

**1 Chris Tse(New Zealand)**  
**Storytelling in the Digital Age | IWP Panel |**

There are days when I wish that the internet hadn't been invented: at its worst, it's a hellscape of unimaginable horrors, where irrationality is king and our patience and decorum is tested on a daily, if not hourly, basis. Of course, there are some benefits that the internet has brought us. In the literary world, this includes being able to connect with other writers from around the world and increased access to books and writing that previously might never have made their way to far-flung shores.

When I think about how much the internet shaped me as a young person, I realise it was a major proponent of my origin story – not only as a poet and a reader, but in the way I was able to excavate and express the many identities I was juggling as a Chinese New Zealander and as a gay man. Since my first steps into the digital world, the internet has been a place where I mask and unmask myself, curating multiple versions of the identities I inhabit. Some of these versions are for me; others are, or have been, what I think the world wants me to be. Depending on the context, this curation has been a form of self-preservation or an exercise in counteracting shame. Plato, who believed all poets to be liars, would have his mind blown seeing how we present slant versions of our lives and grapple with the challenges of presenting the truth on the internet.

In a world where our identities can be celebrated or used against us at the flick of a switch, how we portray ourselves online mirrors the tension some writers face when navigating between the 'I' of the page and the 'I' of their personal lives. Whether posting to social media or starting a new piece of writing, we're making decisions about what and how much we reveal, constantly

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crossing, negotiating and blurring the line that separates fact from fiction. That's why I now see that the internet was, in some ways, a training ground for me to shape my creative practice as a writer.

I'm of a generation that came of age in the mid-90s when the internet was establishing itself as a part of our daily lives at a rapid pace. It's safe to say we had no idea how much would change with this technology, even with the future lingering on the fringes of our earliest forays into its possibilities. Perhaps we went in with low expectations: after all, the promise of flying cars and teleportation in previous visions of the future had yet to materialise.

My earliest joy from surfing the world wide web was finding community in forums and bulletin boards where I could get swept up in the collective excitement about upcoming releases by my favourite musicians or argue about who deserved to win that year's Oscar for Best Actress. The internet was a place for pointless arguments about things that many claim to be experts about. Not much has changed.

In order to participate in these spaces, I had to create a profile with a username – the name that others would recognise me and call me by. Sometimes, but not always, I'd also have to select a user photo or avatar, or include further information about myself, such as age, sex, location, or other interests. It was up to each user to reveal as much or as little of themselves as they desired, and we often could never tell if what others said about themselves was true.

In the intervening decades, social media platforms have come and gone, all with their own take on how we connect with others, but one thing has remained the same: we are compelled to curate a version of ourself for each platform. Whether it's the photos we select and edit for Instagram, the trends we take part in on

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TikTok, the lyrics we used as status messages, or how we sell ourselves on dating apps, each decision is an act of storytelling where we use all the tools at our disposal as writers, such as character, voice, setting, narrative and allusion.

Throughout my career as a writer, I have gone through various stages of deciding how much to reveal about myself in my work, making careful consideration of what readers need to know and what I am prepared make public knowledge. Although there is a difference between what I post on social media and what I choose to put in a poem, there are similar considerations in intent. Both are outlets I use to tell my story. They can exist independently of each other, but they are also two sides of the same coin. Picture this future: the internet as an open archive for biographers and historians to mine for information about authors, their interpersonal conflicts revealed in comments sections, and memes they posted being held up as fragments of manifestos. As writers we can imagine the future – but what will the digital future say about us?

## **2 Smith Likongwe (Malawi) STORYTELLING IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

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The gradual emergence of digital storytelling is slowly pushing traditional storytelling on the brink of disappearance in certain areas of the world depending on the advancement of technology. The preliminary reactions amongst storytellers and story audiences may differ depending on various situations.

Whereas some storytellers may rejoice at the `proliferation of technologies that aid their trade, some story audiences may frown at the sad development.

It is crucial at this point to first address what is lost when digital storytelling overrides traditional story telling. The physical presence of a storyteller in a traditional setting with the audience present brings about unparalleled intimacy. The storyteller is able to gauge the mood in real time and where necessary, react to spontaneous verbal and non-verbal responses by among others, adjusting tone, or pace in order to capitalize on the existing mood to achieve a shared emotional experience.

In many parts of my country, Malawi, and indeed other parts of Zambia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, the indigenous storytelling tradition requires frequent interaction with the audience.

In Chichewa, my local language a storyteller would begin with the following words: *'Padangokhala!'* And the audience would respond; *'Tilitonse!'*. *Padangokhala* means *'Once upon a time.'* And *Tilitonse* literally means *"We are together"* which translates into *"We are listening"*. Where necessary, the storyteller pauses and gives a signal for audience response. The audience responds in unison *'Tilitonse!'*. The traditional call-and-response storytelling strategy is best utilized in these circumstances. As you can see, the storyteller is able to pause for dramatic effect, appropriately create a suspenseful mood and build a towards a climax with an audience they are directly interacting with. Since it is an interactive session, the storyteller is able to pause appropriately for periods of laughter, applause or even weeping as the mood may be. This would be difficult if not impossible in a digital storytelling set-up.

Having looked at the losses, it is appropriate to appreciate the seemingly irreversible trend of digital storytelling that is slowly swallowing the traditional storytelling in certain areas of the world. The first question should perhaps be, should we lament or rejoice as a result of this development? Personally, I have no direct answer for that. It is up to you to decide.

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Before delving into the advantages of digital storytelling over traditional storytelling, it is important to appreciate the general changes in terms of people's concentration and focus spans. I have no scientific proof to present having not carried out any guided research but my general observation amongst the people I am able to observe is that the attention span for adults is dwindling little by little and has started to be almost at par with that of children.

A good number of people seem to be more inclined to be more recipient to shorter and more picturesque renditions of storytelling episodes.

Digital storytelling is able to respond to some of the desires for some audiences. It is easy to integrate various formats such as the use of moving pictures, clearly arranged sound effects to the accompaniment of audio narration. It is easy to combine animation with realistic picture presentations. It is easy to cross-blend real and imagined circumstances.

I should hasten to say, however, that the ease with which digital storytelling is made also makes it easy to fabricate false stories and present them as real. In the process, the reputation of some people may be tarnished. With storytelling, however, that may not be applicable because of the awareness that it is only fiction.

Whereas traditional storytelling may be limited to localized audiences familiar with relevant customs and traditions in the stories, digital storytelling may transcend traditional and indigenous boundaries with relative ease. Writers or storytellers would normally aspire to tell their stories to larger audiences. And with digitalization, it is easier to retain certain renditions of stories as opposed to the traditional storytellers whose stories may keep on changing direction with the passing of stories from one storyteller to another.

I believe the writer is challenged more now to be ready for multi-media storytelling beyond the text written.

### **3 Karoline Kamel Egypt**

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“Stories only happen to those who are able to tell them.” Paul Auster

While I’m talking now with you, I can imagine that a lot of you are already taken by a visual medium with its sensors emanating from your smart phones. Photos, Videos, music, news and love chatting. You are already here but reserved for another place.

Or you are waiting to see how people reacted to your new story you had published or think which quotes you will share with people about this panel. In the age of digitization, there seems to be a fear that our story will not receive the largest possible number of reactions.

In order to know how to tell stories, we must know the difference between publishing a post and writing a story. What spreads quickly from a post is not necessarily the result of effort, but perhaps intelligence and the ability to choose words. However, writing a story, even in the digital age, requires a research process that precedes writing, which makes it a story worth reading. It is not for the sake of a lesson, like much of what spreads on social media, but because it is a literary work worth relying on.

I started my research journey for my second novel by going to Diana Market, a market in Cairo that sells used items of all kinds, including paper documents, magazines, books, and more, my intention was finding papers belong to 1940s, and I did many, but one time, I found a cardboard box full of letters, and it was a real treasure, but not too old, but I opened a letter and I came across a story that had never crossed my mind, letters of a sexual nature between an Egyptian man and his fiancée in the late 1980s who works in Saudi Arabia, texts written in a calligraphic style that is unlike anything we have now in terms of

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abbreviation, and even the use of yellow faces that summarize many feelings from anger to desire.

When I chose a single paragraph from one of the letters to be the subject of my weekly article in a paper newspaper that is still being printed, which makes me happy, its title was "Lipstick with a bill" when the fiancé asked his fiancée about the lack of a kiss attached as usual and guessed that the lipstick had run out and she had nothing to buy it with.

The surprise was the reactions of my readers, friends and followers about their desire to know more about these letters.

Today I am working on a book entirely about her and the letters of another Egyptian man who worked in Iraq in the 1980s, who suffered from depression and wrote to his wife, grieving his separation from his homeland and in dire need of companionship so he would not kill himself. We do not tell stories to get likes and shares, but we write because we have a story and we are honest in telling it and we feel happy while writing it, because we laugh when we read the lines without flattery because we often assume in ourselves a sense of humor that does not exist.

This is the real value of the process of searching between living and archival materials for the purpose of recitation fiction.

#### 4 Phodiso Modirwa

### Native Languages in The Digital Space

1.

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It is estimated that there are over 2000 languages spoken in Africa and as Ngugi wa Thiong'o says, language has a dual character—as a means of communication and a carrier of culture. But any child around schooling age knows that English has always been the standard in Botswana, forget Sekalaka and Setebele, Sembukushu or Sekgalagadi. And so, when we grew up, we practiced hard at it, we laughed at each other when we broke the language and silenced ourselves when our vocabulary failed us.

2.

I imagine a world in which much of how we interact and tell our stories as Batswana is done in our own languages and reflects our culture. As the history of oral storytelling would have it, the folk stories we grew up on and history of our land are not well documented, if they are, they are not as accessible. While that could be mildly forgiven, a newer atrocity has risen next to it, which is that we hardly tell our stories in Setswanatoday, at least not in the world I live in. In a world fast going digital, however it finds us, those are the snapshots of a time that will be remembered of us. The stories we tell of ourselves, how we tell them, reflects who we are and that translates vividly in the digital/virtual world. How far better off we would be if we showed up as authentically ourselves whenever we are called forward; and we are called forward whenever someone makes an internet search to say, *day in the life of a thirty-two-year-old Motswana girl in Gaborone—what to expect when you go to Korea on a budget— or religions and traditions of India*. We are called forward every time we come up as a reference point of any area of our lives. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said in her Ted Talk, titled The Danger of a Single Story, we are all impressionable and vulnerable in the face of a story, it therefore matters what stories we tell of ourselves

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3.

4.

Girl

Hello, I am a girl of many tongues and very few mouths, lend me yours so I can show you the places I have been. When I was a little girl, my mother took me to a faraway country, left me there to learn the black and white dance of another language and people. When I came back, I did not know which way to London by way of elaborate etiquette and pleasantries. To make my journey, I had to uproot a little forest out of my mouth to make way for the smooth faux lawn of the queen's song. Already of age, everything new unfamiliar, I got to work, night and day, *my name...my name is [ \_\_\_\_\_ ], I am*

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*a .... girl, I am a girl. My name is ... [            ]* What is my new name?  
My father said Felicity, so there you go, *dumelang*, my name is Felicity. I lost too much on my way to this conversation to tell you my improvised name, meant to oil my tongue to let me fit into this picture. On my flight here, *I am a girl    I am a girl*. I am still. A girl. Though two and thirty years have passed, though my father in his grave let man herd cattle into his kraal for a name. Still girl. Though I made my way here all by myself.

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