

SMART STORYTELLING 4 COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This presentation will explore the recent work of the Smart Storytelling Consortium. As a collaboration between the SIRI, Social Innovation Research Institute and MINA, the Mobile Innovation Network and Association, Dr. Max Schleser and Dr. Hilary Davis initiated the Smart Storytelling Day, which brought together different non-government organisations (NGOs) and community groups to explore the potential of Smart Storytelling for community engagement. As one of its first initiatives Tales from Yarriambiack Shire, a web series commissioned by Yarriambiack Shire Tourism was produced in 2018-9. The application of Smartphone filmmaking will be explored in the context of 'Mobile Screens and the rise of new audiences, practices and technologies'. We understand audiences not as passive viewers, but co-creators of the smart stories (Schleser et al., 2018). Hilary Davis's contribution will illustrate how the non-hierarchical approach supports empowering of storytellers through mobile storytelling, as observed in our other community engaged smartphone filmmaking projects such as 60+ Online (Davis et al., 2018). Hilary Davis is a social scientist interested in how digital technologies generally, and digital storytelling in particular, may support people from diverse communities living with disadvantage. As a filmmaker Dr. Schleser produced mobile-mentaries (mobile documentaries) (Schleser, 2011) and community projects that demonstrate how storytelling and smartphone filmmaking can make a difference for the way communities represent themselves as exemplified in Spirit of Rangatahi or E Vaine Toa. Max Schleser will review the current trends and directions in smartphone filmmaking through the International Mobile Innovation Screening. During the last eight

years he curated international screenings which investigate mobile screen aesthetics (Schleser, 2014 and 2018). In order to understand smartphone filmmaking aesthetics, it is key to study early mobile phone films, which are characterised as intimate, immediate and signifying characteristics of the filmmakers experience (Schleser et al., 2009). These qualities can still be found in contemporary smartphone film-making. Simultaneously we embrace participatory methods that highlight the potential of smartphone filmmaking as an accessible form and format for community engagement.

INTRODUCTION

This presentation will explore the work of the Smart Storytelling Consortium. The Smart Storytelling Collective is a collaboration between Swinburne University of Technology's (SIRI) - Social Innovation Research Institute and MINA, the Mobile Innovation Network and Association. This initiative was initiated by Dr. Max Schleser and Dr Hilary Davis, who have backgrounds in documentary filmmaking, emerging media and digital storytelling and are interested in how it might be used to engage diverse communities.

At SIRI technology meets humanity to explore intelligent, citizen and consumer-engaged social solutions to complex problems. MINA creates interactions between communities, content and the creative industries. MINA is the longest running film festival internationally dedicated to mobile & smartphone filmmaking with a focus on moving-image arts, documentary, community engaged film productions, experimental films and emerging film production forms and formats, such as MoJo, drone videos, AR and Mobile Cinematic VR. The 8th edition of the *International Mobile Innovation Screening* featured 14 short films from USA, Russia, Australia, Germany, France, Brazil, UK and Canada. Currently the call for short films for the 9th edition is online (www.filmfreeway.com/mina). The #MINA2019 screening will take place as part of the International Mobile Storytelling Congress (IMSC) at the University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China in November 2019. The MINA screening-reel was made available as an educational resource via ATOM Victoria education shop: <http://bit.ly/MINASTreaming> . ATOM is the Australian Teachers of Media organization.

Dr. Max Schleser, co-founder of MINA, Screening Director and Associate in the Social Innovation Research Centre and Dr. Hilary Davis, Senior Research Fellow in the Social Innovation Research Centre initiated the Smart Storytelling Day. Hilary Davis is a social scientist interested in how digital storytelling may support people from diverse communities living with disadvantage. As a filmmaker Dr. Schleser produced mobile-mentaries (mobile documentaries) (Schleser 2011) and community projects that demonstrate how storytelling and smartphone filmmaking can make a difference for the way communities

represent themselves as exemplified in Spirit of Rangatahi or E Vaine Toa. In 2017 Schleser and Davis worked on the 60+ Online project transforming these methods for seniors, who are amongst the most digitally excluded in Australia. The 60+ Online project fostered digital inclusion amongst 22 Australian seniors (64-86 years), with varied digital skills, and socio-economic/cultural backgrounds. Within workshops, seniors were encouraged to draw upon personal and community interests to inform storyboarding and digital story development. Digital stories were generated using iPads and smartphones, and edited using Adobe Premiere Clip. Social media sites Facebook and Instagram, facilitated shared digital skills development, supported by workshop participants and researchers. Regardless of skills at outset, every senior produced their own digital story. These were showcased at festivals, City Council events, and hosted on YouTube. Jasmine Knox is a research assistant at the Social Innovation Research Institute at Swinburne University, she has been involved in various VICE Media documentaries as a documentary presenter.

The primary aims of the Smart Storytelling Consortium was to bring together different Non-Government Organisations and community groups to explore the potential of Smart Storytelling for community engagement through creativity and for self-expression, particularly by people from communities which are typically not seen or heard. Presentations included organisations such as Red Cross, Oxfam and Yarriambiack Shire Council. On 7 & 8 November 2018, the 7th *Mobile Innovation & Mobile Creativity Symposium* took place at Swinburne University of Technology and ran in conjunction with the 8th *International Mobile Innovation Screening*.

The Tales from Yarriambiack Shire web-series, is a collection of smart docs (smart documentaries) showcasing four rural and remote communities from Victoria, Australia. These tales were commissioned by Yarriambiack Shire Council & Tourism with the intention to give small communities a platform and raise awareness. The Shire of Yarriambiack is a local government area of Victoria, Australia, located in the north-western part of the state. It covers an area of 7,158 square kilometres and, at the 2016 Census, had a population of 6,674. Swinburne University of Technology is located in the City of Boroondara, which is located in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. It has an area of 60 km² and a population of 167,231. One can note the difference in numbers and geographic location, which is similar to the different lifestyles. The smart docs showcase spaces, places and people in rural Victorian townships, which has its own distinctive history and culture. In a bid to recognize local attractions and encourage visitors to this area, we filmed in the townships Rupanyup, Murtoa, Minyip and Beulah, which are more than four hours' drive northwest from the city of Melbourne.

YARRIAMBIACK SHIRE TALES

YouTube Channel:

<http://bit.ly/YarriambiackTales>

Playlist:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-MF8DMBFbpezwH7b6WjSW5NGnvPiCZgg>

Yarriambiack Shire is known for being the heartland of grain production in the Wimmera and Mallee region with agriculture being the region's main industry. Murtoa is a small town, originally called Marma Gully, Murtoa was founded on country belonging to the Jardwe Aboriginal people for thousands of years, with historical reminders such as ancient marked trees in the Barrabool Forest. Rupanyup, located on Dunmunkle Creek is an Aboriginal word meaning "branch hanging over water". The Wimmera Highway divides the small township, with tourists stopping to view the Rupanyup Railway Station which dates back from 1890 or the Heritage listed Primary School dating back from 1878. Minyip, an Aboriginal word for "Ashes" attracted ex-miners and many South Australian farmers to the district in the 1870s. Since then, the town has become known as a productive wheat growing district.

THE WOOD'S FARMING AND HERITAGE MUSEUM

The Woods' Farming and Heritage Museum, located in Rupanyup, Victoria is a memorabilia collectors dream. It was founded by local brothers, Michael and John Woods who started collecting farming memorabilia in the early 1980's. To house their burgeoning collection, the brothers purchased a large shed which they later opened as a museum and entrusted to the public in 2007. A second shed was purchased and opened in 2010 to showcase their extensive memorabilia collection. The display includes discrete settings or rooms such as the hospital room, displaying medical equipment saved from Murtoa Hospital, or the hardware shop, containing entire collections of spanners and various tools donated to the museum or purchased from swap meets (gatherings where people exchange and trade items). The museum's 'collectible room' is a room bursting with colour, containing many iconic pieces of Australiana memorabilia such as the classic Arnotts and Anzac biscuit tins and for the younger generation a dizzying display of M&M chocolate merchandise. Naturally, the Woods Museum showcases a number of tractors, stationary engines and farming machinery, with Ford and Fordson tractors dating from 1918 spanning to the 1980s. The Woods Museum is managed by the community group 'Friends of the Woods' Museum'.

THE STICK SHED

The Murtoa Stick Shed is introduced by David Grigg the Secretary of Management of the Stick Shed and Bob Petschel who worked in the Stick Shed in the 1960's. The Stick Shed contains 516 Mountain Ash poles from the Dandenong Ranges, which run from ceiling to floor. The highest one in the centre is 19 metres tall. The Stick Shed was a massive grain repository from the 1940s. Grain was emptied from nearby grain silos by rail trucks, and once at the Stick Shed site were loaded onto a hopper via a large bucket. The grain was poured into the shed and reached the top of the walls. Now it is out of commission, but at one time the Stick Shed could hold 92,000 tons of grain – give or take a foot. Up to 70 men were employed in the Stick Shed at the height of its production. Now the Stick Shed is empty but the concrete floors, beautiful Ash poles, diagonal ropes from ceiling to floor, and ambient lighting highlighting particles of dust, are all evocative of past times.

THE ROYAL FLYING DOCTORS

Minyip 'home of the Flying Doctors', or affectionately known by fans as Coopers Crossing base, is a small rural town in the Wimmera region of Victoria, Australia. Minyip was famous for being the backdrop to the highly popular television series *The Flying Doctors*, which was not only a success in Australia but also received international recognition. Because of this success, Minyip has become a tourist destination for fans of *The Flying Doctors* from all over the world and has been used as a location for other Australian films, such as *The Dressmaker* and earlier this year *The Dry* was filmed in this classic Australian township.

HORSING AROUND BEULAH

According to the locals, early settlers first came into Beulah on horses. With the help of horse power these people were able to open up the land and construct a township. The first pony express mail from Horsham to Beulah was delivered by horses, children were sent off to school on ponies, and mothers and fathers would head into town on horses to buy their groceries. Times have changed since then, but Beulah still keeps this connection between horses and Beulah alive with local resident Len Coffey aka 'Squatter' and his horse ranch where people can learn how to ride a horse and enjoy the nearby riding trails around the township. Riding horses is an enjoyable experience for visitors to the ranch, in school holidays and at other times kids and adults alike, can bring a swag and sleep under the stars around a camp fire, and enjoy an rural Australian experience.

SOCIAL INNOVATION

We are drawn to digital storytelling (social innovation) and documentary filmmaking (screen-production) generally, because it allows diversity in stories and experiences to flourish, and foregrounds experiences that may otherwise have remain hidden. Digital storytelling is multi-purposeful – it has been used for educational purposes; such as developing skills in digital literacy and creativity (McCosker, 2018). It has been used for supporting social work practices (Lenette, Cox and Brough, 2015) and for exchanges of intergenerational knowledge between Indigenous communities (Edmonds, 2014) amongst others. With support, people from a variety of backgrounds, including people from diverse or marginalized communities may be empowered to create and share stories of their experiences, and the spaces and places in which they are shaped (Davis et al., 2019). The digital storytelling process encourages self-expression – storytellers are encouraged to select the artefacts which best represent their story. In the *The Tales from Yarriambiack Shire* this includes pictures from private collections and peoples' stories.

The rise of mobile digital technologies such as smart phones and tablets, which include high resolution photography and video tools, has enabled a more flexible, innovative and potentially non-hierarchical approach. This is because mobile digital storytellers or as Schleser argues mobile storymakers may now create and select their content, create their digital stories, and even edit their digital stories on mobile devices (Schleser, 2018). Mobile digital storytellers may use mobile technology and freely available editing tools such as Adobe Clip and/or Adobe Spark Video to craft their stories. Furthermore, many digital storytellers are making use of social media platforms to share their experiences. Indeed, we see a proliferation of such stories, on social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, as well as on local community displays (see for example Davis et al., 2015). Despite technology for storytelling being more accessible that before, the role of the researcher, as mobile digital story advocates and mobile film-makers is a key in the initiation and development of the process.

The Smart Storytelling Consortium approached Shire of Yarriambiack Council with the idea of co-creating digital stories showcasing local rural innovation. From initial meetings, a relationship was forged with the Council, who was keen to collaborate on projects that showcased local communities and utilized digital participation techniques. The stories in the four smart docs (smart documentaries as defined later in the presentation) were co-created by key members of these communities, including long term residents, historical society members, committee members from Probus Club, local business people and others. These people consider themselves guardians of local history, and advocates for

these townships and their residents, which despite declining populations, still have much to offer to visitors. Due to the long drive to rural areas Hilary Davis trained local people how to use video-conferencing software such as Skype so we could have meetings over the distance, as well as conducting workshops onsite or in nearby locations including hotel foyers, cafes and community centres. In addition, we visited the location of the stories, and stayed overnight, for example, at the site of the horse ranch for “Horsing around Beulah”. We took advice from the community about what and where things should be filmed for particular purposes and local insights. The smart docs feature local musicians, interviewees and voice-over narrators. While these digital stories were completed on a very tight budget, which included generous donations of unpaid time from the researchers, and time and effort from the township members, we as researchers, feel enriched by the friendships we have made through the co-creation of the *Yarriambiack Shire Tales*.

SMART STORYTELLING

As a researcher working with emerging media Dr. Schleser explored the application of a webisode format for social innovation. Within this context we would like to define the short documentaries as *smart docs - smart documentaries*. Smart is not only a technical relation to the production process utilising smartphones for filming and partly editing towards rough cut stage, but also as a conceptual and creative method. Smart Docs are produced with the communities for communities. Smart Docs use the most accessible documentary production tools to provide some inspiration. Smart Docs leverage social media to create connections within the community and beyond. Here the application of YouTube was key to define a channel for *Yarriambiack Shire Tales*. The production process also included drones for the *Flying Doctors* episode. In the 80s a helicopter or plane would have been needed for an Arial photography (as in the original TV production by Crawford Productions from 1986-1993). By using the DJI Maveic drone not only the reference to the ‘Flying Doctors’ could be established, but also the landscape in rural Australia captured. The intro and outro takes are thus quite significant to establish a sense of place. As mentioned before the pre-production process was based on discussions that used the Storycanvas method which is licenced under Creative Commons to map out the narrative. The Storycanvas method is based on the Business Model Canvas. “It provides a lens for telling stories that resonate with audiences and build into successful campaigns.” Following the production of the first two smart docs on location a web-series episodic format was conceptualised and hosted on YouTube. The YouTube playlist allows a sequential viewing of the individual stories. The four episodes together have a running time of 30:58. All four stories are created in a similar format to introduce people and places. By means of utilising smartphones for filmmaking, communities could be engaged in the production. Stories were

co-created with communities and filmed in a nonintrusive and personal style. Natural light was used, small tripods for the smartphones using a beastgrip rig. The affordances of smartphones small scale worked for the interviews in less intrusive fashion. We filmed on an iPhone 7 and Dr Max Schleser sourced an iPhone Max during production. Working with Filmic Pro we could adjust to the difficult but beautiful lighting conditions and using Rode's i-XLR we could use XLR microphones from Swinburne University of Technology for sound purposes.

Following consultation with the funders from Yarriambiack Shire Council as well as the *Yarriambiack Shire* community we applied a TV style interview approach to provide recognition for audiences combined with the participatory documentary approach (Nichols, 2010). Nichols characterises this approach through “engagement, strong investment in the encounter with others or in presenting a historical perspective” (Nichols, 2017). Both accounts define the approach in the *Yarriambiack Shire Tales*. Within the historical perspective it is key to note that the community engaged projects are driven by the community. The Wood's Farm and Heritage Museum is an initiative by two brothers, the Stick Shed by a committee and Minyip's residents keep their pride in their towns appearing in an 80s TV series. This connotation to a particular time in history, which became a key story element and a signifier for the rural communities, was further developed through the time-lapses and some personal archive material that was collected by the interview participants. The Cinematic VR / 360° video component was created for the Stick Shed as it would represent the scale and size in a more prominent manner. Smart also meant for the production process to use the four-hour drive one way for pre-production meetings discussing the production. Adobe Rush supported editing audio-visual clips when driving back to Melbourne. During the four hour drive Schleser could review the rushes and select the best takes. Further, once he arrived in his studio he could synch these through the Creative Cloud and import to Premiere Pro for further editing towards the fine cut.

In an academic context these smart docs can be analysed through Open Space Documentary framework. Writing in *Open Space New Media Documentary: A Toolkit for Theory and Practice* Zimmermann and De Michiel (2018) define collaborative projects through small places, designing encounters, polyphonic collaborations and inviting spaces. The above described smart docs exemplify how:

“Open Space documentary shift away from a narrow focus on the highly crafted finished product toward responsive and iterative processes deployed across platforms and places”.

Zimmerman defines complexities as perspectives, experiences, viewpoints in a dialogue with each other that can be tackled through complexity (Zimmer, 2018). Next to complexity

she identifies the working principles of *Open Space Documentary* as Circularity, Collaboration, Community, Composting, Connection, Context, Continuum, Conversation, Cost. Our smart docs speak to this analysis. Above we outlined the rural perspective(s) and view-point(s), circularity has not been completed to the full extent yet, however we intend present a public screening in Yarriambiack Shire to these, and other communities. As mentioned before in relation to cost, we should add that these productions were produced at a budget level that is only accessible using smartphone filmmaking. These four docs exemplify how mobile documentaries used an iterative production process and engaged the community in pre- and post production. By means of using YouTube the feedback process through comments and sharing on social media can continue.

Smart Docs embody people, places, and technology in order to “join together to visualize different ways of acting in the world with others, and to imaging new sustainable futures”. Zimmermann and De Michiel (2018) define collaborative projects through small places, designing encounters, polyphonic collaborations and inviting spaces. These concepts are at the core of the *Smart Docs*.

The Smart Storytelling Consortium focuses on smartphone filmmaking for social innovation. Within the context of social change one can note work by organisations such as Digital Storytellers, Insight Share, Video 4 Change, Film for Change Aotearoa or Engage Media At the #MINA2018 screening featured *KUUIJUAQ* a video essay about the perspective of an indigenous teenager on his hometown filmed on a Go Pro Camera. *KUUIJUAQ* as much as the smart docs described in this paper make a difference for the way communities represent themselves. The qualities of smartphone filmmaking, which cannot be replicated by DSLR, Blackmagic or Red cameras (and any other standard size digital video camera), defined as intimate, immediate and referencing the significance of location are key in the work with rural and also marginalised communities.

“Open space configures networks not solely as digital interfaces, but as the nexus of people, places, and technologies. Open space documentary designs environment and interactions for ongoing dialogues that may or may not be resolved... and reclaims technologies for people.”

Yarriambiack Shire Tales is very much an ongoing dialogue. We hope to continue the project through workshops to engage more people into the production processes so that they can further work with the established webisode format. Key for Smart Storytelling 4 Communities is the reflexive approach in documentary production. The challenge in a fast-moving tech culture is to make certain that the workshop approach as recently defined in workshop-generated content (Schleser, 2018) is something that is not missed out in any production in the context of *Smart Storytelling 4 Communities*.

CONCLUSION

As a social documentary video using participatory, grassroots and community video approaches we feel that the smart stories captured Yarriambiack Shire in an authentic way. The stories were driven in content by the participants. The web series framework was flexible but coherent to develop a local flavour and particular signature. The paper as much as the videos defined a sense of place. Here the time-lapse and drone cinematography provided visual signifiers. In the pre-production and also editing/montage process the feedback from communities set the foundation for the stories. As a result we can present an authentic engagement using an iterative method and hope to provide some inspiration for the community. The Smart Storytelling Consortium will now be further integrated into the MINA website (www.mina.pro) and we hope to develop future collaboration with anyone who needs support in sharing their stories. *Smart Storytelling 4 Communities* embraces the affordances of screen production and emerging media through creativity, which has future potential to embrace communities.

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