The power of stories and being a storyteller

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In her closing piece, Kate Hannah takes umbrage at researchers who decry narrative as not being real research—and, using the stories that the youth writers have shared, highlights the power of storytelling in the freshness, nuance, and hope that they bring to this discussion of technology, identity, and freedom of expression.

Ko Yns Môn te motu
Ko Mynnyd Twr te maunga
Ko Wera, Kotiana, Gloucestershire ahau.
Ko Hughes, MacKenzie, Apperley, Edmonds taku ingoa tīpuna
Ko Kate Hannah ahau.

I'm going to start with a story—because stories are data. You might even have watched Brene Brown's TED talk, *The Power of Vulnerability* (2010), when she refers to her initial discomfort at being described not as a researcher, but as a "storyteller".

> "I'm a qualitative researcher. I collect stories; that's what I do. And maybe stories are just data with a soul…"

South African feminist theologian, Sarojini Nadar, then takes Brown's assertion (and thus plays with the sense that Brown—and other qualitative researchers, myself included, are just "storytellers", a trope made more powerful by Brown's social role as public intellectual lite) and places it within the specifically black, in fact, specifically African feminist epistemology of 'narrative knowing,' describing how story works in research:

> Suspicion of master narratives of knowledge
> Tools of knowledge gathering AND dissemination
> Objection to objectivity
> Reflexivity of the positioning of researchers; and
> Yearning for and working for transformation and change. (Nadar, 2014)

What stories are at work in this place, where we are engaging with the ideas of freedom of expression and freedom of responsible expression?

It feels for many of us that we are teetering on the edge of a precipice, and for some that the ground—the earth—is pulling away from underneath our feet. The democratisation of information offered by the connectedness of the Internet has enabled access to data, information, and each other at never-before-experienced scale—and in that connectedness, that vast sweep of knowledge, wisdom, insight, thought, critique, and opinion, there has been much gained. But there is also a counterpoint to the significant social, emotional, cultural, economic, and human benefits of the Internet.

The earth turns, and we are steady on it, its permeations imperceptible as we move through time and space, living and working on shifting ground. We garner a sense of this shift standing at the tidal zone, at the edge of sand and sea—the tide pulls back, and the sand draws away under our feet. I encourage this sensation, the giddy sense of connection to enormous and fundamental forces, and an embrace of the sense of a loss of control when reflecting on the four essays by rangatahi presented here. This collection of voices of young people and their reflections on responsible expression in the age of the Internet holds us out here on the edge—between what is fixed, static, and what is moving and dynamic.

UNESCO's commitment to responsible expression takes place within historic and contemporary contexts which are both static and dynamic. The United Nations, and UNESCO, bear witness in their formation to the development of the post-World War Two order, which included significant efforts to prevent genocide, crimes against humanity, and to promote and shore up universal human rights. Today, the post-war order is critically assessed by many across the Global South, and is rejected almost entirely by populist strong-man politicians and leaders.

These historic and contemporary contexts shape the information landscape in ways that reflect how colonisation, empire, and capitalism have shaped natural landscapes, and human development. Some of the shifts—the moving ground—that people feel discomforted by are manifestations of communities reclaiming space that was taken or reformed. There is an expression repeated on social media: "when you are accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression"—and in many ways this is the fundamental pull—a sense of displacement which is then captured by stories which seek to drive division.

What is characteristic of these stories is their simplicity. Disinformation—false and/ or misleading information shared or created to cause harm—and conspiratorial narratives are grounded in simplistic elisions of complex and hard-to-process facts. Details given provide a false sense of authenticity, but it is what is left out that matters.

In the divisive language of the so-called 'culture wars' we are told that 'facts don't care about your feelings.' But some of the shifting ground we're experiencing is powerful scholarship and activism which challenges a reliance on archives and printed sources as evidence; "the epistemological question of what can be known and demonstrated by historical evidence" (Hunter, 2017).

Indigenous philosopher Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her paradigm-shifting 1999 text, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, explains the ambivalent swirl which surrounds codified knowledge:

> The word 'research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When it is mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful (Smith, 1999).

When I consider disinformation and its interplay with responsible expression, I lean into the work of Moana Jackson, who describes a deliberate misremembering at the heart of national narratives of encounter and exchange which have dominated New Zealanders understanding of te Tiriti and the colonisation of Aotearoa. The commemorations of 250 years of James Cook's expedition, held in 2019, were presented to the public as stories of encounter between two great voyaging nations, Polynesian and European, which led to the formation of a new nation. This successfully created a discourse of equality—exchange, agency—which generalises to Polynesian and European so as to elide the specific—of Māori, of the British, of the existing state that was destroyed by this set of imperial actions.

In this set of reflections, young people tell us a set of complex, dynamic, ground-shift stories about identity, belonging, life online and life offline, and the ways in which language, imagery, and simplistic stories affect them and their fellow-travellers. They express subjectivities which are nuanced, considered, direct, and kind, in a manner which I have come to expect from

rangatahi, who are at home on the edge between sand and sea, able to steady their footing as the tide pulls.

References

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