

A SNAPSHOT OF LIFE

MIGRANTS WHO TELL THEIR OWN STORIES DEFY THE COMMON LABELS OF VICTIM OR SCROUNGER AND PROVIDE A POWERFUL COUNTERPOINT TO MAINSTREAM REPORTING, SAYS CLODAGH MISKELLY

Through telling stories about our lives we can make sense of experiences, draw on the past to start to plan the future and enable others to understand how we see the world.

Through hearing stories we learn about how others think, feel and act. We can hear about how they are treated, examine their motives, and can develop shared meanings. We can even be persuaded to act. Sharing stories of people who have experienced migration, for example, can help develop dialogue about the topic and promote social change.

When migrants and refugees arrive or wish to stay their life story can become their lifeline. It is formalised, documented, authenticated (or fails to be authenticated) and judged in order to decide whether an individual can stay or must go.

Tales of migration

In the UK, there are familiar stories about migration. At times of economic crisis it has been evoked as a threat to jobs and at other times we hear stories of asylum seekers as a drain on the public purse. Less often do we hear migrants' life stories told on their own terms. But there are projects working to collect the stories of migrants by migrants, be these to celebrate or reflect on and come to terms with experience, have their voices heard in the media or to influence attitudes and work for social change.

A growing number of these projects are making use of digital stories including a recent project where Panos London worked with the African HIV Policy Network (AHPN).

The project was with a group of African migrants who are living with HIV and were at risk of being removed to their country of origin where treatment is not necessarily accessible, affordable or available. They wanted to make digital stories to help people understand their contribution to life in the UK as well as the impact of threatened removal on their health and families. These stories are being used by the Destination Unknown campaign (www.ahpn.org/campaigns/destinationunknown) to give an insight into these people's lives.

Story-circles and individual narratives

Digital stories are short digital videos (2 to 5 minutes) with a personal scripted narrative soundtrack and still images which are produced using a method developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling (www.storycenter.org). Participants script, record, photograph and edit their own stories during a workshop. At the heart of this process is the story-circle where participants tell their stories, listen to other participants' reactions to them, and can develop and refine the narrative in a mutually supportive environment.

These are crafted, scripted stories. Their brevity requires an economy of language and image and focuses on a few aspects of a life story, or perhaps one important period in their lives. Photos of loved ones, or an important occasion, or objects like a diary or memento can also be a starting point or an organising device for a story. The stories are narrated by the author and sometimes as much can be conveyed by the tone of voice as by the words that are spoken.

The resulting stories are always to some extent a collaboration, they are shaped by the process and facilitation, the format and what is happening in people's lives at the time. However, the intention is for participants to have control

over the content, form and also how and where the story is published and viewed. This can lead to stories that challenge preconceptions or provide a different insight into how an "issue" is lived.

The stories produced with AHPN communicate the impact of the threat of removal on people's lives, health and families. But these are also everyday stories of lives involving volunteering, caring for one's family, being frustrated at not being able to work and wanting to live a productive life.

A digital storytelling workshop is an opportunity to be able to reflect on a story and communicate it to others. Having some control over content, form and distribution are important in contexts where opportunities to tell the story are rare or usually controlled by someone else's agenda. In this case the storyteller can set the terms of reference.

The story allows the participant to escape their labels

Even if the story of migration is the one which will decide someone's future, they should not be limited to telling only that story. They might well want to represent other aspects of their lives beyond their country of origin and legal status. Nor should they be pushed to tell what a well meaning workshop facilitator thinks is the story of their life.

When given the opportunity people have created digital stories which free them from the narrow labels of migrant or asylum seeker, scrounger or victim and instead allow them to be seen as mothers, dance teachers and committed volunteers; stories that convey passion and achievement.

The purpose of telling has implications for what gets told and what gets left out of a digital story, just as it does with journalism and legal cases. Digital stories are subjective and usually heartfelt. They don't make claims to be balanced arguments but this does not diminish their value as ways of helping to understand issues of social justice or change.

A digital story cannot provide the richness and breadth of an oral testimony, nor the facts and detail of a legal testimony. But digital stories do provide carefully crafted glimpses of people's lives and thoughts and experiences as they see them at a certain point in time. As such they can be a powerful counterpoint to other mainstream, or political, narratives and so act as an important means of stimulating dialogue and influencing change.

The migrants' stories from the Destination Unknown campaign can be watched on Panos London website at www.panos.org.uk/?lid=27158



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