

Digital stories and emerging citizens' media practices by migrant youth in Western Sydney

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Abstract

This article provides a critical examination of community media practices by young recently arrived African refugees and Cambodian young migrants in Western Sydney, Australia. Against the backdrop of contemporary cultural politics of migration in Australia the article is grounded on a recent participatory community media research project conducted in 2008-2009, which aimed to conceptualise the emerging spaces for claiming new forms of citizen agency and contest the general representations of newly arrived migrants in the mainstream media. The paper argues that community media is better positioned to recognise changing attitudes towards migrants and refugees, and that these changes must also take place from the bottom up. Extending existing notions of citizens' media the paper articulates a view that young media practitioners become active citizens in the exercise of their civil and communication rights and their self-representation, by owning the process of content creation and communication, thus redefining the content (rather than the form) of what citizenship means in different social contexts.

Introduction

The present article discusses some of the preliminary findings of a small scale 12-month practice-led research and pilot project aimed at fostering local media creation as forms of engaged and active citizenship. The research project *Fairfield Stories: digital storytelling by migrant youth in Western Sydney*¹ was conducted between November 2007 and June 2009 in a collaborative initiative between researchers from the University of Western Sydney and partner investigators from Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE), a non-for-profit community cultural arts organisation in Parramatta, and Fairfield City Council (FCC), one of the largest local government councils in Western Sydney. The project involved 23 participants divided in two groups. One group was organized with recently arrived (2003-2008) refugees from African countries with participants from Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Congo. The second group was organized with second-generation youth from Cambodian communities.

The work undertaken revealed that community media is better positioned to recognize changing attitudes towards migrants and refugees, and that these changes must also take place from the bottom up. Extending notions of citizens' media (Rodriguez 2001; 2004) the project was based on a view of citizens' media that defines it not by being alternative to, or challenging existing concentrations of media power, nor by being necessarily linked to broader social movements seeking radical change, but for having certain attributes and qualities that make it different from commercial mass media. The project focused on understanding how young people can become active citizens in the exercise of their civil and communication rights and their self-determination, thus redefining the content (rather than the form) of what citizenship means in their everyday social and cultural contexts, and therefore allowing for processes of social empowerment and inclusion to emerge.

¹ www.fairfieldstories.net

Migration and the changing cultural landscapes of Western Sydney

Since 1945 onwards more than 6.6 million people have migrated to Australia, with roughly 10percent of these being refugees and humanitarian migrants. With a population of over 21 million (2010 estimates), 40 percent of the Australian population are first or second generation migrants, with half of this figure composed of people from non-English speaking backgrounds. However, refugees and humanitarian entrants account for less 5percent of the total population (Jupp 2002). In the case of number of refugees per 1,000 inhabitants, Australia (approximately 1) fares well behind countries like Canada (5.2), Norway (7.5) or Sweden (8.3) (UNHCR, 2008) and in terms of total numbers of humanitarian visas granted in 2006-2007, Australia (13,017) is also positioned behind countries such as the United States (89,190) or Canada (30,033). In terms of the total refugee population, Australia (22,548) is also considerably lower than countries such as France (196,364), Sweden (81,356) or Germany (593,799) (UNHCR, 2009). This is also supported by a recent study released by UNICEF (2009) which claims that the number of refugees allowed to stay permanently in Australia represents a small fraction of Australia's overall immigration intake and the percentage of our humanitarian intake is actually falling. Australia's fixed annual refugee and humanitarian intake of around 12,000 people (2007 figures) appears low when compared to other countries, such as Sweden or Germany for example. As Do (2002) demonstrates Australia also fares quite poorly on a per capita basis, with figures of three refugees for every 1,000 persons living in the country (Do, 2002, 41). As is widely known internationally, Australia was for many years the only country in the world that had a policy of mandatory detention for migrants and asylum seekers deemed to be "illegal" upon entry, including the detention of women and children in urban and remote detention centres.

Some parts of Greater Western Sydney (GWS) have been the first point of arrival for the largest proportion of refugees and migrants coming to Australia in the past few decades. Parts of GWS, such as Fairfield and Liverpool are also the home to some of the country's most disadvantaged communities, showing indices of higher unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and lower tertiary education rates. In many cases, these areas overlap with those with the highest concentration of new-arrivals, temporary protection visa-holders, and people born in non-English speaking countries. The Greater Western Sydney area is formed out of 14 local government areas (LGAs) and is home to approximately 2 million people (over 46percent of the Sydney metropolitan population and roughly 10percent of the total population of Australia). It sprawls over an area of 9,000 square kilometres of residential, industrial and rural land, and constitutes the third largest regional economy in Australia. In some of the LGA's over 200 nationalities are represented, with 40percent of the people speaking a language other than English at home, and with over 140 languages spoken.²

Since the 1950's, Sydney's west has been constructed as the cultural periphery of the cultural and financial global city of Sydney which is situated in the Central Business District, the coastal eastern suburbs, and more recently the gentrified areas of the inner west city fringes. These narratives of yawning cultural/spatial divisions are historically embedded in popular urban lore and reproduced in media representations. But since the early 1990's, there has been a wealth of cultural and social research in Australia taking Western Sydney as a locus of analysis, most of which has attempted – in one way or another – to examine critically the social construction of Western Sydney in the Australian imagination.

² This is a remarkable contrast with the national average of 2.8 million Australians (15percent) that speak a language other than English at home.

However, scholarly research on refugees and migrants, whether in sociology, cultural studies or urban research is still missing an intercultural comparative perspective looking at intercommunal relations, and a grounding in broader transnational contexts of diasporic flows, especially considering that global factors (civil war and armed conflicts in several African countries, or the war in Iraq and Afghanistan) are having a fundamental impact on the shape and makeup of this diverse locality. Longitudinal empirical studies of ethnic populations (especially refugees) are scarce, despite the fact that since 2001 refugees and migrants from countries with limited history of settlement in Australia have come to comprise the largest proportion of Australia's humanitarian intake (particularly African countries, Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as stateless ethnic groups). The issues faced by these small and emerging communities are complex and manifold, compounded by the lack of accessible infrastructures and networks that support arrival and settlement. Many refugees face enormous language and cultural obstacles, health issues, grapple with traumas of displacement and loss, and in many cases the profound impacts of torture and violence. Those on temporary protection visas face precarious and uncertain futures. The experience of arrival is also experienced quite differently by younger and older people, and by women, placing families under considerable strain. Also, many encounter attitudes to their arrival from sections of Australian society that sometimes is far from welcoming. Therefore the patterns of urban engagement and urban strategies by emerging communities in Western Sydney are having a huge impact on cultural, social and environmental sustainability, as well as urban planning and labour markets.

In 2006, 75percent of the Australian government's humanitarian programme comprised young people under the age of 30, and Africa has increased in importance in the context of Australia's migration programs. For example, in 2003-04 and 2004-05 around 70percent of entrants under Australia's Humanitarian Program were from Africa. (ABS, 2009). Importantly, a very significant proportion of young people coming from African countries enduring on-going conflicts and political unrest, mainly Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi and Rwanda, are settling in Great Western Sydney. This is also significant when we see the figures of youth unemployment in Western Sydney, which have been above 25percent during the period 2001-2008, when the Australian economy recorded records levels of unemployment.

Despite the grim economic and social indicators and the uninviting perpetuations of obsolete myths of cultural uniformity and social decay still present in the popular imagination and much of the mainstream media representations, Western Sydney is today an economic and artistic hub. A strong node for digital youth community arts, particularly with migrant communities, many areas of Western Sydney, such as Auburn, Blacktown, Fairfield, Parramatta and Liverpool are emerging as local and regional hubs for the creative industries and community arts initiatives.³ However, and despite these bustling experiences of local content creation, there is still a significant lack of communication and media research into community media practices, particularly

³ These patterns correlate with emerging evidence that the Australian community broadcasting sector is arguably among the fastest growing in the Australian media, with over 350 community radio licenses, 79 remote Indigenous community television licences and 4 permanent free-to-air community television stations in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth. The ethnic radio sector broadcasts over 1700 hours of broadcasting each week in around 100 different languages (Meadows et. al, 2007; CBOonline, 2006a). Community newspapers and print media also have a long tradition going back over a century, with newspapers being published in over 40 languages and a geographical circulation that in some cases reaches over 100,000 issues a week.

ethnographic, action and participatory research and theorization of media practices in Western Sydney. Therefore there is a need for developing theoretical perspectives and model building suitable for guiding further empirical and practice/action led research at the level of local content creation. Empirical evidence is important in order to consider the interventions necessary to enhance well-being especially in Western Sydney where there is little information about the nature of communication and information-related inequalities and their expression within migrant/refugee communities. As Dreher (2008) comments, the relative lack of research on community media in Australia is particularly apparent in the lack of reliable audience figures for media outlets beyond the mass audience, English-language media.

Taking this into consideration, the research project was undertaken with two distinct groups who were recruited through a consultative process within the communities and migrant services organisations in Fairfield, and in response to community needs and interests and the strategic priorities of the two partner agencies. The project was structured around the pilot project Fairfield Stories and considered the production of several short digital stories produced with and by young members of African and Cambodian communities through participatory workshops undertaken in July 2008 and January 2009.

These stories sought to document the diverse histories of refugee and migrant communities in Western Sydney (both recently arrived as in the case of the African group; and second generation Cambodian young people, children of Cambodian refugees from arriving in Australia in the 1980's). The participants we worked with had rarely had an opportunity to represent themselves or to speak to representations of themselves that are generated through the mainstream commercial and public media. Through digital storytelling workshops and content creation, the aim of this project was to position these groups of young African refugees and second generation Cambodian youth as agents of their own change, and 'as protagonists or active social subjects in contemporary processes of global transformation' (Mezzadra, 2003).

Media representations of refugees in Australia, like in many other parts of the world, depict a picture of humanitarian refugees as villains or victims, without ever offering a reading of the cultural complexity of refugee experience. More importantly, they never offer the ownership of the means and process of communication to those who experience displacement and are seeking refuge in another place. Therefore, rather than putting the emphasis on changing media perceptions and representations of refugees, what is needed is the creation of new media spaces, outlets and practices for emerging communities. A sustainable media capital that allows the possibility of self-representation. As Rodriguez brilliantly argues in her groundbreaking book on citizens' media,

It implies having the opportunity to create one's own images of self and environment; it implies being able to recodify one's own identity with the signs and codes that one chooses, thereby disrupting the traditional acceptance of those imposed by outside sources; it implies becoming one's own story teller, regaining one's own voice; it implies reconstructing the self-portrait of one's own community and one's own culture; it implies exploring the infinite possibilities of one's own body, one's own face, to create facial expressions (a new codification of the face) and non-verbal languages (a new codification of the body) never seen before; it implies taking one's own languages out of their usual hiding place and throwing them out there, into the public sphere and seeing how they do, how they defeat

other languages, or how they are defeated by other languages . . . what matters is that for the first time, one's shy languages, languages used to remain within the familiar and the private, take part in the public arena of languages and discourse (Rodriguez, 2001, 3).

Our participatory research project was aimed at precisely this recodification that Rodriguez spells out, in order to encourage young refugees and second generation migrants to take control of the process of content creation and communication by which they seek to tell their own personal stories and that of their families and communities. Access to the media is important, and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), which represents quite a unique public broadcasting model by world standards, provides multicultural services to most migrant communities through its national radio and television services. But access is only the first step towards more profound understanding of inclusion through media literacies, and the opportunity for migrant communities to make their own media, and in this process, construct active and novel forms of citizenship especially as media and ICT literacy becomes a fundamental aspect of what it is to be a citizen in a digital media world.

From 'We Decide Who Comes to This Country' to 'I will stop the boats': media panics and the everlasting turbulences of multiculturalism.

Being a refugee today is not just the experience of trauma, the experience of displacement. It is also being in a structural situation that is beyond these people's control. Refugee identities are not just particular or cultural identities. They are also bureaucratic identities, legal identities, very much embedded in political struggles, which are international and transnational in scope. (Ang, 2005, 64). In this last regard, multiculturalism has been since the early 1970's a centrepiece of official government policy in Australia. In other words, a concerted top down political strategy designed and carried out by the state to manage increasing cultural diversity (Ang and Stratton 1998,22), with several historical phases defined by historical shifts in the currency and main points of application of the term multiculturalism (Jupp 2001).⁴

As a symbolic construct, multiculturalism has been ideologically inscribed within the very core of post White-Australia national cultural policy, shifting from a more integrationist policy in the 1970's and 1980's to a more technocratic policy framework of managing diasporic cultural diversity in the 1990's, or what Hage refers to as 'cosmopolitan multiculturalism' (Hage 1994). As Brooke (2008) comments,

Ghassan Hage's account of Australian 'cosmopolitan multiculturalism' provided an exemplary class critique of multiculturalism policy under the labor Hawke-Keating governments (1983-1996) (describing) a policy moment in which Australians were inculcated within a celebratory and consumer relation to signifiers of ethnic authenticity (where the policies) had little to do with the needs of an ethnically diverse polity, and even less with the symbolic work of 'home building' in migrant communities, but rather centralised a middle-class tourist subject for whom public

⁴ The first significant shift in migration patterns in Australia took place from 1948 to 1954 with the arrival of thousands of refugees and migrants from Western and Eastern Europe (not including the British Isles) and thousands of refugees and migrants from southern Europe (mostly Italians and Greeks) and Turks after 1954. The second significant shift took place in the 1970's with massive immigration from the Middle East, Southern and South East Asia and Latin America. A third shift is visible in the 1980's with an explosive increase in the migrants and refugees from South East Asia (Vietnam and Cambodia), China, Korea, and the Pacific Islands. And the latest shift has been in the late 1990's and 2000's with significant increases from Africa and Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

displays of taste for ethnic difference evidence a form of 'cosmopolitan capital', a subset of cultural capital (Brooke, 2008, 509-510).

But despite profound transformations of the migration patterns and the structural changes in the social, cultural and religious composition of contemporary Australia, the soft historical shifts in political emphasis, all share an underlying rationale that refugee settlement planning in Australia is oriented towards the ideal that 'humanitarian arrivals will begin to live and think as national citizens within the multicultural container of the Australian state' (Gow, 2005, 390). As Tascon puts it, refugees have become 'border-crossers of the postcolonial [Australian] imaginary' (Tascón, 2002).

In the 2001 and 2006 Australian Censuses, more than 200 nationalities were recorded as living in Sydney, with important disparities however among some areas. The participants that took part in our project, for example, came mostly from Fairfield and Blacktown local government areas. In Fairfield, with a population of 186,414 people (2006 census), 55 percent of the total population is overseas born, 37 percent are under 25 years of age, and 71 percent of people speak a language other than English at home. Similarly, Blacktown's population of 234,000 is also highly culturally and linguistically diverse with over 184 Countries and 156 Languages represented within the community and the largest urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in the state with 7,055 people making up 2.6% of the population. There is little doubt that Western Sydney is a cosmopolitan, culturally diverse urban landscape, a 'site of dense global connections, marked by the passage of flows associated with its variously overlapping diasporic communities' (Neilson, 2005). But more importantly, as Neilson has noted 'contrary to those arguments that correlate a high degree of cultural diversity with global economic performance, it is the traditionally poorer region of Western Sydney that boasts Australia's highest concentration of cultural diversity' (Neilson, 2005). In this regard, Neilson changes the view of a 'multiculturalism without migrants' present in Hage's work, where people enjoy culturally diverse food, but with minimal or no direct intercultural contact nor dialogue, to a 'cosmopolitanism-from-below' view, where the Sydney peripheral suburbs are constructed as sites of cosmopolitan diversity, therefore inverting well-known discourses that associate the city's globality with its historical centre (Neilson, 2005).

This construction of a cosmopolitanism-from-below faced continual erosion during the Howard years of backlash against multiculturalism, where progressive politics were submerged under a veil of conservative media representation of migrants and refugees. For example, Cabramatta (in Fairfield) and Blacktown have been areas 'rendered publicly visible due to regular moral panics in the media' (Gow, 2005), such as drugs trafficking and 'Asian gangs' in the first case, and problems with newly arrived Africans in the second case. As in most countries, Australian public policy towards refugees is heavily influenced by public opinion on migrants and refugees at home and from international events. Examples from recent years are abundant. On August 24, 2001, for example, a small fishing boat, the Palapa 1, carrying over 438 people (mainly Afghan and including 26 women and 43 children) sunk on international waters about 140 km north of Christmas Island.⁵ This took place eight weeks prior to the Australian federal election of November 2001 (and just days before the September 11, 2001 events in New York). The Tampa, a Norwegian Cargo Ship rescued all passengers and attempted to take them back to Australia. However, the Howard Government refused to allow the people aboard the

⁵ Christmas Island is an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean, some 2000 km off the north-west coast of Australia and 500 km south of Jakarta, Indonesia.

Tampa to have their claims of refugee status processed on Australian soil. The event figured prominently in international news with Howard strongly declaring in the launching of his 2001 election campaign that 'We decide who comes to this country...' (Howard, 2001). Once again, in the Australian Federal Elections of 2010, border protection has unfortunately again played a central role in the political rhetoric of both Labor and the Coalition political programmes, with Coalition candidate Tony Abbott assuring the Australian people that 'I [he] will stop the boats'.

These are epitomes of moral panic, the very embodiment of the connections 'between national identity and populist politics receptive to a politics of fear' in contemporary Australia (Gale, 2004, 334). They configure what Papastergiadis has called 'the invasion complex in Australian political culture' (Papastergiadis, 2004). The manifestation of the lack of understanding of what Papastergiadis (2000) calls the 'turbulences of migration' in order to explain the unsettling effects and destabilization of the routes of migratory movements in the flows of migration at play in the world today. 'In the absence of structured patterns of global migration, with direct causes and effects' Papastergiadis asserts 'turbulence is the best formulation for the mobile processes of complex self-organization that are now occurring' (2000, 4). The Tampa affair, like the many similar cases happening in Europe, describe this autopoietic nature of contemporary global migration flows, and how these are read within certain logics that might be regarded as a having a 'transactivation effect' into local and global social movements.

The Tampa affair coincided with the period of highest level of activism in several detention centres across Australia, particularly in Woomera Detention Centre in South Australia, where from July 2001 to July 2002 over 1,300 violent incidents involving more than 5,000 detainees were recorded⁶ included hunger strikes, massive riots by detainees inside the centres and protesters outside the centres. While these events were not as massive as the migrant actions in Rome in January 2002 or as the undocumented migrants claims in France in 1996, they still demonstrate the political actions that social movements in Australia were bringing up to contest what Abdelmalek Sayad (2004,282) calls the new 'state thought' through which, as Turner observes 'the criminality of the migrant has become ontological' (2006, 134).

The letter sent by a Sydney academic to the Parramatta Sun newspaper on July 6, 2005 titled Refugees and 'Anglo Australians'⁷, is an example. 'Keep them Out' was the front cover of the newspaper where the university professor, under the auspices of free speech, made the comment that an increasing black (African) community in the suburbs of Western Sydney was a 'sure-fire recipe for increases in crime, violence and a wide range of social problems'. This is the 'state of thought' that Sayad claims, present in academic circles and visible in the media's coverage of recently arrived African humanitarian and skilled migrants alike. In his work "The Suffering of the Immigrant" Sayad demonstrates how receiving countries (such as Australian in this case) view immigration as their own social problem, thus focusing the attention on the situation of 'immigrants' by which the dominant member of the migration relationship firmly maintains control over knowledge and management of this 'problem', according to which immigrants are always "lacking" necessary skills and culture' (Agustin 2005,703). This is despite the fact that, in general terms, most African migrants have more tertiary degrees than other recent migrants, media coverage of fuels discourses of fear have been

⁶ According to figures provided in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report "*A Last Resort? National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention*". Sydney, 2004.

⁷ Andrew Fraser, Refugees and "Anglo-Australians", Parramatta Sun, July 6, 2005.

permanent in the Australian media, for example, reports in December 2006 that a number of African refugees arrived carrying communicable diseases.

Given this context, it seems more important than ever that young refugees and emerging migrant communities are able to take control of the processes of content creation and communication and find a voice to tell their stories to wider audiences. The pages that follow provide an overview of our project undertaken in Fairfield, Western Sydney with Cambodian and African youth groups. These groups were relatively internet savvy, but had never produced digital audiovisual content before. The young women and men were active media consumers, particularly of television and online entertainment (and to a lesser degree cinema), but, again, had never made creative content dealing with their experience of migration and resettlement in Western Sydney. Through this project they were invited to produce 2-3 minutes digital stories using current models of digital storytelling for online circulation.

Digital storytelling and emerging practices of citizens' media by migrant and refugee youth: the *Fairfield Stories Project*

Digital storytelling is a format and a methodology for first-person digital content creation. Digital stories allow people to make their own stories (and histories) important, validating these through a medium that resonates very well because it can talk about the personal. Digital storytelling are time-based digital narratives that remix still images (photos), video, animations and drawings, sounds, sometimes a music soundtrack and voice-over narration. It has grown worldwide as an effective way of articulating information and communication networks allowing people to communicate their 'voices' in a relatively simple form. Digital storytelling, as Hartley and McWilliam point out, is 'an emergent form, a new media practice, an activist/community movement and a textual system' (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009, 4). In our case, it was the chosen media to assess how media literacy can be both effective and empowering in each local context leading to community leadership, social/cultural inclusion and as an interface for inter generational/cultural dialogue. Digital storytelling was envisaged as a way to document the diverse histories of refugee and migrant communities in Western Sydney (both recently arrived and second generation emerging communities). The project aimed to equip participants with basic multimedia and digital narrative skills to enhance their leadership potential and employability in the creative industries, as digital storytelling has proven to be a stimulating practice that 'fills a gap between everyday cultural practice and professional media that was never adequately bridged during the broadcast era' (Carpentier, 2003 in Hartley, 2008). As Gumucio proposes (personal communication, July 2008) digital storytelling 'is like a thumbprint', a personal mark or unique impression made by one person. This autobiographical, quotidian element, what Burgess calls 'the vernacular creativity of the everyday' (2006) resonates with experiences of 'everyday cosmopolitanism' (Noble 2005) in Western Sydney and, as Dreher (2008) points out, the way people in the western suburbs of Sydney negotiate on a daily basis feelings of belonging, and of marginalisation and misrepresentation. Digital storytelling factualizes subjective experience into a digital canvas, in this particular case it imprints the depth and breadth of the subjective experiences of young first and second-generation migrants and refugees into the everyday life urban experiences. The journeys and landscapes of forced migration are narrated in such ways as to show what Reguillo calls the 'clandestine centrality of the everyday life' (Reguillo, 1998).

In general terms, the project aimed to see the crystallization of these experiences into short digital stories as moving beyond already conventional ideals of giving citizen's a

voice through access to the media or media representation through national or transnational broadcasting services. With the aim of having a better picture of local content creation and media practices by migrant youth in Western Sydney we set out a digital storytelling project with participation from 23 young people from the Fairfield and Blacktown areas, who produced a total of 23 short digital stories for online distribution. These come to complement the hundreds of similar vernacular stories being produced monthly across all Greater Western Sydney (GWS) by individuals from diverse communities. The 'African group' in the project was organized with 10 participants, ranging from 12 to 22 years old, plus a father of 49 years old with 3 of his children. The participants were from Sudan (4), Democratic Republic of Congo (5), and Sierra Leone (1). The 'Cambodian group' was organized with 13 participants ranging from 9 to 19 years of age, mostly Australia-born second-generation Cambodian-Australians with the exception of one 16 year old young woman arrived as a humanitarian migrant in 2006.

In the Cambodian Community⁸ 47 percent of people are in the age group 25-44 years old, and 11% in the age group 15-24, the age group of our youth group involved in this project. Khmer speaking youth is the sixth largest youth community in Fairfield after Vietnamese, Arabic, Assyrian, Spanish and Cantonese. In terms of the project participants, all were attending school with the exception of one participant who was at university. All were born in Australia, with the exception of three born in Cambodia and another in New Zealand. Preliminary results from a qualitative survey, several focus groups and ongoing participatory video methods provides an initial understanding of high (but decreasing) levels of bilingualism and the interest to participate in local community events and gatherings and are sophisticated users of social media applications. While all but one of the digital stories were narrated in English, all the participants manifested the importance of telling stories in Khmer, arguing that there are not many spaces to listen to Khmer stories or information in Khmer.⁹

The project process was designed on the basis of participatory methodologies in practice-led research and participatory video, including ethnographic action research for over a period of 12 months. With a few exceptions, the participants were computer and Internet savvy, and all had access to a computer and the web either at home, school, university or

⁸ An important proportion of Cambodians living in Australia (71.6percent) arrived in Australia prior to 1996. The larger migration from Cambodia to Australia took place between April 1975 (beginnings of the Khmer Rouge Regime) and June 1986, where over 12,000 Cambodians arrived in Australia under the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Programme. Smaller numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers from Cambodia arrived in the period 1986-1996. Today, the Cambodian communities make up 24,530 people, most of them living in New South Wales and Victoria. A large majority of the Cambodia-born people in Australia are Buddhists, and while across the state of New South Wales 2.2 percent of the population is Buddhist, in the Fairfield LGA this figure rises to 17percent of the population. According to the 2006 Census, 94.6percent of Cambodia-born are Australian citizens, significantly larger than the estimated rate for all overseas-born of 75.6percent. The median individual weekly income for Cambodia-born people in 2006 was significantly lower (30percent) than the average median individual income for the total Australian population and 25percent lower than the average overseas-born population and with an average unemployment of twice as high as the total Australian population.

⁹ While it is not the scope of this article to provide a detailed analysis of the Khmer media ecology, it is important to mention some of the very few outlets for Khmer programs and content, such as Radio SBS 2EA (public national broadcaster) which transmits a Khmer Programme in Sydney and the Khmer Community Radio Programs on 2GLF 89.3FM in Fairfield and SWR FM Blacktown which broadcast only once hour a week. The local ethnic Smaraday Khmer Newspaper also provides local news for Western Sydney residents.

work. Therefore, the research project took an approach that shifted the debate from digital divide to that of digital inclusion. Most important, both the research and the final online video productions indicate the intimate relationship between identity and territory, in this case how migrants and refugees continue to shape the cultural capital and spatial identity of Western Sydney. Existing within the fissures of public and commercial media structures, these vernacular stories in digital form are producing a social text of community agency that is not possible in mainstream media. The participants in our project were able to acknowledge that making local content with universal meanings is in fact creating a social dialogue for their communities through which they can see themselves not only as passive consumers of media but also as active makers of media. By having access to their own forms of media and communication, second generation and recently arrived migrants will have another mechanism to actually define, claim and give meaning to their citizenship – and hopefully, create the social and political openings and alternative spaces where their voices and stories might be listened. In this regard, the workshops, community screenings and online accessibility of the digital stories created form a unique space for listening. This becomes important when acknowledging that the process of making digital stories by the Cambodian and African participants turns out to be a way by which individual experience is transformed into public culture.

Preliminary outcomes of our research can demonstrate that the digital stories have important consequences in giving young African refugees a mechanism to speak back to the complex and systematic racialisations of place constructed through the mainstream media. In a similar way, the Cambodian youth were able to speak back to their parents, and raise complex issues of intergenerational tension. In both cases, we were able to observe how young refugees often have needs that are distinct from those of older refugees, in the fact that ‘as well as adjusting to resettlement in a new country, recovering from trauma, navigating education, employment and complex bureaucratic systems, refugee young people must also negotiate family, peer, individual and community expectations within the context of adolescence’ (O’ Sullivan and Olliff, 2006).

In the case of the work done by the group of second-generation Cambodian-Australian young people, the stories produced reflected in many cases intergenerational tensions with their Cambodian parents and grandparents. In most of the stories the young media-makers presented themselves as growing up in the ‘global city’ and being bilingual in English and Khmer while their parents were represented as having had very hard living and migration conditions and being very strict. In many cases, it was possible to observe a particularly painful generation gap, between the parents who lived through the years of the Khmer Rouge and fled to Australia as refugees, and their Australia-born children, who know very little about it. The taboo of the Khmer Rouge years was subtly brought in some of the young participants adding to the tension on the day in which the children screened their films to their parents at a community screening in the local school.

Many of the stories produced demonstrate these complex negotiations. One 15-year old Cambodian participant chose to tell the story of his father, a 65-year old man who migrated from Cambodia and had a hard life, being forcefully enrolled in the Vietnamese Army during the Vietnam War due to a shortage of soldiers. After losing his brother in the war and returning to Cambodia he is captured by the Khmer Rouge. In the story we are told how the life of his father was spared due to his ability to play traditional music. The story looks up at the father figure with respectful amazement, telling of the hardships of his life as a young adult back in Cambodia, the difficulties of his migration to Australia, and the strict rules imposed by the father on him and his sister. The images

combine archival sepia-tone images of the father as a young soldier, with images of his lucky escape and arrival in Australia and how he faced sustained discrimination, and also current images of him as an important community elder that teaches Cambodian traditional music in Cabramatta. During a community screening at a Cabramatta school, the father expressed admiration and pride at his son's story, indicating he could now see how relevant Cambodian culture still was for his son. This is extremely important given the intergenerational tensions existing within migrant communities between first and second-generation migrants. For Fairfield City Council, a partner in this project, it was important that the project addressed these tensions as first generation Cambodians had built important social and cultural community structures and were concerned that these might be lost within a generation. For the young participants of Fairfield and Cabramatta, the digital stories were a precious space to convey their views about growing up bi-cultural and bi-lingual in Western Sydney, and while they shared most of the interests of any teenager immersed in global popular cultures, they also cared for their Cambodian heritage. The relevance of Cambodian culture and the everyday cultural complexities of negotiating a Cambodian-Australian identity are taken up in many of the Cambodian digital stories. Another 19 year old young woman retells a trip she made back to Cambodia with her parents and the everlasting impressions of her senile grandmother, who remembered her when she left for Australia as a 2-year old, but due to dementia could not recognize her now. In less than 3 minutes, this story gives a powerful account of loss, of cultural displacement and the complex hyphenated identities of migrant young people in Western Sydney.

The digital stories produced became incipient key sites of media representation of migrant identity, with its own circuits of circulation and dissemination outside of the margins of the media centre and into new realm of community cultural production. In each case, the participants were able to represent themselves as the protagonists of the stories and to construct narratives of universal value and meaning based on their individual stories of migration and resettlement in a new country as well as how they negotiate their identities in a new urban landscape. This is important in terms of building inter-communal networks and connecting communities of different origin, which has implications not only for Western Sydney but also for all of Australian society. Multiculturalism implies the dialogue among communities without the brokering of official histories of dominant Anglo Australia and here lies the importance of citizens' media for migrants. It is an opportunity to become active citizens not by holding an Australian passport, but by being resources of cultural power and agency in their communities. This was a recurrent theme in many of the 23 digital online films produced during our project.

As in the case of the Cambodian group, the African digital storytelling part of the project was informed by broader political and cultural contexts surrounding the experience of young African refugees arriving in Western Sydney, many of whom had arrived in Australia after spending several years in refugee camps and having been through exceptional episodes of violence. The beginnings of the project coincided with the general federal elections of November 24, 2007 in which the conservative neo-liberal coalition led by former Prime Minister John Howard was defeated after 12 years in power. It also coincided with a particularly nefarious controversy in the media and public opinion caused by comments of the former Immigration Minister about African refugees facing integration issues and the government limiting the quota of African humanitarian refugees. For the young African participants from Sudan, to whom the Minister's remarks were being directed, it was critically important to tell stories of positive

integration, where they were able to bridge their experiences of childhood in Sudan, through the time spent in refugee camps to their new school or university lives in Western Sydney.

Another important outcome of the project was the participation of a Pygmy family (a father and 3 children aged 11-17) from D.R Congo¹⁰, all whom produced short digital stories about their personal experience of forced migration to Australia, and the ongoing plight of the Pygmies as Indigenous peoples of the central African forests and the current human right abuses being put on them. The father, a Pygmy activist and one of a handful of Kitembo speakers in Australia (a local dialect only spoken in D.R Congo), was very concerned with taking this opportunity to tell his story of forced migration to Australia after the war broke in DR Congo in 1998. In his digital story he tells how he and his family escape to the forest, eating whatever they could find, before being relocated to Kenya and then Australia in 2001. His two sons and one daughter also explore the complexities of their Pygmy-Bantu heritage and growing up as Congolese-Australians. In many regards all of the African stories reflected the very particular experiences of migration from contexts of civil war in their home countries (Sudan, Sierra Leone, DR Congo) to intercultural tensions in their everyday life experiences in Sydney.

What the screening of the digital stories revealed, was the power of the medium to act as poetic tools for self-representation and 'talk-back' to their older generations, who became active listeners of what their children were saying to them, how they were imagining and visualizing their stories of migration and settlement in Sydney. From this perspective, the participants were able to use the digital stories as a form of healing historical disruptions in cultural knowledge and social memory and as an innovative and simple way of bridge cultural identities and ideas about Australia and Cambodia between the two generations.

The Fairfield Stories digital storytelling project was based on a process of valuing peoples' life experiences as stories worth hearing, which often works as important tools for narrative therapy for people who have undergone displacement and trauma, but in this case proved to be important ways through which young people wanted to be active citizens by validating and acknowledging their diverse experiences and stories of displacement (in the case of the African group) and of growing up as Cambodian-Australians (in the case of the Cambodian group). In both cases these digital storytelling media practices allow for the location of citizenship to be situated 'outside the frame of the nation state' (Gow, 2005). The production of short films for online distribution allowed young participants from these communities to 'find a voice' (Tacchi, 2008) of their own to narrate their personal stories of migration to Australia, how they negotiate their identity in everyday cultural practices, or the intergenerational issues with their parents and relatives in their home countries. As Tacchi suggests, 'the notion of "voice" represents in many ways a development zeitgeist, combining participatory approaches to development and local content creation' (Tacchi, 2008). In the case of the African group, there was an important aspect of finding a voice of their own to challenge media stereotypes of integration in African communities in Blacktown and Fairfield. But most importantly, the workshops and screenings became a critical space for active listening. Listening to similar stories of refugee experiences, through which a rich embodiment of

¹⁰ The Congolese community in Australia is very small - the 2006 Census identified around 620 residents of which 95percent of whom were humanitarian entrants. The level of linguistic, religious and cultural diversity among the Congolese population is very high, with Swahili, French, Lingala, Kirundi and Kitembo as languages spoken.

intercultural dialogue took place. As Dreher (2008) has recently suggested, by shifting the attention from a politics of speaking to a politics of listening, the attention to listening shifts 'the focus and responsibility for change from marginalised voices on to the conventions, institutions and privileges which shape who and what can be heard in the media' (Dreher 2008). As Downing (2007) also claims 'active listening' becomes in this sense becomes a key component of citizenship. In this way, we can think of moving beyond the paradigm of digital storytelling as individualized media practices onto the collective experience and collective memory of communities in dialogue who engage in active listening.

In both cases we could argue that emerging practices of citizens' media could act as 'antibodies of commercial mainstream media' (Lewis 1993), which in the case of ethnic communities in Western Sydney can be critical, as individuals can claim a political and subjective space for their public voices as they correct the distortions and bias of mainstream media that would otherwise remain unchallenged. Citizens' media emerge then 'as fracturers of the symbolic' (Rodriguez, 2001,150), allowing for symbolic resistance and contestation to potentially take place. This is particularly important given the symbolic gap separating Western Sydney, from Sydney the global city, and thus allowing for the emergence of a multiculturalism from below as Neilson asserts. Citizen's media reinstate the local dimension and in this regard it seems like an appropriate strategy to frame local content creation by ethnically diverse populations in Western Sydney, particularly through youth community-based media practices. Young people are perhaps the largest resource in development if we think that 40% of the world's population is under 20 years of age and over 1 billion people are between the ages of 15 and 25. The two workshops and related research with digital storytelling media production among young migrants in Western Sydney match the reflections presented at the 2003 and 2005 World Summits on the Information Society about the importance of empowering young people as leaders and decision-makers in their own communities and as champions of participation. What our project demonstrates in line with global digital storytelling initiatives is that digital storytelling 'challenges the traditional distinction between professional and amateur production, reworking the producer/consumer relationship' (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009, 5). The 23 participants involved were for the first time producer of content about their stories and their communities, not subjects of news reports and mainstream media representations, whether racist or fair. The product of the project (23 short 3-minute films) is an important outcome. But more important was the process by which these young participants were able to discover the relevance of making local content that best represents their views and that of their communities; of telling stories and seeking the capacity to be heard in their own right; of reshaping, although at a micro level, the representation of cultural diversity in mainstream media and ultimately, presenting a view of what participatory democracy looks like from the bottom-up. Digital storytelling already announces a post-broadcast ecology, where the spaces and circuits of cultural production that today exist for migrant and refugee populations in user-generated content production offers renewed opportunities for self-representation.

Final Remarks

During the last decade or so there has been a symbolically violent backlash of multiculturalism in Australia, a period where multiculturalism has become above all a managerial strategy for the administration and control of diversity. The context of community cultural development work in Australia over the past decade can be

characterized by a fragmentation of social movements, social networks and local social solidarities, and a formal de-politicisation of community media strongly influenced by the funding arrangements that have shaped the sector over the last 12 years and the role of mainstream media in fostering fear and misconceptions regarding refugees. This model has strongly developed as a donor-driven and increasingly output-driven enterprise disregarding long-term processes of social change and cultural transformation driven by the communities themselves.

However, there is an extremely high and increasing level of interest from diverse emerging and established local communities in Western Sydney to produce local content and have their voices heard and their images seen through a more active engagement as media producers. One of the partner organisations in this project, ICE, is constantly inundated with proposals and initiatives to work with diverse established and emerging migrant communities. Using communication for social change frameworks we aimed to illuminate the outstanding potential of this region for new ways of understanding intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity, social inclusion and civic-driven change, in this case through digital storytelling practices. Current community media research worldwide indicates that the capacity to affect social change through participation in community media has the potential to lead to sustainable local content creation if participating individuals and communities own the process and content of communication. In this sense, the article identifies the urgent need for longitudinal, multi-agency, and grounded communication and cultural research on community media practices in Western Sydney taking a more transnational perspective.

In line with contemporary community media research initiatives, we developed a short pilot research study to begin to understand the connections between community media and social inclusion in Western Sydney, Australia. The project was aimed at questioning conventional constructions of the notion of citizenship and how it has been used and reproduced in community development contexts. An important interest in the project was how through digital storytelling practices young Cambodian and African participants were able to find their own voice to speak back to older generations and the dominant society. How they were able to create their own images of self and their personal stories and cultural environment; how they were able to see themselves as active speakers and listeners, inventing and reinventing their hybrid identities as cosmopolitan Australians; and also, how they were able to use digital storytelling as a novel form of active civic engagement and participation, of social and cultural memory, and above all, as a way of placing them into the future as young leaders of their communities.

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