Midwestern Voices, Midwestern Vision: Transmedia Storytelling as Civic Discourse

Project Overview

The Midwest is often characterized by a hopeless resignation to global forces such as immigration and industrialized agribusiness – or else by the idyll of wholesome farmsteads that contradicts this malaise. Midwesterners live in-between, flow in and out, and our stories play a critical role in creating our sense of place and time and setting the tone for policy-making. From indigenous cosmologies to world fairs, the Midwest has long been global. Midwestern Voices, Midwestern Vision proposes to use transmedia storytelling—stories told by community members and scholars across different media and sites—in order to reveal emerging stories, discover alternative views, and help co-create public policy in such areas as the environment, social equity, and economic development.

Urban planners traditionally rely on social science methods of surveys and focus groups to obtain public opinion. Our research asks: *what impact can transmedia storytelling have on community discourse, public scholarship, and regional policy-making?* Our hypothesis: transmedia storytelling offers an alternative form of civic engagement that can empower Midwesterners to speak in rich, compelling ways to provide crucial cultural and historical perspectives and contribute to policy-making. Inspired by Imagining America, we seek to connect universities and community organizations and forge an infrastructure of democratic media for sharing stories and practices tied to human-centered problem-solving. Combining oral storytelling and local historical archives with literary cartography and data storytelling, how might transmedia storytelling drive social innovation and public policy?

Institutional Partners, Projects, and Platforms

Collaborators at the University of Iowa, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of Minnesota have identified community engagement projects, humanities researchers, and media platforms to support our initial research. At Iowa, the School of Urban and Regional Planning, the Library's Department of Digital Research and Publishing, and the Iowa Digital Engagement and Learning Initiative (IDEAL) will help pilot community partnerships through the Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Library's DesignLab is collaborating with the Morgridge Center for Public Service, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Mobile Learning Lab, Department of English, Dictionary of American Regional English, and The Bubbler: Making Justice with Court-Involved Teens outreach initiative. At the University of Minnesota, the Humphrey School of Public Affairs will collaborate through the Resilient Communities Project.

Midwestern Voices, Midwestern Vision will deploy a suite of existing media platforms that enable communities and scholars to generate stories and research and connect with other emerging histories through community centers, libraries, schools, and universities. At Wisconsin, these platforms include DesignLab's smart media forms, the GPS-based Augmented Reality and Interactive Storytelling (ARIS) platform, and the Dictionary of American Regional English's archive of recorded stories. At Iowa, IDEAL's Archives Alive and Iowa Narratives Project as well as Digital Research and Publishing's DIY History, support pedagogical projects for engaging with community narratives and archival material, while the Printshop in a Van project uses printmaking as community engagement. Together, these platforms offer

powerful tools and models for integrating stories with historical and cultural interpretations. Existing courses and assignments such as [Designing Wisconsin Experiences](#), [Archives Alive](#) and [Iowa Narratives Project](#) already empower hundreds of students each term as community and archival researchers.

Forms and Methodologies

Transmedia storytelling takes many emergent forms. The video essay [America's Dairyland](#) addresses farming and immigration issues. The archive project [Hello, I Love You, and Goodbye](#) analyzes historical and rhetorical forces at work in a World War II love letter. The interactive game [Dow Day](#) uses place-based learning to explore a pivotal 1967 Vietnam War protest. Emerging stories extend and sometimes challenge established history, while archival research and interpretations can recast today's challenges in enlightening ways and drive policy-making. Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring* blossomed into Earth Day eight years later; with climate change, tribal elders no longer trust talking with the clouds to forecast the weather.

Like planning, storytelling is both temporal and spatial and marked by gaps and surprises. Printshop in a Van graphics, ARIS games, IDEAL podcasts, and DesignLab smart media genres offer models and tools for layering different stories and opening new perspectives within and beyond them. Events, histories, and public services can all be mapped, enabling generations to share information, plan events, and connect across time and space.

The link between storytelling and civic discourse lies in what media theorist Craig Sapir calls intimate bureaucracies, forms of participatory decentralization modeled on Fluxus uses of postal networks to create community engagement. We envision recursive narrative-building, community action, and public planning fed by the sharing of stories, practices, and resources. Networks of tactile and digital storytellers can empower communities to create works of self-expression, social engagement, and cultural research addressing pressing environmental, economic, and equity issues.

Work Plan

In year one, we plan to enhance and extend storytelling projects in existing service courses and host a summer institute of presentations and workshops. At Iowa, IDEAL co-directors Matt Gilchrist and Tom Keegan have developed Rhetoric courses where students created digital narratives to spur civic dialogue around a redevelopment project and connectivity plan in Muscatine, Iowa prepared by Urban and Regional Planning students. Using their success as a model, IDEAL and the Department of Digital Research and Publishing will develop new curricula and services to expand opportunities for students to research and produce living narratives combining writing, image, and podcast. At UW-Madison, the English course "Designing Wisconsin Experiences" trains undergraduates in archival ARIS and video projects. Joan Hall of the Dictionary of American Regional English is developing an API for its collection of textual, audio, and cartographic materials. DesignLab is developing support for a community-based course in Library and Information Studies with Nancy Buenger, who coordinates the Madison Public Library/Bubbler initiative for local teens entangled in the justice system. English is working with the VA Hospital on a storytelling project with Vietnam veterans, while Patty Loew in Life Science Communications leads a digital storytelling project with Lake Superior Ojibwe teens of the Bad River Band to address public health disparities. Global Midwest funding will allow partners and projects to interconnect their stories.

Grant money will be allocated for the development of tools and support to help community members and public scholars collect stories, create digital narratives, share and access digital content, and conduct relevant research that can enable community action and inform public policy. Midwestern Voices, Midwestern Vision seeks to connect stories of regional communities, scholars, and planners in

order to bring new perspectives, discover new solutions, and drive sustainable change. As importantly, our infrastructure will enable other communities and scholars to add their voices and vision to these efforts. Over time, the interweaving of vernacular and scholarly discourses through transmedia storytelling will enable our communities to better envision and plan their futures.

Schedule and Outcomes

Fall '14   Integration and assessment of transmedia projects in community-engagement courses at Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota

Spring '15   Continued piloting of transmedia projects in community-engagement courses at Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota

Summer '15   Summer institute at Iowa featuring presentations, discussion, and studio workshops to enhance design and production skills of community leaders, scholars, and planners

2015-2016   Iterative learning and parallel expansion of transmedia storytelling to other community-based projects

Throughout   Development of website, network, and tools

Outcomes

- Network of storytellers based in communities, universities, and elsewhere
- Multimedia archive and database of primary and secondary materials
- Integrated suite of forms, tools, curricula, and evaluative frames
- Summer institute to enhance storytelling skills community leaders and scholars
- Publication(s) on transmedia storytelling, case studies, impacts, etc.
- Emergence of new media practices and alternative publication and presentation forms for public scholars, citizen librarians, and community organizers

Funding will help develop and enhance storytelling skills, showcase work, and build infrastructure. A web site will provide updates on the progress of projects and key insights learned in using transmedia storytelling to connect communities, universities, and policy makers. The site will also house toolkits that enable university professionals and community members to create their stories. To further strengthen our network and build public arts and humanities, we will host a 2015 summer institute where community representatives, students, and scholars can attend workshops in transmedia storytelling and civic discourse, discuss project implementation and progress, and plan for growth and sustainability.

To these ends, each university seeks a graduate assistant to provide conceptual, aesthetic, and technical assistance for developing community media forms and tools, from personal narratives and data storytelling kits to software and hardware choices to the preparation and management of toolkits, website, assessment frames, and other programming. Graduate assistants will also help coordinate campus-wide and community events that provide support for transmedia storytelling initiatives.

Our second year plans are to expand and strengthen the Midwestern Voices, Midwestern Vision model by pursuing transmedia storytelling as civic discourse into public policy, testing our hypothesis with more urban and regional planners while building our network with other scholars and communities. A second summer institute at Wisconsin would include bringing together transmedia storytellers from many institutions, communities, and generations.

Midwestern Voices, Midwestern Vision: Transmedia Storytelling as Civic Discourse

PI, Organizer: Charles Connerly, University of Iowa

Midwestern Voices, Midwestern Vision Organizer Names and Email Addresses

University of Iowa:

Chuck Connerly (Urban and Regional Planning, Department of History, Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities), charles-connerly@uiowa.edu

Matt Gilchrist (Rhetoric, Iowa Digital Engagement and Learning, University of Iowa), matthew-gilchrist@uiowa.edu

Anita Jung (Art and Art History), anita-jung@uiowa.edu

Thomas Keegan (Digital Research and Publishing, Iowa Digital Engagement and Learning), Thomas-keegan@uiowa.edu

University of Wisconsin-Madison:

Jon McKenzie (English, DesignLab), jvmckenzie@wisc.edu

Nancy Buenger (Library and Information Studies), nbuenger@wisc.edu

Kathy Cramer (Morgridge Center for Public Service), kathy.cramer@wisc.edu

David Gagnon (Mobile Learning Incubator), djgagnon@wisc.edu

Joan Hall (Dictionary of American Regional English) jdhall@wisc.edu

Caroline Levine (English), clevine@wisc.edu

Patty Loew (Life Sciences Communication), paloew@wisc.edu

Alfonso Morales (Urban and Regional Planning), morales1@wisc.edu

University of Minnesota:

Carissa Schively-Slotterback (Humphrey School of Public Affairs, Resilient Communities Project, University of Minnesota), cschively@umn.edu

Organizer:

Chuck Connerly, University of Iowa

Organizer's Contact Information: charles-connerly@uiowa.edu

Organizer's Departmental and University Affiliations: School of Urban and Regional Planning, Department of History, Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242