Narrating oneself through digital story telling - Breaches in the ethics of coproduction

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Abstract

This paper is based on two Digital Stories produced with two young South African men during a participatory research project led in Cape Town in 2014-2015. Tyrone and Ashwin are members of an NGO that uses technology and innovation to empower disenfranchised communities on the Cape Flats. Their sensitive autoportraits reveal bumpy trajectories where hope does never eliminate doubt, where pain cohabits with pride. You can watch the stories here: http://www.youcitizen.org/videos/vimeo-south-africa.
Tyrone and Ashwin's stories are the result of a workshop aimed to creating a space for self-narration and mutual listening. The participants collected personal archives. Together, we took pictures of their daily environment, recorded soundscapes. We wrote their stories and recorded their voice. After weeks of work and discussion, we eventually edited these bits and pieces into 4 to 8 minutes audio slideshows that were later shared with their peers.

After exposing the main elements of this method, I will show that each story is the result of a multifaceted dialogue that is saturated with ethical pitfalls. I argue that coproducing visual outputs is not just a question of sharing the tools of research. It interrogates how we see the world and how we draw narrative from it. It also questions how we listen to each other and how we navigate structural inequality.

Editing a digital story implies making clear technical choices: how to frame a picture, how to edit a transition between two pictures, how to illustrate an abstract feeling, etc. In this process, different, and sometimes diverging, narrative tactics are made explicit. In that sense, visual co-writing highlights the different gazes that come into play in an ethnographic project. It also questions their legitimacy in different contexts.

While working on the ground with Tyrone and Ashwin, I also had to respond to the academic objectives of the international research project that funded the workshop and to the more immediate expectations of those who took part in it. Here again, this tension becomes visible in the Digital Stories themselves. Visual approaches make it more difficult to hide the breaches that so often derail the utopian principles of " participatory research " as defined in textbooks.

Last but not least, screening the stories to the participants and their peers suddenly gave another meaning to what we had produced. The stories triggered emotional reactions that revealed their political dimension. I argue that associating audiovisual tools to a more classical ethnographic approach creates a unique opportunity to not only unravel but also possibly

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challenge the fragility of the construction of self, especially in a context of exacerbated racial, economic and social domination such as Cape Town former townships.

Video : https://vimeo.com/548501904/1c5c063f38