StoryLab Research Network: An Ethnomediaology Approach to Story-Development

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Abstract

The StoryLab Research Network was a collaborative research project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. StoryLab is an international film development research network of practice-led researchers from Australia, Malaysia, Ghana, Colombia and the UK. Establishing and utilising an ethnomediaology approach, the project conducted workshops with around 15 emerging independent filmmakers in each of the three developing countries of Malaysia, Ghana and Colombia between June and October 2017, during which each participant developed a screen-based story idea. The underlying question the StoryLab Research Networked sought to explore was: if the digital age has democratised the means of filmmaking and film dissemination, thereby enabling new voices to emerge outside of the dominant Western production centres, then what are the stories filmmakers in emerging economies want to tell and how are these stories reflecting a different perspective on living in an increasingly globalised world?

This article is a report on the research project. It will introduce the StoryLab Research Network and its methodology of ethnomediaology. It will then present an overview of stories developed in the three workshops, demonstrating that these stories have strong personal impulses, discuss local socio-political matters and attempt to challenge the dominance of global and national production centres in the shaping of screen realities. I will end the report with a discussion around the workshops' impact and future plans of the StoryLab Network. Information on StoryLab can be found at: www.storylabnetwork.com.

Introduction

'The future of cinematography belongs to a new race of young solitaires who will shoot films by putting their last penny into it and not let themselves be taken in by the material routines of the trade' (Bresson, 1975: 65).

For the first 120 years of its history, cinema has been dominated by a few, mostly Western, production centres. The digital revolution is challenging this hegemonic paradigm. The means of filmmaking, distribution and exhibition have become more accessible, allowing more individuals and cultures to express themselves through the screen and become part of a more diverse global cinema. An explosion of independent filmmaking across the developing world has helped to establish new voices and filmmaking styles (see Lobato, 2010; Baumgaertel, 2012).

This new diversity of voices is the starting point for the [StoryLab Research Network](#) – an international network of practice-led researchers from Australia, Malaysia, Ghana, Colombia and the UK. Establishing and utilising an ethnomediaology approach, the project conducted workshops with around 15 emerging independent filmmakers in each of the three developing countries of Malaysia, Ghana and Colombia between June and October 2017, during which each participant originated a screen-based story idea. The three countries of Malaysia, Ghana and Colombia were chosen because of a professional network that extends from the project leader in the UK, Professor Erik Knudsen, into the leading film schools in all three countries. I, for instance, had a position as Head of the Faculty of Cinematic Arts at Multimedia University in Malaysia at the time of writing the project bid. The three countries represent emerging economies of similar population sizes, along the equator, on three different continents. As an interesting side note, Malaysia and Ghana have gained their independence from Britain in the same year (1957).

Co-investigators in each country advertised the research workshops through relevant professional or educational networks. In my own example of Malaysia, the workshop was advertised through two film festivals ([KL Experimental Film, Video and Music Festival](#); [Freedom Film Festival](#)), two professional networks (writers' and directors' associations in Malaysia) as well as three personally selected film school graduates. Most participants represented the democratised margins of their respective national film industries. They did not work in the mainstream television industry or for big production houses, but independently from these established production models. As a group, the filmmakers we met represented a wide spectrum of filmmaking in emerging markets on three continents – from seasoned veteran filmmakers to recent graduates, with and without formal film education, working across all genres of film, inside and outside of the main production centres of their countries.

The underlying question the StoryLab Research Network sought to explore was: if the digital age has democratised the means of filmmaking and film dissemination, thereby enabling new voices to emerge outside of the dominant Western production centres, then what are the stories filmmakers in emerging economies want to tell and how are these stories reflecting a different perspective on living in an increasingly globalised world? Within a team of four practice-led researchers, under the leadership of Professor Erik Knudsen from the University of Central Lancashire as principal investigator, I was the project's co-investigator, coordinator of the Malaysia workshop and I shared instructor responsibilities with my three colleagues during each of the story development workshops in Malaysia, Ghana and Colombia.

This article is a report on the research project. It is divided into three sections. I will first introduce *ethnomediaology* – the methodology we developed and employed for this research project. I will then present an overview of story ideas created within the three workshops, demonstrating that these stories have strong personal impulses, discuss local socio-political matters and attempt to challenge the dominance of global and national production centres in the shaping of screen realities. I will end with a discussion of the project's impact and future plans of the StoryLab Network.

Ethnomediaology as Media Practice

The StoryLab Research Network developed a methodology called ethnomediaology. Borrowing mainly from ethnomusicology, this approach allowed us to directly work with filmmakers in three developing media industries – granting deep insights into storytelling ambitions, career progression and generally the cultures from which these stories originate. The project's main working method was a 3-day storytelling workshop with around 15 local filmmakers in each of the countries of Malaysia, Ghana and Colombia. Each of the four researchers became an instructor during the workshops, working with three to four participants per workshop. During the first day of the workshop, participants introduced themselves and the themes and narratives they were interested in or had explored in the

past. After an interactive group workshop (trying different ideation techniques) at the beginning of the second day, each instructor would have two individual sessions with their three to four participants in the afternoon. The first session was usually spent on asking questions about the participant's story ideas or developing a completely new idea based on the techniques we explored in the morning seminar. During the second session, we discussed the first draft of a step outline, which would then be reworked by participants overnight and presented on the third day for further feedback from other instructors and workshop participants.

The entire workshop was documented audio-visually. Participants were also asked to record a short introduction video on the first day and upload it to the closed Facebook page of the project. Participants would also upload their final step outline. The Facebook group allowed us to create a more interactive workshop, record the participants' work and, most importantly for us, expose all participants to the work and ideas of their peers in the other countries.

It is important to note that StoryLab was not a film production workshop, media lab or community storytelling project but a film development workshop that ended with a written step outline for a film idea – not a finished film. The research project was interested in the stories that participants want to tell. Participants were free to use these story outlines to develop their ideas further and some of the participants used the network's Facebook page to share work in progress after the workshops.

Figure 1: Screenshot of StoryLab Facebook group (top left), StoryLab Workshop day 1 (top right), day 2 (bottom left) and day 3 (bottom right) sessions.

Ethnomediaology, therefore, is creative practice research mixed with methods of ethnographic fieldwork. Through the direct engagement of researcher and the researched community, a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge takes place. One of the outcomes of such engagement is the co-creation of artistic works, allowing the research to meaningfully impact the participating filmmakers – some of whom continued to develop their stories after the workshop, and/or established useful connections with other participants. This co-creation differentiates ethnomediaology from ethnofiction or ethnographic filmmaking (Sjöberg, 2014), in which creative practice constitutes the final

research output, while in ethnomediaology, the creative act becomes a method of ‘data collection’.

Like ethnomusicology (Nettl, 2015) or ethnochoreology (Hall, 1967), ethnomediaology has its roots in anthropology – the study of other cultures through deep engagement, often in the form of participant observation. While Nettl (2015), as one of the field’s leading scholars, stays clear of arguing for a precise definition of ethnomusicology, he does describe ethnomusicologists as scholars that study non-Western music ‘as a component of culture’ (10). In the most basic sense, this is what the StoryLab did in its own application of ethnomediaology. As in all anthropological studies, primary ‘data’ in ethnomediaology cannot be found in manuscript form but lies instead in the artwork (the participants’ stories) and the interaction between artists before, during and after the creative process. ‘Data analysis’ then becomes a form of personal reflection, based on extensive diary notes taken, video materials collected and artworks developed. Findings in ethnomediaology are personal observations.

Like autoethnography, our approach to ethnomediaology is a social constructionist epistemology (Ellingson and Ellis, 2008) that rejects the claim of the impartially observing researcher. If we cannot ‘study’ another group objectively, and if there is no clear opposition between the researcher and the researched, then, like in autoethnography, reporting in ethnomediaology must be subjective and personal in nature. The researcher, the ‘I’, becomes not observer but participant, not meaning deductor but meaning maker, not reporter but storyteller. In terms of filmmaking, autoethnographic methods are probably best exhibited in what Bill Nichols (2001) described as participatory documentaries.

Figure 2: StoryLab Workshop participants in Ghana (top left), Colombia (top right) and Malaysia (bottom)

The workshops and their stories: from the personal to the socio-political

The following section reports on all 10 stories developed by filmmakers under my mentorship in the StoryLab workshops in Malaysia, Ghana and Colombia. As is the nature of ethnomediaology, the reporting on the collected data takes the form of personal observations.

What may have surprised me the most, from the perspective of a film school lecturer, was that no workshop participant developed purely fictional/fantasy stories – no stories of space

travel, mafia, guns, zombies or murder. All of the stories that the participants developed came from autobiographical impulses, often deeply rooted in personal histories and beliefs. For example, Meliza, from Colombia, started the workshop, explaining that she wanted to:

'... write for children. [Because] they consume a lot of TV shows that unplug them from their country. I want to show them characters, music, environments, animals and children like them; identifying themselves as Colombians or Latin Americans.'

Meliza was raised by a single mother. A lot of her friends did not have fathers in their lives. During the workshop, Meliza developed a short story of a single mother, who recently moved cities. Overwhelmed with her crying daughter during a hectic first day in the new apartment, the mother decides to take her daughter out for a short walk. The walk, involuntarily, extends into an overnight adventure of small obstacles that bring mother and daughter closer together and remind both of each other's love.

Jassmin is a 39-year old scriptwriter from Malaysia. During the workshop, she developed a story about a popular romance novelist, developing writer's block when writing her 10th book. Having to let go of her routine and the controlling care of her parents, the novelist leaves her mother's house to find new inspiration in 'Villa Takeiteasy' – a remote rental property occupied by different extroverted characters that challenge her norms and routines and breathe new life into the novelist and her stories. Jassmin did not reveal the inspiration for her story, but the age, gender, living arrangements and occupation of the protagonist as well as the locations within the story suggested at least some autobiographical inspirations.

Most participants used their story's autobiographical impulses to explore socio-political themes with relevance to their own lives. The workshop participants were socially conscious storytellers that care about the societies they live in. They tried to use stories as a medium to take a stand on issues of importance to them. Remy, from Malaysia, for example, started with a rather vague idea of exploring human emotions and what it means to be human. He developed a story of a young playwright with democratic ideals, asked to perform a play in which he has to accept bribes as a politician (a very common practice in Malaysia). On stage, the struggle between the playwright's political ideals and his character's choices create conflict that mirrors the Malaysian struggle between democratic ideals and political realities - between the need to do the 'right' thing and fulfil economic necessities. In the words of Remy's pitch during the workshop:

'In his character, Adli has been told to accept the 'compensation'. He goes crazy because the amount of the bribe is too much to refuse. He breaks his own democratic principles. Adli sold his soul.'

Thaaqhib, also from Malaysia, started the workshop with a broad theme: While every religion speaks about unity, no religion has ever united us. In his story, he translates this theme into the character of a writer that is tired of writing meaningless scripts for television. When he meets a grieving old piano player, the encounter changes both men's lives. They become friends, without ever discussing their religious beliefs, giving the writer new creative inspiration and meaning in his life, and the grieving old man new hope.

Divine, from Accra, has written and directed three feature films. Told specifically from an African perspective, his often epic stories explore humanitarian issues like slavery or domestic violence. He is currently writing his fourth feature film, which he partially developed during the workshop. The film explores the often unresolvable tension between

mining as economic necessity for a husband and father in a rural Ghanaian village and the underlying illegality of such work.

Daniel is a young and openly gay man from Colombia. In his story, he explores the relationship between a young gay man and his loving mother, who cannot accept his sexuality. The young man leaves his hometown for the capital, Bogota, and enters into a homosexual relationship. When his father dies, he has to return home, and finds out that his mother did not just have an affair with his first boyfriend but also declared his first love for dead – all to change her son's sexual orientation.

'Julio and [his mother] Amparo argue. She discusses his sexuality, he argues that she has lied to him for so long, and now she is the lover of Adam, his ex-boyfriend.'

Luqman may sum up best what I mean by 'from the personal to the socio-political': As a young, modern Muslim, he constantly struggles between his religious beliefs and traditions and the realities of life in a modern multi-ethnic, globalised, urban Malaysia. He pitched this simple and effective story:

He and She

It's evening. He finishes his prayer with his family. He shakes hands with his mother, kisses her cheek. He goes to his room. His mom opens up her phone and watches a religious sermon on video. He is texting someone on his phone - someone with a love hurt emoji. She says 'come over tonight'. He says 'ok, see you there'. He closes his phone and wraps a small box. He meets up with her at her house. All their other friends are there. They are fun and nice but a bit 'out there'. They watch some movies and go for karaoke. Some friend says 'don't worry, nothing haram'. At the end of the night, one friend takes out a joint. It goes around the group of friends. Finally, it reaches her. She takes it and smokes. He stands up and says 'sorry, I got to get some fresh air'. Outside, he gets a phone call. It's his mom. 'Where are you?'. 'I'm having dinner with my friends'. 'Ok'. Then the girl texts him. 'Where are you?'. 'I'm just taking a walk'. 'The others want dinner now'. She texts location. He takes his car and drives to dinner. He sees the girl, and thinks. Pause. He's walking towards the girl. Then he sees the friend who said 'nothing haram'. Doubt. He goes back to the car. The girl sees him. She goes to him. He lets her into the car. She says 'what's going on?'. He says 'it's nothing, I'm fine.' 'No, what's going on?'. 'I'm just really tired. I want to go home.' As she gets out of the car, his hand slides down to the little box he wrapped earlier. He turns around to her and says 'hey'. She says 'yes?'. He says 'good night'. As he gets home, his mother yells at him for being home late. He is quiet, goes up to his bedroom and sits alone. A knock on his door. His mother is there, holding a tray with some snacks. 'Are you hungry?'. He breaks down.

It was my impression that, while participants in all three countries often felt that their voices would not be heard at a government level, they still did not stop trying to make a difference in their immediate environments through the stories they chose to tell. There was no indication of political apathy. In the case of the StoryLab participants in Malaysia, Ghana and Colombia, it seemed like the filmic medium has become so accessible that it created a positively naive energy and a need to express, regardless of commercial considerations, personal stories for small audiences, outside of the mainstream mass entertainment.

The workshops and their stories: challenging traditional production centres

Global media is dominated by stories from only a few production centres – mainly Hollywood and to lesser extent Bollywood, a few European countries, China, Korea and

Japan. Participants of the three workshops acknowledged this and tried to find ways to represent their lives, experiences and surroundings through the stories they developed. By doing so, they attempted to challenge the dominance of traditional production centres in the shaping of screen realities. In Malaysia and Ghana, participants wanted to tell Malaysian or Ghanaian stories. They wanted to see their country's stories represented on the screen. But in Ibagué, which was the only workshop we held outside of a capital city, participants wanted to tell hyperlocal stories – stories that not only challenged the dominance of global but also national centres of media production. Traditional media industries are often situated in the capital cities. This is where the film schools are located. This is also where the production houses and major broadcasters are located. While a country can fight for representation on a political level (schools, funding, broadcasters) – most emerging economies only develop basic media structures in the capital city. The regions remain underrepresented. Digital media provides opportunities to change this and liberate voices. It makes it possible to develop stories such as these:

Adwoa, from Ghana, developed a documentary about Yaba – a high-achieving young girl from a small Ghanaian village. When Yaba comes to Accra to study at university, she drifts into prostitution to afford a better lifestyle. After a series of abortions, she learns that she can never have a baby. Yaba is now working as a midwife and uses her story to educate teenage girls.

During the Colombia workshop, Julio wrote a story about a young boy who learns from his grandfather about the history and techniques of Ibagué's traditional music. Traditional music that, as Julio put it, was an important part of the cultural identity of Ibagué but has been largely forgotten:

The grandson asks:

Why do they call Ibagué, the musical capital of Colombia?

The grandfather takes a guitar and tells the grandson that this instrument has a long history linked to his own life and the city.

Juan has worked as a video journalist and covered stories around violence and displacement in Colombia. During the workshop, he developed a beautifully tragic love story set in Cucuta – a thriving trading town at the border of Colombia and Venezuela. After a free trade agreement between Venezuela and Colombia, Cucuta developed into an important trade centre, where Venezuelans buy essential products that are not available in their country. But in late 2016, the Venezuelan Bolívar started to lose value, eventually spiralling into the world's highest inflation rate – devalued by 1,000%. Venezuelans could no longer afford to buy in Cucuta. Travelling, as a consequence dramatically decreased. Under this historical backdrop, a young Venezuelan man never returns to his girlfriend in Cucuta, who is waiting for him, expecting their first baby:

Pedro finds out about Black Friday; the Bolívar devalued. Maria is out of work and learns that she is pregnant. Pedro leaves Cucuta for Caracas, Venezuela. Maria awaits his call.

Juan reminded me of the potential, albeit hypothetical, impact of hyperlocal stories: I googled the news of Venezuela's hyperinflation in January 2018, four months after the workshop in Colombia. At that time, I could only find the story in sources from South America. The news of Venezuela's hyperinflation reached me again three days after I googled it. This time through the Western news media I consume habitually. Four months earlier, in a storytelling workshop in Ibagué, Colombia, Juan had engaged me in the same event. But Juan did not offer cold, factual news. He captivated me with a personalised, emotional story that stuck with me and opened my mind and heart for the Venezuelan situation four months before the first news item reached me.

The impact of a story-development research workshop

'The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live: a living thing, a story'
(Le Guin, 1989: 198).

'There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you'
(Hurstun, 1942: 71).

The StoryLab Research Network was intentionally designed as a pilot project around a rather basic research question to test the methodology of ethnomediaology and establish a network of practice-based researchers and storytellers in three emerging economies. As such, the project was a great success. We held workshops in three countries with a total of 42 filmmakers, established a Facebook group of 59 members to further potential discussions and collaborations, and developed 42 screen-based narratives that participants were free to continue to develop outside of the workshop – either on their own or with other participants. This is fantastic impact that has laid the foundation for many follow-on projects. For example, Divine from Accra has since shot his fourth feature film on illegal mining and Adwoa continues to document the story of Yaba. Meliza, from Colombia, has not developed her story further after the workshop, but instead formed working relationship with other participants and explores funding opportunities for her storytelling workshops for kids in rural areas around Ibagué.

We started the research project with the overall question of what kind of stories filmmakers in emerging economies want to tell in a digital age that has democratised the means of filmmaking. From my personal observations during the story development workshops, and as reported in this article, the answer was: personal stories that discuss socio-political matters and have an impact on the filmmakers' immediate environments. By doing so, the workshops celebrated the power of storytelling as a basic function of human communication in bringing people together, creating debate, illustrating different points of view, appealing to human emotions, forming communities around shared values, and impacting societies. All of these are important lessons to take away from a workshop and a research project like the StoryLab. But I also understood that Juan's story and all the other stories that we developed through the StoryLab project were not just exercises in storytelling. They could hold value far beyond the limitations of a 3-day workshop. This is the potential power of personal, hyperlocal storytelling. It can, hypothetically, bring local issues to the global stage. And I started wondering, why, despite the digital revolution and democratised access to media production, I am rarely exposed to the stories of Pedro, Yaba or 'He and She' through the media I consume.

During the design of the research project, we had a number of discussions about issues around impact. We tried to avoid going into a foreign country, teaching a workshop and leaving after three days as if nothing had happened. Hence, we established a Facebook group and specifically termed the workshops 'story development' workshops, to indicate to participants that they would be able to use the network established and the ideas developed to continue to work on their projects after the workshops. And a number of participants did.

The StoryLab Network's AHRC-funded research project culminated in a symposium in Preston, UK, in January 2018 (a summary version of which was be viewed [online](#)). During the symposium, we discussed the methodology and results of the research project. And we also started discussing future applications of ethnomediaology and the StoryLab Research Network. Questions arose as to whether story-development workshops could have

increased impact by shifting attention away from the stories themselves towards larger impact goals around the triad of story, sustainable development and production/circulation. Stories bring us together. They hold value as personal therapy, as localised democratic debate, as advertising for ideas or values, and as thought experiments for imagined futures. We posed the question: what if a story-development workshop fits, or not, to solve specific problems of our times? What if ethnomediaology becomes a tool, a methodology, to address problems that are traditionally left to the sciences?

One symposium discussion centred around the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d.). On 25 September 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the resolution 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', based on which 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were enforced on 1 January 2016. The 17 SDGs are: (1) No Poverty, (2) Zero Hunger, (3) Good Health & Well-Being, (4) Quality Education, (5) Gender Equality, (6) Clean Water and Sanitation, (7) Affordable and Clean Energy, (8) Decent Work and Economic Growth, (9) Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, (10) Reduce Inequality, (11) Sustainable Cities and Communities, (12) Responsible Consumption and Production, (13) Combat Climate Change, (14) Conserve the Oceans, (15) Protect Life on Land, (16) Peace and Justice, (17) Partnerships to achieve the Goals.

The 17 SDGs address central global challenges and create actionable goals for a more sustainable world by 2030. With some sources estimating that almost 90% of the world's population under 30 years of age live in emerging markets (Euromonitor, 2014), many of these goals will have to be addressed in emerging economies. Storytelling could play a role here – not just in supporting the sciences by communicating scientific findings. But by bringing stakeholders and communities together, discussing the status quo, imagining local solutions, and communicating these solutions for a sustainable implementation. Such an approach makes storytelling the central method of change, instead of a supporting afterthought.

In urban planning, an approach that puts story at the centre to balance economic growth, environmental health and social justice has been established (Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003). South-Africa's post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Wilson, 2001) is an example in the field of peace and justice. But more can be done. I recently had discussions with colleagues about applying scientific findings but in local contexts and creating local communities of action that bring scientists, artists and communities together in envisioning local applications of scientific solutions through storytelling exercises, and translating these solutions into a series of animations that foster identification with shared goals.

Such an approach to story-development workshops, then, one that puts story at the centre of different stakeholders and creates clear goals for a local community, would ensure that the workshops' impact goes beyond the developed stories. Such an approach would take more resources, of course, but it would impact communities and their sustainable development through ethnomediaology and the story making process. It would also bring storytellers together with professional clients and audiences for their work, therefore impacting their own career growth.

Therefore, a central outcome of the StoryLab Research Network lies in its discussion during the concluding symposium and, in addition to having developed and tested ethnomediaology and established a network of screen practitioners, discussing bigger engagement and impact goals for follow-on projects that put ethnomediaology and the StoryLab Network at the centre of sustainable development goals around the globe.

A short documentary focusing on the impact of the StoryLab project, featuring interviews with StoryLab participants from Colombia, Ghana, and Malaysia, can be viewed below.

Acknowledgements

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