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## **Digital storytelling and community branding**

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**Paper for the Second International DREAM Conference, September 18-20, 2008, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark**

**Title of paper:**

**Digital storytelling and community branding**

**Experiences from workshops about user-generated audiovisual content**

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**Indication of themes** which the paper addresses:

- creative processes and aesthetics
- personal voice and commercial coercion
- institutional boundaries and creation for learning

**Short abstract:**

Based on experiences from a research and development project on user-generated audiovisual content and broadband, our paper will present and discuss a number of videos created by two very different groups of users – young people aged approx. 15 years and a group of people of 60 – 75 years old. The aim of the user involvement project was to investigate the newest trends of user-generated content on sites such as YouTube and BBC Video Nation and test possibilities of local or regional user involvement in creating a platform for local, audiovisual user-generated content.

## **Introduction**

Based on experiences from a research and development project (1) about broadband and user-generated audiovisual content, our paper will present and discuss a number of videos created by two entirely different groups of users – young people around 15 years old and a group of people of 60 – 75 years old. The aim of the user involvement project was to investigate the newest trends of user-generated content on sites such as YouTube and BBC Video Nation and to test possibilities of local or regional user involvement in creating a platform for local, audiovisual user-generated content. The regional TV/MIDT-VEST television station and their independent teaching and development unit, Nova Media, was in charge of local workshops where the different groups of users were trained in elementary AV production for the Internet.

For Nova Media there were two challenges in the project: First of all, they had to reconsider their own “professional” ideals of media literacy in the light of the development of more “amateurish” user skills on the popular Internet sites. The aim of the workshops was formulated in accordance with BBC practices of digital storytelling where focus is on the personal life story and not on the technical or professional competences. Secondly, Nova Media was involved in organizational learning and development concerning user-generated content.

The paper will give a short background for viewer/user involvement in audio visual media (Danish context) and present the videos made by the two different groups of “prod-users”. We will discuss motives for user involvement and production of meaning on the basis of Paul Ricouer’s hermeneutics and relate these motives to questions of identity formation and branding.

## **User involvement in television – before and now**

It is not an entirely new phenomenon that viewer/users involve themselves in television and video production. In a Danish context, “TV-Båndværkstedet” (The TV tape-workshop) in the 70ties and 80ties provided the viewers with the possibility of creating manuscripts for television programmes based on the viewers’ own everyday life. As a part of Danish Radio’s (DR) public service institution, TV-Båndværkstedet was a strong gatekeeper and the viewer/user productions followed the norms and traditions of a professional television aesthetics framework. The viewer/user involvement in TV-Båndværkstedet was conceptualized as a sort of media democracy – giving voice and visuals to the everyday life of ordinary people. However, it was not user-generated content as we know it today from video-logs or sites such as YouTube where the viewers/users may become “prod-users” as they themselves produce the whole production (2) which does not always apply smoothly to professional television aesthetics.

During the 80ties, a lot of local television stations were created in Denmark and there was a strong interest in local everyday life and in involving ordinary people in television production. Video workshops were made and people were trained in most aspects of television/video production. The motives for engagement were of very different political or religious kinds in line with thoughts about media democracy. But contrary to TV-Båndværkstedet, there was also an ambition of media literacy – teaching ordinary people to work with the professional standards of television. There was no intention of breaking the television genres or forms of representation. The introduction of the video recorders offered new possibilities for distributing audiovisual messages on an independent basis using videotapes – free of the gate-keepers on national, regional or local television stations.

A very specific aim of the local television stations in the 80ties was to get as close to the life of the community as possible. This aim was also adopted by the public service broadcaster DR and their “Provinsenheden” (Unit of the Province). In 1988, DR’s monopoly was broken and the new, partly commercial TV2 established eight regional television stations. Their approximately one hour regional news programmes are sent at the TV2 mother channel subsequent to the national news. User involvement has not been prominent on TV2 regional stations.

During the 1990ties, both media politics and peoples’ political engagement changed. The local television channels were commercialized and professionalized – or shut down as was the case for the video workshops throughout the country. Peoples’ interest and motivations for participation in the media changed as well – from politics to performance. From the mid/late 90ties, reality television became the platform for ordinary peoples’ participation in performance and competitive reality programmes such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor*. In reality, television people participate and they get their 15 minutes of fame as well as a lot of other personal benefits such as getting to know themselves and their personal limits and potentials. They do not produce and they have no influence on the editing voice over or dramaturgical construction.

Meanwhile, DR’s Provinsenheden continued their experiments with other reality formats and involvement of ordinary people. *Det er ren kagemand* and *Hjemmevideo* (home video programmes) were funny programmes with real life “slap stick” accidents and funny situations. The video clips were genuinely user-created and the programmes were broadcasted in early week end prime time which all in all represented quite a challenge to the “good taste” and the cultural establishment.

### **The tabloid and the authentic**

Today, user-generated videos may be everything on web sites such as YouTube – but short formats such as home video, accidents, Jack Ass, sketch/humour, fake commercials are important (Kofoed, Rasmussen & Christensen 2008). The dramaturgical models of professional television are less relevant for user-generated content on the Internet where terrifying or funny fragments are valued for their chocking or performative qualities which are easy to share with your friends. Whereas the most used news on the Internet have been dominated by the tabloid contents of sex, violence, accidents, crime, gossip, human interest and sensation, we suggest that Jack Ass, accidents and home videos are the tabloids of the user-generated content – and we find it quite interesting that the home video format was popular also on broadcast television in the 90ties.

While succeeding with the home videos, DR Provinsenheden also did some experiments with video-diaries in the 90ties. Video diaries are filmed by the viewers/users themselves and they take on a very personal and often “raw” (or amateurish) style which is traditionally experienced as real and even authentic. BBC has been a great inspiration for involving viewer/users and their everyday lives in these formats. *The man who loved Gary Lineker* is the first generic video diary from BBC. It is a more than one hour long videotaped diary where an Albanian doctor tells about his life in a very poor village contrasted to his fascination of English football and his hero, Gary Lineker. The diary format inspired the programme series *Vi stiller om* by DR’s Provinsenheden where a group of very different people were given video cameras and asked to film an incident from their daily lives and reflect on a given question once a week. Besides from this programme series, only a very few video diaries have found their way to the Danish television screens.

“Make it raw” is a credo for content production on the Internet and it makes really good sense in relation to the quest for authenticity which Pine & Gilmore (2007) claim to be the drive of peoples’ sensibility and experience orientation today. The “raw” is better than the “cooked” professional television dramaturgy because it seems more real and more appropriate for sharing with friends. Perhaps most of all: the raw is best because it allows people to do “the cooking” themselves and thereby get a sensation of the real authentic (which is of course “the self made”); a point that Pine & Gilmore make in relation to products and “super-customization” where the consumer becomes a “prosumer” (Pine 2007: 13) designing her own Nike shoes.

### **Telling the personal story**

On the BBC Video Nation web site, you find a large amount of viewer/user stories. They are much shorter than the video diaries and the format is more like “digital storytelling” (Lambert 2006). BBC Video Nation was started in 1993 by Chris Mohr and Mandy Rose who distributed a series of cameras to viewers across the UK. Over a decade, more than 10,000 tapes were returned to the BBC, with edited programs attracting 1 to 9 million viewers. Today, Video Nation operates in 33 regional centers throughout UK. One of the most prominent purposes of Video Nation is to involve users in telling stories reflecting the complexities and plurality of their own everyday lives.

A local production team provides users with the training and advice they need to produce a short video for the web and they often do the editing as well, so users do not have to be technically minded to take part. The essential benefit is “an opportunity to share your views and experiences with others, to talk directly to both local and national audiences and to add your videos to the growing online archive of everyday life.” Very few videos make it to Television broadcast and the editors alone decide which do. Viewers cannot participate in voting and rating but they are welcome to comment on videos. BBC asks for “your thoughts about this video”, presupposing that the viewer/user makes some sort of personal sense of the videos.

Half a dozen new videos are added to the national Video Nation web every week but that is just a small selection of the videos uploaded onto the fifteen local websites in UK. Typically, short videos are made as two minute stories told in the first person; an emotional dramatic question with a personal voiceover. Most of the stories include video but still images, slides and scanned personal photographs are also used. In that way, the short videos match the characteristics for “digital storytelling” as described by Joe Lambert (3):

- 1) The story has a *point* and is told from one perspective (point of view)
- 2) The story has a *dramatic question* – but it is not posed directly by the narrator, rather it causes the viewer to ask themselves a question
- 3) The story has an *emotional content* to keep the audience engaged
- 4) The story is told by the *gift of your voice* in a conversational style
- 5) The story is supported by the *power of the soundtrack* by including mood establishing music
- 6) The story is based on a limited *economy* by using a small number of images and video and a relatively short text
- 7) The story includes changes in *pacing*, rhythm and breath of the storytelling

In the Video Nation archives, there are several short videos based on the characteristics for digital storytelling. These videos have a simple, compressed and poetic form that differs radically from common television expressions and dramatics, for example by using only still images and an informal tone. The story of *Two Families*, by Dai Evans, is a poetic masterpiece within the simplicity of digital storytelling. In the first part, this 77 year-old miner tells us about his “first” family; his wife, daughter, son and grandchildren. Then he presents his “second” family to whom he is deeply dedicated; his wax models in the garage. This kind of digital storytelling is mostly made by people attending workshops at local Video Nation centers where participants learn to tell their stories with the restrictions of telling a simple digital story.

### **Case study in a local context**

In Denmark, we have not seen any initiatives by national or regional television stations to explore the potentiality in user-generated content and digital storytelling. Inspired by BBC Video Nation, Current TV and of course You Tube, the research centre InDIMedia at Aalborg University formed a research and development project called ‘Plan B’. Our aim was to support groups of viewers and users to become active ‘prod-users’ generating their own audiovisual stories.

The project started up late 2005 and ended in November 2007. The regional TV2 station in Holstebro, TV/MIDT-VEST took part in the project together with a broadband division from a regional power supply company called Himmerlands Elforsyning. We engaged TV/MIDT-VEST and their development division, Nova Media in the Plan B-project, because this television station already had some thoughts about media democracy and viewer involvement.

During the process, television producers arranged workshops for two different groups of people in a small community, the town of Aalestrup. One group was recruited among the elder citizens and one was young teenagers from the 9th grade at the local school. Originally, we wanted to recruit a broad representation from the local community and, at first, many different people were interested in participating in the project and the workshops. But later on when it came to really spend some time on producing short videos, only the elderly, retired people had the time. In return, they not only began producing videos, they also established a web portal for distributing the user-created content and organized a local group to continue the local program production ([www.videoaalestrup.dk](http://www.videoaalestrup.dk)). To involve young people in user-generated audiovisual production, we had to organize special workshops as educational teaching lessons at the local school. The design for the workshops was the same but the learning processes and the resulting videos were very different.

During the workshops, the young people produced seven videos:

- *Rollespil* : Dramatized documentary about role playing games
- *Vores fritidsjobs, Besøg på gården*: ”What I do” personal work place/process presentations
- *Lars’ nye ven*: Personalized instructional video about horse riding
- *Mine bedste venner, Heey*: Personal portraits of people, pets and classmates
- *Er du fed i dag*: Home video with scooter stunts

The group of elderly people produced four videos during the workshop:

- *En ring sluttes*: A dramatized short documentary about a ring from 2<sup>nd</sup> world war
- *Hverrestrup Bakker, Rosenparken*: Local natural history presentation
- *Gedsteds varmeeventyr*: Work place/ process presentation

On the surface, the videos by the two groups seem very much alike: Genres such as work place presentations and dramatized stories is combined with voice over formats and even visually presented narrators. When it comes to perspective and intentionality, however, the videos differ immensely: The young people represent the subject and the world as such from the perspective of their own first person (I or we) whereas the elderly represent their subject from a third person perspective (it, he, she, they).

When we for example compare the work place videos *Vores fritidsjobs, Besøg på gården* with *Gedsteds varmeeventyr*“, we see that the young people are showing and telling about what they do themselves whereas the elderly people show and tell about what is done by others: The subjective, emotional and active aspect in (re)presenting the work process is present in the young videos and is told in a much more informal and conversational tone - and thereby we conclude that these videos meet the requirements of digital storytelling while the videos by the elderly group are characterized by a more traditional producer/journalist perspective and at the same time a strong intentionality of doing something good for their community. Therefore, it has been no surprise that there was a further development and the elderly group formed a regular video-club and a media web site for their local town. The club aims at “showing the world that a lot goes on in the town of Aalestrup”. At the end of the paper, we shall discuss how this site takes on certain branding qualities.

Both the young and the older people produce meaning and identity in their media activity. Now, we will turn to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur in order to understand how user involvement in text production and circulation may take on certain qualities of meaning for the “prod-users”. Thereby, we might understand why people get engaged in and involve themselves in user-generated content on social web sites.

### **Meaning, production and social identity**

Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics (Ricoeur 1984) is a general theory of understanding seen as a process of interpretation and meaning production. In relation to user-generated videos, we are especially interested in the dialogical and ecological aspects of critical hermeneutics. The text/reader relationship is seen as a dialogical investigation in the form of questions and answers from the reader and the implied author forming the interpretation process. The ecology aspect is about the contextual and communicative whole of human interpretation and navigation of the meaning of life in its biological, physical and cultural aspects. The meaning of the text is not determined by the author’s intentions because the meaning depends on the rhetorical and aesthetical capabilities of the author taken in combination with the capabilities, intentions and pre-understandings of the reader during the present situation.

The dialogical aspects of interpretation take place in the so-called second reading of the text. Whereas the first reading is about expectations of genre on the part of the reader, the second reading becomes more distanced as readers recognize that not all of their expectations are being met: There will be empty spaces in the text that have to be populated and uncertainties that need to be resolved. Such mental effort takes the form of dialogue, where readers’ questions have been foreseen and answered by the implied author of the text. This process of implied asking and answering forms the basic hermeneutical circle that ends when the reader is able to ask the question to which the text is an answer. This leads to the third critical reading of the text, which is about the effect of the text on the reader’s practice – does the text inform the world in which the reader lives?

According to Ricoeur, texts will be more or less open and more or less structured. It is the same phenomenon that Umberto Eco addresses in *The Role of the Reader* where he outlines the paradox of open text: The more open a text is – the more closed it will be to reader groups who do not have the same cultural competencies as the author. In contrast, the more closed a text is, the more open it is to different kinds of reader skills and non-intended use.

We also see that the three hermeneutical readings correspond in some sense with Stuart Hall's (1980) three types of hypothetical readings; dominant, negotiated and oppositional reading. The hermeneutical method, however, exceeds the semiological and critical method of Stuart Hall with respect to understanding the process of interpretation and meaning production. In the hermeneutical circle, readers work their way through all of the three types of reading (naïve, negotiated and oppositional/critical) in order to meet, understand and make out the meaning of the text in relation to their expectations (genre), dialogue (empty spaces, questions and answers) and the possible effect on their further understanding of their situation, life and actions.

### **User and prod-user**

The interactive media have brought with them interactivity and the concept of 'the user' who has partial control over the distribution of content. The activity of the user lies in the mental effort of meaning production and physically influencing distribution and eventually the text itself especially in the conversational mode of interactivity as for example in e-mail (Jensen 1999). Recent social and communicative developments have brought about other positions for users themselves to become "prod-users" of the texts for an online audience.

In relation to user-generated videos and collaboratively produced content, we assume that Ricoeur's second dialogical reading is of special interest because the efforts of the reader expand into physical interactivity and into explicit dialogue (questions and answers) about expectations, empty spaces and the social negotiation of meaning.

When we apply Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical circle on user-generated videos, we see that much work is done in the distanced second reading where new distribution forms and the immediacy of the blog on the social sharing web sites help to expand the dialogue: The questions and answers in the mental interpretation as well as the actual readers' and authors' questions and answers to meaning production of the text itself. So, we claim that user-generated videos and conversational blogs both expand the second reading phase, and in relation to the first reading, it is fair to say that it is also very much present and asking for comments and communication in order to fulfill itself in the second reading. As for the third critical reading, readers, viewers, users and prod-users seemingly enlighten their world and find some sort of social meaning as they collectively seek to ask the question to which their dialogue is an answer.

At the same time, the dialogical and hermeneutical affordances in the social media allow people to become both distanced readers and authors in a social and even collective meaning and interpretational process of what life is about. In line with Anthony Giddens (Giddens 1991), you may say that the social web embeds people in their individual and collective efforts to help each other to make sense of life as it is today, as many people do not have any religion, political ideologies, family traditions or great pieces of art by which to make sense anymore. So, identity is at stake but with user generated videos we are witnessing new everyday methods of identity production, interpretation and social meaning making. According to this, social media should not be

treated as expressions of exhibitionism and even voyeurism but as expressions of the hermeneutical circle of social interpretation of post-modern life.

We suggest that user-generated videos provide a textual artifact that represents the completion of the basic hermeneutical circle, whereby user-generated videos can be understood as answers to some of the questions posed by Ricoeur's three readings. In turn, we argue that it is an ecology of sociability, derived from the role of television in everyday life and extended to the new platforms that host user-generated videos, that motivate and inform the audiences' transformation from viewer/readers to authors and prod-users. Thus we suggest that it is a collective search for identity and meaning, as an expression of the inner dialogue found in Ricoeur's second reading, which motivates people to become prod-users.

### **City branding and personal branding**

We suppose that the hermeneutical questions, dialogues and quests for meaning vary with experience and age and we have witnessed different uses of camera and narrative combined with different purposes and aims of representation on behalf of our two groups of prod-users. The young people put themselves and their own activities in the centre and they have a rough and subjective point of view. The question to which these texts are an answer might be: "Here is my life – am I OK?". The elder people focus on local and historical matters from a third person point of view. The question to which these texts are an answer might be: "Here is local history – is the community all right?"

The subjective point of view and the private matters have quite a lot of resemblances with the kind of representations (texts and photos) that people put onto their profiles at homepages or social networking sites such as Face Book or Arto. It has been suggested that social networking on these sites may take on certain personal branding qualities (Nielsen 2004) in the sense that you have to make yourself visible in order to make friends and network. The social visibility is self selected and mostly positive – giving the impression of a nice, interesting and authentic person (Larsen 2005).

The interesting twist of the branding perspective is that the group of elderly people takes little interest in themselves as private persons – they probably do not need to brand themselves to friends or networks in the same degree as the young people. Yet the discourse of branding also comes to mind when visiting [www.videoaalestrup.dk](http://www.videoaalestrup.dk). The name of the web site alone points to the local engagement and when the members of the group tell about their project, they will explain why Aalestrup needs a better image. They are dedicated to their local community and the "city-branding" has become a matter of importance to them.

As such, the viewer/user/prod-user engagement came to have a motive beyond video production and the creation of content for the Internet. The elderly group came to see themselves as a group and they gained identity and meaning by collectively working with the web site for the local community to make it a better place for residents and a more attractive place for newcomers. Seen in the light of city branding as such, the Aalestrup videos and the video group have quite a high potential as the video people themselves are members of the community and thereby cultural participants.

Often, the problem with city branding is that the political establishment and the advertising experts are distanced from the community culture and the values which might form the basis of a branding strategy. One of the other problems is that there are many subcultures and many stakeholders who

may hold different or even contradicting values (Stigel 2006). The lesson from Aalestrup is that cities can involve groups of citizens in the branding process – giving every group responsibility and at the same time exercise a minimum of control as we have seen in some user-generated advertising campaigns (Norup & Nielsen 2008). What is gained is not a unified brand but a “learning” brand (Buhl 2007) and what might be the best of all is that it will be authentic because the city brand is made by the people themselves – one of the strongest strategies of authenticity according to Pine & Gilmore (2007).

### **Learnings from the Aalestrup case**

The young peoples’ videos represent genuine digital story telling videos and their subjective/personal perspectives are prominent. The videos from the elderly group are more like the videos from the video-workshops in the 1980ties where professional norms were rather strong as were the political intentions. Interestingly, our collaborators from TV/MIDT-VEST/Nova Media ended up being rather frustrated about the young peoples’ videos. They found that the youngster’s videos were too rough and the young people not interested in learning whereas they found the elderly group to be more motivated to learn.

From the very start, we all agreed that one of the aims of the project was to understand and make useful the cultural expressivity of the social web sites such as YouTube. Nova Media wanted to learn new aspects of media literacy from these sites and they even arranged a one-day-seminar for their journalist colleagues at the TV station where the agenda was clear: Let us try to learn from the new cultural expressions and maybe even invite the viewer/users to contribute to the TV station’s broadcast with user-generated content.

As the project unfolded, however, the institutional boundaries became more and more prominent: The professional ‘televisual’ norms were difficult to be without, the worries of the colleagues were too strong and even the expectations to the semi-professional videos from the school teacher involved were disappointed. In the end, the professional producers could not skip their own professionalism. The learning from the digital story project was in fact limited with respect to both inclusion of user-generated content and changing of aims and strategies for media learning and pedagogy.

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### **Notes**

- 1) The project called Plan B was supported by IT-Korridoren, The Danish Ministry of Science 2005 – 2007. Partners in the project besides InDiMedia, Aalborg University were Himmerlands Elforsyning (regional power supply company) and TV/MIDT-VEST (regional television station).
- 2) Only a smaller part of the videos on YouTube are genuine user-generated content in this respect. Today, the most viewed and popular videos are clips from professional television broadcast.
- 3) The basic elements of constructing a digital multimedia story are described by Joe Lambert et al. and refer to the ongoing workshops and educations at the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, USA (Lambert 2006). Seven important elements are described to craft a compelling story.

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