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# A partial promise of voice: digital storytelling and the limit of listening

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## A partial promise of voice: Digital Storytelling and the limits of listening

*The continual rise of participatory media offers increasing opportunities for non-professionals and marginalised communities to tell their stories. In the policy arena, Australia's Social Inclusion Agenda and international debates on indicators of wellbeing name 'voice' as a key capability for social inclusion and individual flourishing. In this paper I engage recent scholarship on 'listening' and 'voice that matters' to highlight the limits of the participatory media genre of Digital Storytelling and of the social inclusion category of 'voice'. The discussion is illustrated via examples from public launch events for 'mini-films' produced in digital storytelling projects facilitated by Information Cultural Exchange (ICE), a new media arts organisation working in Sydney's cosmopolitan western suburbs. While these public events ensure a process of 'voice', I argue for a greater commitment to political listening in media research, practice and policy, lest the promise of 'voice' remain only partially fulfilled.*

'It's really important for the participants to see people's responses and hear what they've got to say. To have people really respond is so powerful, especially if their experience has been that people don't want to hear what they have to say' (Caitlin Vaughan, Manager of Research and Policy, ICE)

While much research, policy and practice around participatory media rightly focuses on the importance of finding a voice and speaking up, Caitlin Vaughan's comment highlights the significance of response and recognition. Describing digital storytelling projects facilitated by new media arts organisation Information Cultural Exchange (ICE), Vaughan turns our attention to processes of 'listening' in response to speaking up. This paper explores the practices, possibilities and politics of 'listening' in response to digital storytelling projects run by ICE with emerging communities in Sydney's western suburbs. If, as Vaughan argues, response is a vital outcome to these projects, what is the evidence for 'listening' in response to the 'voice' enabled by participatory media? Focusing on public screening events in particular, I find tensions between the celebration of voice and the challenge of political listening that might ensure what Nick Couldry terms 'voice as a value' (2010). I argue for a dynamic conception of voice in which listening is clearly foregrounded, lest our social policy and media practice entrench a partial promise of voice that is not adequately valued.

The argument develops over four sections. I begin with an overview of the emergence of 'voice' as a key capability for social inclusion. I identify a vital challenge for the social inclusion agenda, and for participatory media: the need to enable not only the process of speaking or storytelling encapsulated in the category of 'voice', but also to ensure that the content of voice is adequately listened to. The second section outlines the research, which examined the dynamics of listening and voice at public screenings of digital stories produced in ICE projects via participant observations and interviews. I identify two key factors contributing to limited listening: the tensions inherent in the conventional digital storytelling model; and a lack of institutional commitments to political listening. The concluding discussion argues that the Social Inclusion category of 'voice' may indeed enable the democratisation of speaking and media participation, yet still fail to adequately democratise conventions of 'listening' and recognition. In order to fully realise the promise of 'voice' in media practice, research and policy, a complex and dynamic conception of 'listening' is required.

### SOCIAL INCLUSION, VOICE AND LISTENING

Social Inclusion is currently the key framework for social policy in Australia. Adopted in late 2007 by the incoming Rudd Labor government, the Social Inclusion Agenda replaces earlier

explicit policy commitments to multiculturalism, equal opportunity, and to access and equity. While the Social Inclusion Agenda has relatively little to say about media and communications specifically, the category of 'voice' has a prominent place in the policy. The official website states 'all Australians should have the resources, opportunities and capability to ... have a voice, in influencing decisions that affect them'. This definition of voice has a long history in research on media, participation and democracy. Here in the Social Inclusion Agenda is a classic statement of the role of voice in democracy and of participation as having an influence on decision-making.

This statement of 'voice' as one of the key 'capabilities' for a socially inclusive society echoes recent developments in social policy in Western Europe and in Britain under 'New Labour' in particular (Lister 1998). The emphasis on 'voice' is a key component of the 'capabilities approach' developed by Amartya Sen and others in the area of development economics, and popularized in the *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009).

In this paper I argue that a complex and dynamic conception of 'voice' is needed in order to ensure effective strategies for media and social inclusion. Specifically, we must attend closely to the practices and politics of 'listening' in order to achieve meaningful voice. I illustrate the argument with examples from a number of digital storytelling projects which aimed to skill young people from emerging communities in western Sydney to 'speak up', tell their stories and 'find a voice'. The theoretical framework is drawn from recent work on 'voice that matters' (Couldry 2010) and 'listening' (O'Donnell et al 2009). In contrast to the work on capabilities and voice in development economics, the recent work of Nick Couldry and *The Listening Project* begins with media studies perspectives highlighting the specifically *communicative* dimension of voice, stressing the need to attend fully to 'listening' as the 'other side' of communication. This scholarship sounds a cautionary note lest media research, policy and practice focus on a narrow conception of 'voice' which does not in fact ensure the crucial outcomes of 'voice that matters' or political 'listening'.

Nick Couldry argues that contemporary neoliberalism offers proliferating opportunities for voice, but not necessarily listening, 'a system that provides formal voice for its citizens but *fails so markedly to listen* exhibits a crisis of political voice ' ... 'a recognition crisis' (2010: 101). Writing about digital storytelling in development contexts, Jo Tacchi finds a similar dilemma of voice in play:

'such voicing may be encouraged, but nevertheless not be *heard*. Participatory approaches may themselves turn out to constitute 'top-down participation', where participation constitutes 'insiders' learning what 'outsiders' want to hear, or simply an exercise in administrative task-sharing or the necessary rhetoric to win funding' (Tacchi 2009: 170).

Couldry in turn argues that societies such as England and Australia seemingly offer opportunities for 'voice' or participation, but all too often this is voice that does not matter or does not have an influence on decision-making (2009, 2010). This he analyses as a refusal to *value* voice.

The homepage of the Australian government's Social Inclusion Agenda offers an example of an offer of voice hand in hand with a failure to value voice. The only visible manifestation of the commitment to 'voice' evident on the webpage of the Social Inclusion Agenda is a 'have your say' discussion forum, posing the following questions:

What would a 'socially inclusive' society look like to you? What do you think are the three most important characteristics of a socially inclusive society? What impact do you think greater social inclusion would have on your local community? Do you think greater social inclusion would help everyone in the community?

As an offer of 'voice', this is hardly inspiring, and the level of participation is unsurprisingly low. The questions are dry and bureaucratic with no indication that they are derived from any

identified community concern or citizen-led initiative. More importantly, there is no indication of where contributions might go or how they might matter. If one were to participate - who would read the comments? In what way would they contribute to deliberations or decision-making beyond the 'have your say' discussion forum?

In fact, the options for 'voice' on the website of the Australian Social Inclusion Agenda look like a classic case of voice that doesn't matter, that does not, in fact, have an influence on decision-making or policy. Nor is this an isolated example, as Jim MacNamara (2008, 2012) has analysed the many empty consultation processes of 'egovernance'. The risk of the contemporary offer of voice, then, is that voice becomes limited to 'bare voice' (Couldry 2010) or a process of voice that doesn't matter. The challenge is that voice must be valued.

The recent scholarship on 'listening' focuses on the processes by which voice might be valued, attended to and recognised. The work of *The Listening Project* begins from the observation that media studies has routinely explored questions of voice and speaking, but paid rather less attention to the dynamics and politics of listening. Susan Bickford's (1996) work on the *Dissonance of Democracy* provides a compelling analysis of the lack of attention to 'listening' in Western political theory since the ancient Greeks. While speaking and voice are assumed to be vital for agency and participation, the importance of 'listening' for democracy has been left largely unexamined. In order to redress this imbalance and to develop a more robust understanding of speaking *and* listening, advocates of a 'listening' framework suggest the need to focus analytical attention on processes of receptivity, recognition and response as they connect with more familiar processes of speaking. Listening here is understood not simply as aurality, but rather as a powerful metaphor for analysing 'the other side' of voice - that is the importance of attention and response, openness and recognition to complete the circuits of democratic communication.

In a survey of international literature on social inclusion, Buckmaster and Thomas (2009) report that the framework has been criticised for a focus on 'thresholds' or 'minimum standards' which does little to address the inequalities that persist within the category of 'the included'. The emphasis on the threshold between inclusion and exclusion entails a lack of attention to privilege and the 'mainstream'. The category of 'voice' within the Social Inclusion Agenda could easily be subjected to a similar critique - a focus on voice as a process or the bare opportunity to tell one's story can be seen as a minimum standard which does not necessarily challenge overall inequalities in how voice is valued, nor the unequal distribution of voice as a value within mainstream media and policy settings. A narrow conception of voice may succeed in democratising speaking - but fail to democratise listening. If we focus only on thresholds such as access to communication technologies or to skills training or to distribution, we will not guarantee listening or voice that matters.

## **VOICE and LISTENING at DIGITAL STORYTELLING PUBLIC EVENTS**

By focusing on 'listening' at digital storytelling events, this paper begins to address Nick Couldry's call for detailed empirical work to examine 'in what contexts and under what conditions digital stories are exchanged, referred to, treated as a resource and given recognition and authority' (2008). Similarly, Jean Burgess has argued that as researchers we now need to ask, not who speaks in digital storytelling, but rather who is heard? (2006). To explore these questions, I focused on public events such as project launches and screenings, to look for evidence of 'listening', or recognition and response, beyond the workshops of participatory media. The public events showcased the results of digital storytelling workshops run by Information Cultural Exchange during 2009 and 2010.

Digital Storytelling is an increasingly popular form of participatory media. In its original format, developed in influential projects at the Centre for Digital Storytelling in California (Lambert 2009) and the 'Capture Wales' project of the BBC (Meadows and Kidd 2009), 'digital storytelling' refers to a specific, simple and accessible media technique that non-professionals are trained in

via a workshop-based process that allows them to tell 'their story'. The resulting 'digital stories' are usually no more than two minutes long, and the basic format involves a recorded personal narrative voiced over a set of carefully arranged images (generally photos that are brought from home by participants). Digital storytelling is increasingly being used within culturally diverse communities as a means to 'talk back' to racist, stereotyped representations found within mainstream media and as a strategy for empowerment through 'finding a voice' (Salazar 2010). Promotional posters and callouts for ICE digital storytelling projects typically encourage participants to 'have your say', 'yarn up', 'tell your story' and 'speak out'.

According to Juan Salazar, digital storytelling provides an opportunity for those marginalized from mainstream media to exercise civil and communication rights, 'refining the content, rather than the form, of citizenship' (2010: 1). Similarly, Rina Benmayor argues that digital storytelling offers a particularly productive practice for cultural citizenship, as 'personal stories of marginalized communities are 'voice acts,' acts of speaking back and claiming cultural difference as the basis for full citizenship' (2008, 2011). Both Benmayor and Salazar have worked with digital storytelling methods, Benmayor in the context of university teaching, Salazar in a project developed in partnership with ICE, The University of Western Sydney, and a local western Sydney council, Fairfield (Salazar 2010). Analysing the 'Fairfield Stories' project, Salazar highlights the vital achievements of digital storytelling projects such as those facilitated by ICE and similar organizations, including: participants come to see themselves as active producers rather than passive consumers of media (12), new spaces of community cultural production and new circuits of circulation are developed outside the mainstream (10), distortions and biases of the mainstream media are corrected (12), and the life stories of people in emerging communities are valued as stories worth hearing (11). Digital storytelling projects can thus ensure vital processes of voice and empowerment.

As well as facilitating cultural production, ICE builds into projects opportunities for participants to have their voices 'heard'. At the end of a project the launch event allows participants to 'showcase' their completed work to an audience. In organizing an ICE launch event there are a few key features that invite acknowledgement and respect for the producers of digital stories. Promotional materials and MC commentary on the night will usually frame participants as emerging artists or filmmakers (instead of, for example, 'disadvantaged youth'). In a similar move, ICE increasingly refers to digital stories as 'minifilms'. The inclusion of local Councillors, and State and Federal MPs on the guest list demands recognition of the participants as (cultural) citizens. Inviting established artists and industry professionals as guests and audience positions the participants as peers and acknowledges them as cultural producers. The organization of these events invites the audience to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of participants, and the practice of telling their story. There is a noticeable 'buzz' and 'feel good mood' which is typical of the 'politics of affirmation' that dominates in community arts (Hawkins 1993). In the discussion that follows, I sound a cautionary note on the potential to fully deliver on the promise of 'voice' for marginalised communities without explicit attention to political and institutional listening.

## **WHO IS LISTENING?**

So just who is listening at public events such as the launch of digital storytelling projects? How and why are they listening? Analysis of ICE projects finds that public launch screenings have effectively facilitated intercommunal listening (Mowbray 2010) and intergenerational listening (Salazar 2010, Lee-Shoy and Dreher 2009) as well as an infectious atmosphere of celebration. Despite the buzz of affirmation typical of screenings and the development of active listening between generations and communities, I focus here on the glass half full, or evidence of missed opportunities and failures to listen. The discussion is intended not as criticism but rather as an opportunity to think through possibilities for more, and more effective, political listening alongside the undoubted achievements of participatory media projects for 'finding a voice' and 'speaking up'.

There is evidence of some disappointment at limited listening, or a desire for further listening alongside the significant achievements of digital storytelling projects such as those facilitated

through ICE. The evidence includes comments from interviews and my own participant observations. In interviews, ICE staff argue that reaching wider and different audiences is a significant challenge:

I think it's hard to get these kinds of stories into the faces of people who hold views that are resistant to hearing them and I think that is the biggest challenge. (Caitlin Vaughan)

Ideally it'd be great to have them shown on SBS all the time. (Maylei Hunt, Digital storytelling facilitator)

Take it to the east and don't only screen it in the west basically. (Amin Palangi, Digital storytelling facilitator)

Interviewees suggest that the 'voice' offered by ICE projects is heard primarily in the 'community' sector rather than the 'mainstream' represented by Australia's multicultural public broadcaster the SBS, is unlikely to be heard by audiences who may be uninterested in or resistant to the stories celebrated at ICE, and is largely confined to Sydney's western suburbs rather than the more conventionally fashionable eastern suburbs. While Sydney's western suburbs have, since the 1950s, been understood as Sydney's 'Other' - a cultural wasteland subject to regular moral panics around culturally diverse and working class communities (Powell 1993, Collins and Poynting 2000) - recent years have seen Western Sydney increasingly recognized as an economic and creative hub with cultural production thriving among its cosmopolitan communities (Salazar 2010: 3). Despite this significant shift in representations of western Sydney, many cultural producers working in the area see a need for further change and wider audiences.

Facilitators of digital storytelling projects also shared a hope that policymakers in particular would listen to the unheard stories elicited through DS projects:

[T]he policy makers are the ones who really need to hear. If they're going to start making policies about multiculturalism and so forth then they really need to be hearing what these communities are going through and their experiences to really understand (Maylei Hunt)

[T]he people who are the policy-makers, who have the resources to actually build the community up, is usually what participants and the communities want to make stories for. (Maria Tran, Digital storytelling facilitator)

These are succinct statements of the social inclusion principle of having a voice that has an impact on policy, framed by some doubt that the DS 'voice' is indeed having an impact, or being adequately heard by policymakers. While there is no doubt that public launch events can generate active listening among the audience, as found by Salazar (2010), the evidence for active listening from policymakers is patchier.

Participants in 'speaking up' projects also discuss a desire to reach wider or different audiences. During an evaluation of the Youth Digital Cultures project at ICE, participants described a range of achievements and desires, including an aim to become a rich and famous entertainer, industry recognition, and a recurring concern that the stories produced need to travel further. Suggestions for wider audiences included: 'different communities - wider Australian audience / anywhere everywhere / the Northies, Eastern Suburbs, people with language barriers, Kevin Rudd'. Here again we see a desire that 'speaking up' projects reach beyond the western suburbs and across cultural differences. In mentioning the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, the respondents also suggest a need for the stories to reach decision-makers.

### **The tensions of digital storytelling**

The evidence for 'voice that matters' through digital storytelling projects at ICE is patchy. The digital storytelling events observed for this research have proved highly successful in celebrating the achievements and stories of participants in DS projects, and less successful in generating

political 'listening' understood as sustained engagement with and response to issues raised by marginalised voices. As suggested by the emerging critiques of the DS 'formula', the genre itself may contribute to limited listening. Jerry Watkins and Angelina Russo (2009), for example, argue that the original model of digital storytelling is an individualistic and prescriptive mode of storytelling, more reactive than interactive. Others suggest that the form is too sentimental, too individualistic with too much emphasis on self-expression and inadequate attention to 'serious' work, or to propagation and dissemination strategies (Hartley and McWilliam 2009: 14 - 15).

The celebration of individual achievement, the politics of affirmation and focus on personal stories can actually work against 'difficult listening' (Bickford 1996, Thill 2009) and engagement with issues raised. In my research, this tension has been most evident at the screening of two explicitly politicised minifilms produced in two different digital storytelling projects - 'Isaac's story' and 'I stepped in my Home'. In these cases, the atmosphere of celebration and affirmation which characterises launch events seemed to work against overtly political forms of listening or engagement with digital stories that have an explicitly political or advocacy agenda.

'Isaac's Story' (2009) focuses on an NGO, Pygmy Solidarity Australia, founded in order to support Pygmies in Central Africa to enjoy equal rights and improved living conditions. Isaac's voice over explains that Pygmies face ongoing discrimination by Bantus, despite being the Indigenous peoples of Central Africa. After a short period as a teacher, Isaac has spent most of his life as a Pygmy rights activist, founding international organisations as well as an Australian NGO. At the project showcase, 'Isaac's Story' screened alongside a dozen more conventional digital stories focusing on experiences of migration and integration. While 'Isaac's Story' sought to raise awareness of discrimination against Pygmy's and the work of the NGOs, the launch event did not generate shared discussion of the contents of the digital story, nor any sense of how the audience might support the work of the NGOs. Like all the digital stories screened at Fairfield Stories, 'Isaac's Story' provoked congratulatory applause, but the format and feel of the launch did not lend itself to closer engagement with the political demands highlighted by this mini-film.

'I stepped in my Home' (2010) also contained political demands and references to ongoing conflict which did not sit easily within the conventional format of a digital storytelling launch event. Produced by Bader, an Arab Australian teenager, 'I stepped in my Home' recounts his attempts to visit the village of his father and grandfather in Palestine. The visuals include toy soldiers burning and a final graphic spelling out 'Free Palestine' while Bader's voiceover describes his frustration at being denied access through Israeli checkpoints. In the fast-paced lineup of the launch event, 'I stepped in my Home' screened among hip hop videos and digital stories focused on a young woman's origami hobby and another's dream of becoming a famous writer of vampire fiction. Bader's story generated enthusiastic applause before the MC's cheerful quip 'moving right along' led into the next screening. As with 'Isaac's Story', the celebratory mode of the event did little to encourage engagement with the explicitly politicised content of 'I stepped in my Home'.

For all the care and attention that goes in to generating listening and affirmation at public launch events such as those organized by ICE, the issues behind more politicised stories are unlikely to be meaningfully or productively discussed. While generating attention and celebration for participants in digital storytelling projects, the events do not foreground debate or politics or issues or advocacy in the conventional sense. Digital storytellers are celebrated for 'speaking up' and claiming 'voice', but there is little opportunity to explore the ways in which politicised voices might make a difference.

### **Beyond celebration**

There is a tension, then, between the aim of facilitating 'voice' for groups and individuals who are rarely heard in media, and the limited mode of listening generated by celebratory launch events. One of the originators of digital storytelling, Joe Lambert of the Centre for Digital Storytelling in California, has recently suggested that the three-day workshop process is 'greatly limited with regard to instilling a sense of social agency':

We could shift our work to make it more explicitly about reviewing the pieces, and finding appropriate social contexts for sharing the work that would enliven individuals and their communities to their potential for action. ... Those projects that take people from their personal stories to more broadly defined projects ... tend to build the kind of cohort structure that supports self-agency and broader social awareness' (2009: 89).

In a similar vein, I argue that for digital storytelling projects to fully ensure voice that matters, further innovations in the format are required, alongside the sustained development of strategies for circulation, engagement and debate beyond the celebratory dynamics of most launch events.

Two international examples demonstrate possibilities for innovation in the format and dissemination of digital storytelling for an explicit social change goal. In Brazil, for example, the project 'One Million Stories of Youth' adapts digital storytelling techniques with marginalised young people in order to build a social movement (Clarke 2009). The project deliberately extends the original DS model to focus more on dissemination, circulation and take up of the stories. The plans are to work with web interactivity and with young people as change agents who 'will be responsible for embedding the stories within multilevel frameworks of national, municipal, and community institutions and organisation' (Clarke 2009: 145). In a similar vein, Jo Tacchi (2009) explains the need to adapt the DS format for a social change or advocacy function. In 'Finding a Voice' projects in India and Nepal, project organisers added journalistic techniques of 'the five Ws (what, who, when, where, why) to typical digital storytelling (Tacchi 2009: 172). The projects also developed strategies for dissemination focussed on generating debate on issues as well as celebration. Local screenings were used to generate group discussions among participants and to encourage others to join the debate. In Nepal digital stories produced at a rural community library were screened at a meeting in the capital Kathmandu, and subsequently picked up by a national newspaper and local radio station. The resulting project both demonstrated the value of innovation in DS techniques as well a challenging what counts as 'valid' storytelling for social change.

These two projects suggest important strategies for digital storytelling to enable 'voice that matters' by focusing on 'listening' beyond the celebration of individual achievement. The examples of 'One Million Stories of Youth' and 'Finding a Voice' demonstrate that that the DS emphasis on personal narrative can be productively extended to incorporate strategies from journalism and from advocacy media. Both projects emphasise dissemination and discussion beyond the screening for families and friends - aiming also to generate discussion and debate about issues raised, and to involve stakeholders and policymakers in responding to the content through processes such as workshops, forums or consultations.

### **Institutional responsibilities**

The challenge of ensuring listening in response to participatory media clearly must not rest solely with community organizations such as ICE. It is vital that institutions and policymakers do not simply promise 'voice', but commit also to listening. The phrase 'having an influence on decisions that affect them' in the classic definition of 'voice' in Australia's Social Inclusion Agenda focuses our attention on the listening practices of institutions which debate and apply policies. The evidence for institutional listening in response to the 'speaking up' projects developed at ICE is uneven. There is certainly considerable evidence for changing perceptions and changing funding priorities among key stakeholders in Western Sydney community arts and cultural development (Ho forthcoming). There are also indicators of limited listening. In rare circumstances, this might take the form of censorship, such as occurred with the Media Spaces and Places project in 2002. Produced at the height of 'border panic' politics in Australia (Poynting et al 2004), this project included a poster critical of Australia's hardline policies on asylum seekers, produced by communities in western Sydney. The federal funding body refused permission for the poster to be publicly displayed, indicating not only an institutional refusal to listen, but a refusal to allow the possibility of public listening as well.



A further indicator of listening - and also the absence of listening - is the presence and the engagement of 'VIPs' at ICE launch events. ICE has established a reputation for attracting VIPs such as local politicians and policymakers, funding bodies and industry representatives to their high-profile and high quality public events. Just as the presence of VIPs at public events can be an important indicator of recognition and impact, the actions and response of VIPs can also indicate listening, or a lack of listening:

'[T]o know that if they're listening or not is, after the event, how the level of interaction is with the participants. Because I notice that sometimes they might say, "Oh, I got to go; I got to, you know... I want to say my speech and then I want to run off." So we know (slight laugh) in that case, they haven't seen any stories, and they're probably just there to do their job' (Maria Tran)

'Well, I think it's only when you actually talk to these people. When you invite them to come to the launches, when you actually have a conversation with them and when they start making changes with how they starting writing policies per se' (Maylei Hunt)

It is not uncommon for a local Mayor or dignitary to attend a launch event but provide no indication of engagement with the stories being told. Rushing off to another engagement, a disappearing dignitary can function as a promise of listening that is not fulfilled.

Even where digital storytelling is used with the specific purpose of community consultation, there is often little evidence of take up and engagement with the content beyond a celebratory launch event. The Story Exchange 2009 'aimed at consulting children and young people about the strengths and needs of their neighbourhoods' in Western Sydney. The project culminated in a successful launch event attended by more than 100 family, friends and school representatives. Yet there is little evidence of further consultation or negotiation from the very policymakers who funded the project. Here the 'voice' of digital storytelling appears as the endpoint of consultations, rather than as a productive starting point for institutional listening that might ensure the voice of participants truly matters.

As the offer of voice proliferates it is essential that funding bodies and institutions make good on the promise through listening. While there is a need for innovation in the format and the dissemination of digital storytelling in order to ensure that voice is valued, it is also crucial to shift some of the responsibility for voice that matters from community organisations such as ICE and on to the key institutions of media, arts and policymaking. For example, project funding bodies may be well-placed to broker opportunities for the issues raised in DS mini-films to be heard beyond the community of participants. This could occur through further public forums, or through brokering with mainstream media and cultural institutions such as the SBS or major film festivals, to name but two. Policymakers could ensure that the outcomes of digital storytelling and similar projects are explicitly addressed in policy deliberations. Mainstream media have a vital role to play in ensuring that the stories travel more widely and reach wider audiences.

These suggestions entail a shift in emphasis for media research, practice and policy - from the mere value of processes for voice, to a focus on institutional responsibilities to ensure listening for voice that matters. It is important that the call for 'listening' not be interpreted as an argument that ICE or similar organisations need to become more savvy or further politicised in order to ensure that (digital) stories are heard. Indeed, ICE is already one of the leading organisations in the sector in terms of innovative strategies for attracting audiences and encouraging engagement. This is sure to continue, as ICE has developed an explicit emphasis on 'listening' and making sure that stories are heard (Torrance 2011). Liaising with mainstream media is emerging as an important strategy for reaching wider audiences. For example, in July 2011 an ICE digital storytelling project that documented the impacts for workers retrenched from a factory closed down by the iconic Australian clothing company, Bonds, was picked up by ABC local radio in Sydney for an extended interview with participants and facilitators of the project.

The argument for 'voice that matters' as developed in this paper is intended to shift some of the responsibility for listening on to mainstream institutions. Beyond ensuring opportunities for voice as storytelling, key institutions must also commit to listening to ensure voice that matters. Again Susan Bickford's (1996) work on listening is useful here - as it emphasises the often difficult or uncomfortable nature of political listening. In contrast to the common assumption that listening may operate as a form of therapy, Bickford instead argues that political listening can be unsettling, risky and challenging. It is precisely this dynamic and sometimes difficult conception of listening that is required alongside the celebration of storytelling that dominates at digital storytelling launch events. As well as applauding participants' achievements, listening can also serve to challenge the 'hierarchies of attention' (Thill 2009) which shape institutional listening.

## **CONCLUSION: Listening beyond Social inclusion**

The preceding sections have sketched evidence of limited political listening in response to digital storytelling projects supported by Information Cultural Exchange. While there is much to celebrate in the work of ICE and similar organisations, and no doubt that digital storytelling projects have democratised media production and allowed untold stories to be shared, the key challenge of 'voice that matters' remains at best partially achieved. The explicit commitment to 'voice' in policies such as Australia's Social Inclusion Agenda is a significant development for research and practice around media, democracy and diversity. It is also imperative to ensure that the offer of 'voice' is not an empty promise, but rather that commitment to voice is accompanied by political listening to ensure voice that matters. Crucially, the opportunity for voice must be understood, not as an end point, but rather as a vital starting point for ongoing processes of engagement and debate, negotiation and response.

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