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Ethical images and storytelling amidst differing expectations

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ABSTRACT

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-profit organizations (NPOs) seek creative ways to raise awareness about issues and connect with donors to raise the resources required to address the needs of the communities they work with. This paper highlights ethical challenges and lessons learned in using images and storytelling in the development sector. This article resulted from a capacity-building event on the ethical use of images from development projects. It draws from the event itself, which was organized by the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation (MCIC) in 2022, and from conversations leading up to and following the event between the author, guest speakers, and additional stakeholders.

The workshop was led by two representatives from MCIC member organizations. These two guest speakers shared experiences of using images and storytelling in their work in the Global South. Based on these conversations, this article highlights unequal power relations around the use of images from development projects, emphasizing organizations' ethical challenges and how storytelling is (re)constructed amidst competing needs and expectations. The paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on ethical storytelling in fundraising and the need for decolonial storytelling.

Key Words Fundraising; authentic participation; decolonization; human rights; consent; dignified storytelling; international development.

INTRODUCTION

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rely on storytelling for advocacy and to meet their fundraising goals. NGOs' ability to communicate with donors effectively is critical as they need to tell compelling and emotional stories that raise awareness of issues, invite people to buy into their objectives, and support intervention strategies. In this article, I discuss how competing needs and expectations can influence storytelling, impact the dynamics between stakeholders, and sometimes even empower or disempower project participants. I also highlight how structures must be negotiated to ensure stories are told authentically and in empowering ways. This article evolved from a capacity-building workshop facilitated by the author and organized by the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation (MCIC), a council of 41 organizations working in international cooperation worldwide. The workshop was led by two representatives from MCIC member organizations who shared their experiences of using images and storytelling in their work in the Global South. MCIC supports and amplifies the work of its members and partners, and directly engages with Manitobans for global sustainability. MCIC is also responsible for distributing government funds designated for international development and humanitarian projects.

MCIC supports connections and capacity development with members and their international partners for greater impact by providing valued resources for members and other partners, contributing to local, provincial, and national networks, and generating and sharing good practices and lessons learned. This paper draws upon the Dignified Storytelling Principles[1] (DSPs), which inspire everyone to tell stories with human dignity, it contributes to the ongoing debate on ethical storytelling in advocacy and fundraising, and it demonstrates how meaning-making in storytelling is constructed and negotiated within varied expectations.

Storytelling Amid Competing Needs

NGOs and other community service organizations aim to promote the well-being of the communities they serve.

[1] See, Dignified Storytelling: https://dignifiedstorytelling.com/dignified-storytelling/

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Storytelling is an important tool that these organizations[2] use to achieve their goals. When developing communication strategies, which include storytelling and choosing/selecting images to create content, there are different expectations and competing needs that NGOs must consider. First, there are the participants[3] who engage in the project. Second, there is the NGO seeking to raise funds and awareness to meet the participants' needs by sharing their stories. Finally, there is the donor who wishes to get a clearer picture of the situation—to hear, see, and feel enough to be moved to donate to the cause. The storyteller must put all these perspectives together and may struggle to construct them into one image that addresses all needs. Not every stakeholder in this scenario may like how the story is being told, and some may want it changed to fit their needs and agenda. Here lies another challenge, which may require changing, or adapting, an image or story to fit a narrative. This story may end up incomparable with the participants' experience and raise questions about representation and authenticity.

Today, many organizations working to address global issues struggle with the ability to use storytelling to raise awareness and meet multiple expectations without compromising the dignity of project participants. Stories promote communication across cultures (Stevenson, 2019) and have cultural relevance that is often used to preserve communities' ethics. Importantly, stories provide opportunities to build resilience in the face of hardships (East et al., 2010). In this sense, storytelling can be a form of power that evokes curiosity, influences behaviour, and inspires action and awareness raising on social and political issues (Ogbu, 2020). For many, the lessons learned from stories can linger for a lifetime. It is no wonder that when used constructively, empowering storytelling can be a tool for social transformation (Senehi, 2002).

Arguably, storytellers have "narrator potency," as they are in a position of power and play a critical role in the social construction of meaning (Bauman, 1986, cited in Senehi, 2002). Several issues have been raised concerning how storytelling and imagery reproduction can embody power inequity (Plewes & Stuart, 2007), particularly when the experiences of others are narrated by someone else, potentially stripping away agency and the authenticity of experiences. Hence, despite the benefits of storytelling, it can cause more harm than good to project participants. In the bid to appeal to specific stakeholders, some images used by NGOs may not tell participants' authentic stories. Some images may lack context, portray participants as powerless, reinforce stereotypes, and can challenge ongoing efforts to create awareness of the root causes of global issues and how to address them (Plewes & Stuart, 2007). For example, social media platforms have become a useful means through which many organizations increase awareness of issues globally. However, for NGOs, visual storytelling is a considerable ethical concern. Instagram, for example, prefers images with human faces, so an organization that uses non-identifying images and actively avoids showing the faces of their participants would probably not be as successful on Instagram as it is on traditional media in raising awareness of problems and seeking resources to address issues.

Likewise, emotions play an essential role in storytelling. Organizations appeal to donors through a range of emotions (Paxton et al., 2020) and depend on compelling storytelling to fundraise (Merchant et al., 2010). A well-structured, artistic, skillfully designed narrative will attract interest (Akgün et al., 2015). Further, some donors are drawn to authentic projects, especially when they reflect the organization's mission (De Bock & Tine, 2017), while others have been known to have interests in projects beyond donations, such as wanting to be included in the intervention process (Cluff, 2009). This may result in a situation described by Susan Ostrander (2007) as "donor-controlled philanthropy." In this sense, donors "inevitably seem to have relatively more power than recipients who express demands for those funds" (p. 357).

In some fundraising campaigns, participants may lack "narrator potency"[4] when their voices and experiences are subverted. For example, participants are usually not consulted or not allowed to decide whether their images will be used on social media platforms, websites, or annual reports of organizations. The power imbalance often prevalent in fundraising stories is due to the inequity between the participants and other stakeholders, leading to stereotyping, objectification, and portrayals of powerless "beneficiaries" (Bhatti & Eikenberry, 2016). More worrisome for others is the construction of human hopelessness as a persuasive technique to evoke empathy in fundraising campaigns (Musarò, 2011). Inherent in structuring appealing stories lies an ethical risk that participants are misrepresented and objectified.

Further, organizations aim to build long-term relationships with donors to increase the likelihood of funding retention; at the same time, they also want to increase awareness of issues that need to be resolved (Musarò, 2011). However, the potential exists for fundraising needs to overshadow the need to educate as "visual power" (Musaro, 2011) dominates other needs in storytelling. These situations constrain the ability of project participants to question how they are represented in storytelling (Breeze & Dean, 2012).

Lessons Learned from MCIC Workshop

Power Over and Language

Power and language were central themes in this workshop. Organizations and donors have significant power over those they fund and influence aspects of projects, including language and narratives. According to one of the guest speakers, the terms organizations use in the humanitarian sector reflect the image they most often want to portray. For example, "beneficiary" as used to describe participants may reinforce power inequality and imply that those being served lack a sense of agency and cannot control their lives. Hence, some organizations may prefer using terms such as "participants" and or "constituents" instead of "beneficiaries." Many organizations are becoming conscious of the need to use a decolonizing strategy in storytelling and fundraising. However, many still struggle with this aspect, and storytelling frameworks are still colonial, often emphasizing organizations' support and

[2] "Organizations," as used throughout this paper refers to NGOs, NPOs, and other community service organizations that provide aid and work with marginalized groups.

[3] Throughout this article, the word "participants" is used rather than "beneficiaries."

[4] For details on narrator potency in storytelling, see Senehi (2002).

donations to participants and largely leaving out participants' resilience and voices. Therefore, organizations need to critically analyze the values that guide their fundraising framework; doing so will involve asking questions about representations, how stories are told, and those (unconscious) biases that guide projects and fundraising.

Consent and the Use of Images

The use of images can have negative consequences for project participants; some find it embarrassing to "not give" consent for their images to be used because of the benefits they enjoy. One member representative highlighted that their organization was initially comfortable using participants' images on their website and social media platforms but noticed that participants always felt uncomfortable even when they had provided "consent." Upon further probing and discussions with the participants, it was discovered that they were uncomfortable with their images being used and only gave consent to receive services from the organization. According to the representative, this organization also discovered that many children and youth were being trafficked through images found on websites and social media platforms. The organization started a campaign to sensitize others to these issues and use webinars to share findings with other NGOs. As an institution, they developed a policy of not using identifiable images of those they assist. This policy was respectful and considerate of the needs of participants, even though these organizations felt a huge pressure from their donors to show the participants' faces. Organizations need to consider how their needs may affect the lives of the people they are working with, analyze their practices, and ensure the approaches used in storytelling and fundraising are dignifying. One lesson learned is that *informed* consent is important to tell dignified stories of participants. Consent must go beyond simply signing forms; organizations must ensure that participants genuinely give consent and know how their images will be used. Participants should be aware that they can give or withdraw their consent without any penalty.

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the organizations to protect their participants and ensure their information and images are not exploited. We learned that organizations and funders could capture meaningful themes and tell impactful stories without using identifiable images. Additionally, NPOs, NGOs, and other community-serving organizations should build partnerships with government agencies and other organizations to help protect the well-being of those they serve and raise awareness of dehumanizing issues.

Whose Story?

One of the ethical challenges considered during the workshop was how to manage varied stakeholders' expectations during storytelling. For example, an NGO needed to project the story of a young participant in the Global South, and the planning team had their perspectives on how best to "capture the story from the participant." As a filmmaker, the team lead had specific ideas about how best to create the story in a way that would be appealing, the local team had their ideas, and the donors also had their version of how they would like to present the participant's stories to the people they work with. There were also differing views on the language (French/English) that the participant could use to best captivate the audience. The team lead wanted the participant to speak French, which was her first language, because they considered it "authentic." However, the participant wanted to share her story in English, a language she was proud to have learned. This is an example of a real-life experience with conflicting interests in storytelling.

NGOs understand the power of persuasive language in creating appealing stories. Research further points out that the intention to persuade may enhance increased emotional connections using words/language (Rocklage et al., 2018) in a way that "appeals" to the desired audience. One can also argue that the participant's unrelenting wish to speak in a language of her choice embodies the idea of storytelling as resistance (Senehi, 2002); it is a reminder of the ways that language can be a tool that participants use to negotiate power (Ogbu, 2021, p. 58). We learned that participants have a sense of agency irrespective of their financial and social circumstances. The scenario above reflects the notion of human dignity and agency in storytelling embedded in the DSPs.

Dignified Storytelling Principles: A Decolonizing Practice

One of the guest speakers at the MCIC workshop drew from the DSPs to highlight how his awareness of these principles has enabled him to address some ethical challenges in storytelling, although this was not without its challenges. Most often, organizations still prioritize donor expectations, which may impact telling stories constructively and ethically. When storytelling is constructive, it not only raises awareness about issues in transparent ways but also promotes inclusion and amplifies voice (Senehi, 2002). Constructive storytelling is central to the DSPs, which seek to foster an inclusive atmosphere where constructive dialogue between all stakeholders can lead to honest education about issues while protecting the dignity of participants in storytelling.

The DSPs are foundational in ethical storytelling, founded on "transparency," accountability, and respect for all persons; these encourage collaboration and highlight the need to safeguard human dignity in storytelling.[5] Hence, constructive storytelling is an ethical practice, a decolonial praxis, and a call to action. Decolonizing storytelling means decentralizing power, focusing on collaboration and relationship building, and emphasizing participants' voices and lived experiences (Caxaj, 2015). Adopting a storytelling framework that does not consider the context and lived experiences of the participants, particularly in formerly colonized countries, reinforces colonial power, stereotypes, and power over those who are marginalized. Of central importance here is that decolonizing storytelling is an intentional practice because storytelling is not innately decolonizing (Samuel & Ortiz, 2021).

The first principle of DSPs, "It's not my story,"[6] encourages relationship building through genuine connection with participants as equal partners and co-creators. Most importantly, it prioritizes centering participants' voices and perspectives on how their stories are told using their preferred language. We learned that ethical challenges in storytelling provide opportunities to use the DSPs.

[5] See, Dignified Storytelling: https://dignifiedstorytelling.com/dignified-storytelling/

[6] The Principles: https://dignifiedstorytelling.com/the-principles/

The DSPs encourage organizations to recognize that participants can tell their stories authentically. While technical and other forms of expertise are important, authenticity, as it relates to participants' experiences and how they want to tell them, is essential. For example, NGOs may fundraise on stories drawn from a perspective that might be more appealing and impactful. However, this may raise ethical questions about representation, authentic participation, and voice. What an NGO and its team of professional storytellers and marketers might envision to be a great storytelling idea, with all the right elements to engage donors successfully, could be destructive and disempowering to participants.

Destructive storytelling (Senehi, 2002) does not foster representation and authenticity nor allow collaboration and dignity. Crafting narratives embedded in the DSPs celebrates human dignity, rights, and agency because it focuses on the perspectives and experiences of those we assist. The DSPs are about reflecting on the inherent power imbalance in how stories are being told, particularly the voice given to the story; it is necessary to constantly ask questions such as "Whose voice is prioritized in this story? Within what framework and context were these stories constructed? Will this story empower the participants?" It is also important to reflect on whose story we want to tell and how participants wish their stories to be told.

Stories must be told authentically through the perspectives of those whose experiences are being told. As with the DSPs, ethical use of images and storytelling imposes the duty of ensuring an atmosphere of equality that honours the participant's voice. This is not to limit or devalue the collective engagement and participation of stakeholders in the storytelling process but to ensure dignity in how the story was constructed and that the participant feels empowered and included in the process.

CONCLUSION

The organization of this workshop came from a place of deep reflection, lessons learned from past projects, and the need to learn more about emerging issues to be better equipped to address them. There is a great deal to reflect on and learn from the issues raised in this article. As with constructive storytelling, the DSPs ask us to engage in reflective practice and consider how power imbalance influences the way stories are told and whose "voice" becomes central in creating project stories. Storytelling through a decolonial lens can help honour experiences, create meaningful connections between partners/stakeholders, and provide true-life lessons about the participants. Creating stories through a decolonial lens can be educational and help stakeholders become aware of unconscious biases. When stories are told with filters, the authenticity of the participants is removed; with a decolonial lens, they are validated. Using images and telling stories ethically is a decolonial praxis (Pedri-Spade, 2017) that is inclusive (Dunford, 2017). This practice asks the storytellers and organizations, including donors, to be mindful of whose story it is and the impacts of stories that reinforce stereotypes.

It is important for organizations that wish to create awareness about global issues and fundraising using participants' stories to consider whose story is being told and how it is being told. As much as donors want to be part of a project beyond providing funds, the needs of participants and their desire for inclusion in the process also deserve recognition. Participants can tell their stories within an atmosphere of inclusion if given the opportunity.

An important element of storytelling is its ability to allow us to conceive of others as "fully human" (Freire, 2005). This quality, however, is lost when stories designed to evoke support for specific individuals do not include the active participation of those they are supposed to be helping. Active involvement in telling their stories could provide participants with a sense of satisfaction and serve as a means of giving a voice to those who are already experiencing oppression instead of reinforcing said oppression (Sepinuck, 2014). Hence, it behooves NGOs and other organizations to always endeavour to expend the effort required to ensure participants take an active part in telling their stories. This will not always be easy but is critical to ensure that participants are empowered and not dehumanized through processes that are supposed to help them. Moreover, participants' genuine participation in telling their stories may even evoke a greater and more positive response or engagement.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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