a lot of input, as I was promoted and am now one of the heads of the department, now more closely resembles that of a quasi-ethnographic/applied approach. Our organizers are required to actually spend time developing relationships in the community before they ask for a video, they are asked to find causes that are actually important to them and build relationships within those networks, the pressure to be a video mill has been relaxed, and generally we only now do cold asks for videos at large rallies or protests where the tacit understanding is that people who have already decided a cause is important enough to come out in public for, will generally feel much more comfortable sharing a brief story with a stranger than in the more intimate organizer spaces where movement work is taking place. In addition, I also now give a talk for political organizations called “Don’t pimp people’s pain for profit” which is geared around reminding political operatives that paying attention to the harm they potentially cause to the greater goal of building a trusted political base and of becoming a trusted messenger is more important than airing a video that may go on to traumatize the person who shared the story in the first place, even if it may “win hearts and minds”.
Thus, my work to produce the mini-documentary on the Marathon Refinery, with Emma Lockridge, an activist who resides in SW Detroit, is an example of how I used the tools of applied anthropology and community based participatory research to create something we both felt was valuable and that would have a lasting impact beyond the life of the campaign. In addition, I also just became her friend and ally because I believe in the work she is doing to protect all of us from harmful corporate greed and the practices they employ that hurt, harm and destroy lives.
In a live presentation a clip of this video would have been shown. As it is, the finalized video will be available this summer. Please follow me on Facebook at Megan Douglass if you would like to be able to see a finalized version of this mini-doc.
Through my work, I've learned that while indeed producing the kind of content I do often walks right up to the line of transaction, that with some intentionality and transparency built in to the program we are able to build better relationships, and thus produce better content, that is beneficial both to those with whom we work and our political organization. Building lasting political power using a top down approach has long been shown to lead to frustration, mistrust between politicians and locals, and in many ways to voters feeling used and so unwilling to participate in the political sphere.

I hope that I've shown that while navigating the ethics of such work can at times be tricky, that it isn’t impossible, and that using an anthropological filter that considers decolonization and community inclusion provides a pathway towards how such work might be approached in as gentle and productive a way as possible.
References:


