

Storytelling in times of COVID-19

A Survey Report

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FEDERATION FOR EUROPEAN STORYTELLING - 2021

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Introduction

The current global pandemic has placed the arts, culture, and storytelling sector - where human gathering and interaction are inherent to its practice - in crisis. National strategies put in place to fight the virus have demanded that these sectors be the first to close and the last to start back up. Without a clear end in sight and as we sit at the start of 2021, we have all attempted to adjust to the 'new normal' and tried to assemble something from the remnants of the plans, dreams, and intentions we had for the year passed.

There is, however, a glimmer of hope, light at the end of the tunnel or silver lining to this dark cloud. Many storytelling professionals and those making use of storytelling within their respective fields have begun to innovate and produce creative adaptations to their working methods.

The purpose of this report by the Federation of European Storytelling (FEST), is to provide insight into the impact that COVID-19 has had on the storytelling sector and those who work within it. Over a period of several months, FEST collected feedback from storytelling professionals by way of an online survey and face to face interviews.

What is evident from the feedback is that storytelling professionals have approached work during the pandemic in different ways. For some, the transition to online performance and activities was relatively smooth as they already had some experience of working in this way. Others approached the situation with a greater degree of apprehension but were eventually cajoled into taking part in online forums and projects. There are also many who have opted to wait out the pandemic and take time to focus on other projects or work. A key factor that influences the ability of storytelling professionals to invest time into successfully operating online, is funding and support for skills development from both private and public creative bodies and institutions. Without these, individuals operating within the sector face additional barriers to their creative work.

Where are the Survey Respondents From?

The FEST survey received a total of 81 responses from individuals located in 18 different countries including: India, Belgium, Germany, Norway, Ireland, Luxembourg, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Switzerland, France, The Netherlands, Italy, Greece, Denmark, Turkey, Sweden, Spain, Thailand and Austria. The UK, Germany and Denmark were the countries with the highest number of respondents, each contributing 26%, 15% and 14% of the total number.

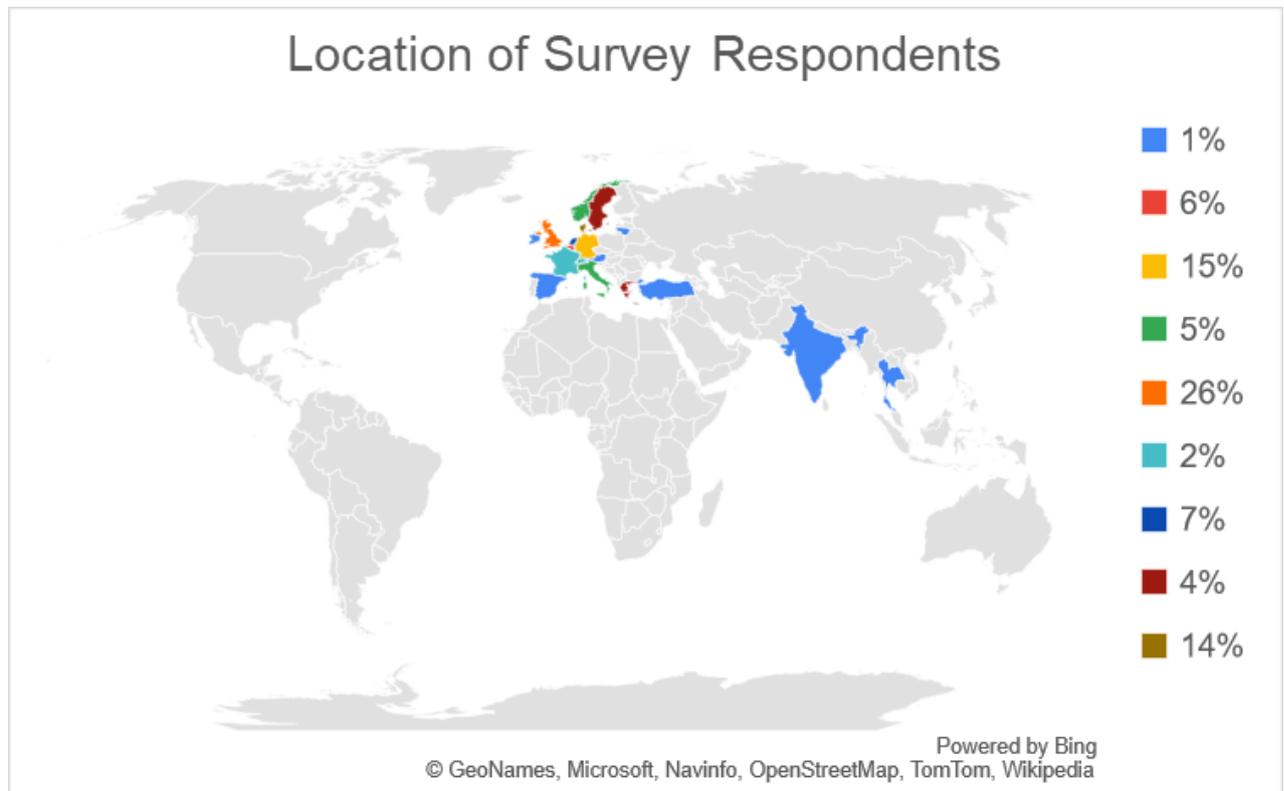


Figure 1 Location of Survey Respondents

Occupation of Survey Respondents

Survey respondents were asked to report what their occupations were. The categories provided included: 'Storyteller', 'Teacher in storytelling', and 'Organising of storytelling events'. The question allowed for multiple responses and a total of 155 were collected. 'Storyteller' made up 44% of responses followed by 'Organising storytelling events' (23%), 'Teacher in storytelling' (20%) and 'Other' (13%). Other types of occupations reported included: companionship leader for young storytellers, researcher, producer, digital content creator for storytelling organisations, oral interpretive reading teacher and author.

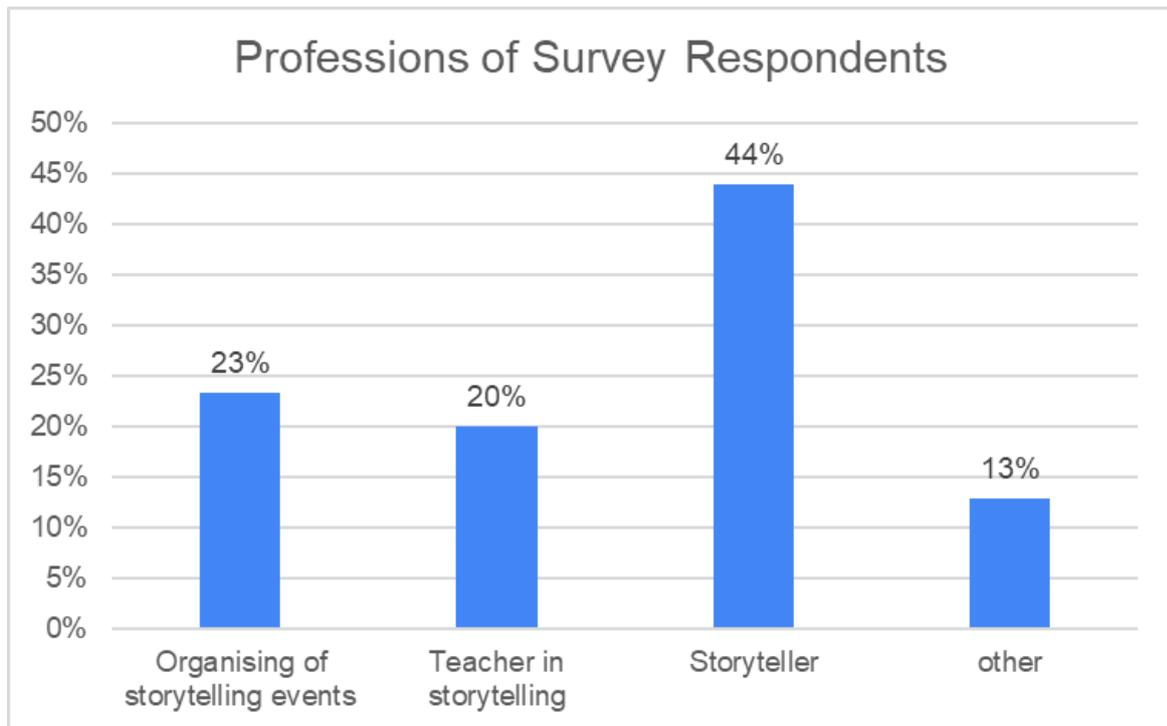


Figure 2 Professional Occupations of Respondents

How has COVID-19 affected your work?

Respondents were asked to report on how COVID-19 had affected their work by selecting one of the following options: 'all my teaching has been cancelled', 'all my storytelling performances have been cancelled', 'all organising of storytelling events has been cancelled' and 'other'. The question allowed for multiple selections and a total of 148 answers were collected. 'All my storytelling performances have been cancelled' was the common selection making up 42% of the total. 'All storytelling events have been cancelled' was the next most popular choice and made up 26%. 'All my teaching has been cancelled' and 'other' made up 18% and 16% of the total.

Respondents were also provided with the option to add further details about the impact that COVID-19 has had on their profession. Some reported that they were able to easily shift their work online by organising storytelling events in the form of webinars and online performances. Some storytelling professionals working in education as well as mental health and wellness have been able to transition to online classes and sessions.

In some cases, storytelling events and/or classes have not been cancelled but rather postponed which has left many in a state of limbo. A handful of respondents reported that some grants for projects have still been paid out so that preparations for planned events can continue in the hope that they will go ahead in the future. The financial impact has also been severe with some reporting that they have lost their businesses, client relationships and are in financial ruin.

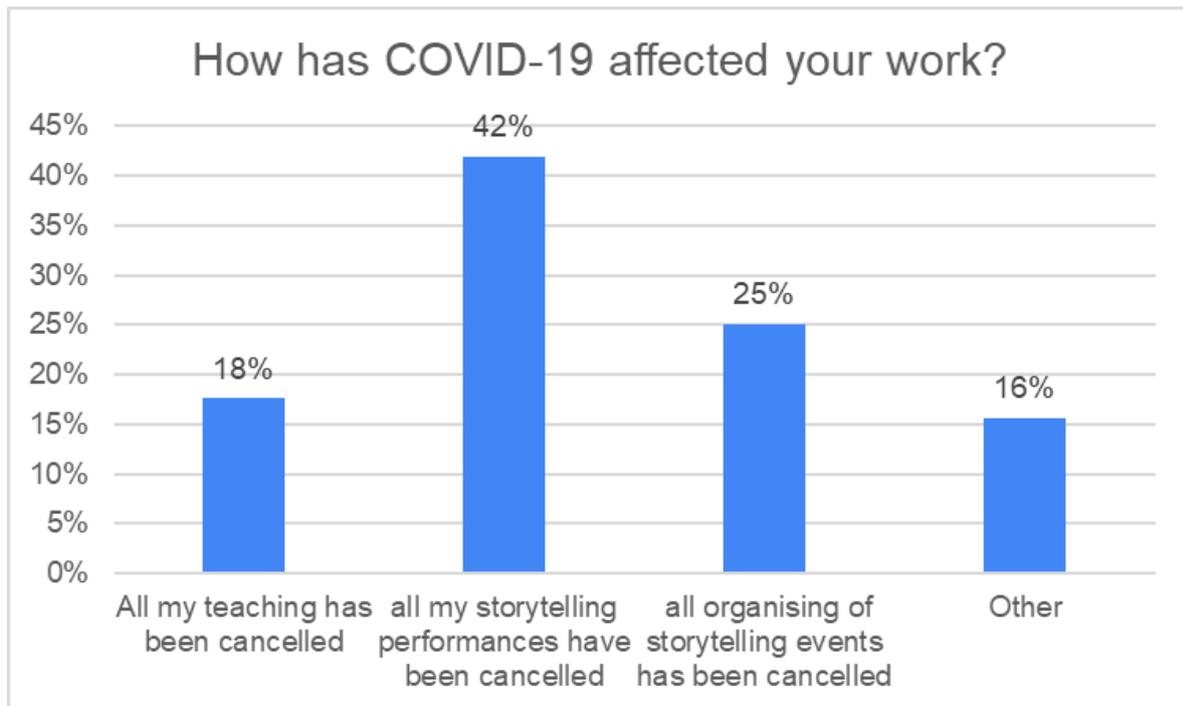


Figure 3 Impact of COVID-19 on the work of storytelling professionals

How has COVID-19 changed the focus of storytelling work?

Respondents were asked to describe and provide details of how the COVID-19 pandemic had changed the focus of their work. Many reported that they are essentially ‘on hold’ as their projects, performances and events have been postponed until further notice. This pause has allowed for some to get up to date with admin, focus on other career prospects, or plan the next steps for their storytelling work post-pandemic. In addition to this, some have shifted their focus to personal and professional writing projects.

Others have adapted their working style and shifted to online working. This has involved research and learning for those who may have previously worked in a strictly live off-line format. One respondent described experimenting with a loop station for audio-storytelling. Others have participated in online teaching, hosting, performances, and discussions using available platforms such as Zoom and Skype.

An online storytelling project that has emerged from enforced quarantine of COVID-19 is *Quarantine Stories – Fight Fear with Culture*¹, produced by Compagnia Raccontamiunastoria² (Italy) and TSC – The Storytelling Company³ (U.A.E). “Quarantine Stories” is described as a ‘reaction to the present time and an act of free art and resilience’ by professional storytellers impacted by the pandemic. The purpose of the project is to promote hope by following the footsteps of greats such as Giovanni Boccaccio, Shakespeare and Caravaggio who continued to create art during dark and difficult times.

Some respondents have conceded that COVID-19 has sped up the digitisation of the storytelling field as many have been left with no option but to move online. There are a number of online events

¹ Quarantine Stories – Fight Fear with Culture: <https://fest-network.eu/quarantine-stories-fight-fear-with-culture/>

² Compagnia Raccontamiunastoria: <http://www.raccontamiunastoria.com/italiano-home.html>

³ The Storytelling Company: <https://m.facebook.com/storytellingdubai/posts/542635696447438>

occurring now which was not the case prior to the pandemic. Individuals, companies, and organisations have been forced to assess, build, and improve their online presence and capabilities. The new storytelling landscape (temporary or otherwise) has prompted professionals accustomed to live telling to get to grips with performing on camera and operating technical equipment. Some report that the changes have been positive as more online events allow for greater dialogue and interaction with peers around the world. For some, the online space is a woefully inadequate substitute for face to face and live work. Instead, they choose to plan and regroup whilst waiting for restrictions to be lifted.

How have professionals adapted their traditional storytelling activities to digital platforms?

A total of 137 answers were collected in response to the question of if and how storytelling professionals had adapted their work for digital platforms. As with previous questions, multiple responses were available. Making videos to be disseminated to audiences was selected the highest number of times (22%). “Other” was the next most popular choice making up 17% of the total number of responses. Some of the activities described by respondents which fall into this category include teaching online, live Zoom calls with multiple visitors, producing work on SoundCloud, recording sound files for kindergartens and e-mail storytelling.

The next most common selections were “arranging closed group events through different platforms”, not using digital media, streaming live performances, making webinars, and making podcasts.

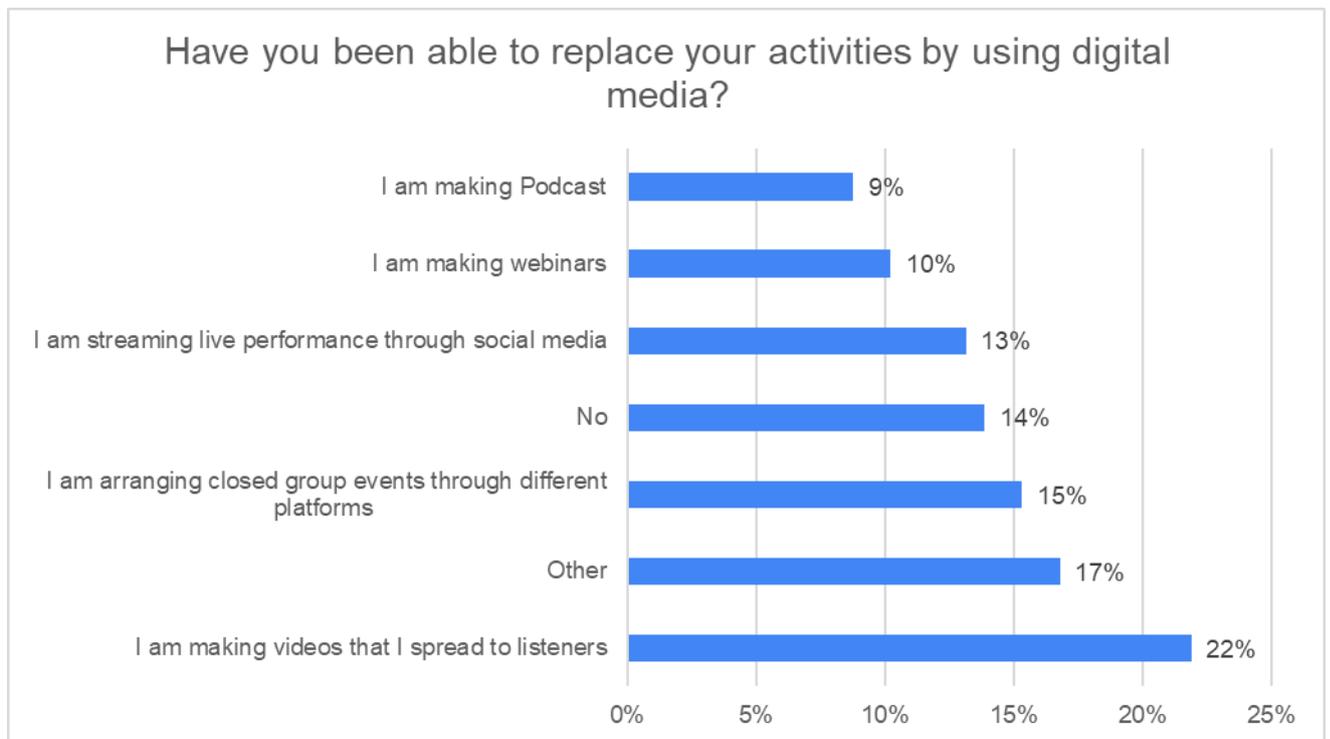


Figure 4 Digital storytelling activities

The respondents that reported using digital media to replace their activities provided a wide range of information about their new work approaches. One respondent described storytelling via webinar for both performance and teaching purposes. Stop-motion films, collage and audio-tutorials are some of the methods that the respondent has adapted. They are experimenting further to “create a new aesthetic that would create an atmosphere comparable to live-storytelling”.

To allow listeners on digital platforms to still have the chance to create their own story worlds, one storyteller mentioned that they worked without video and instead concentrated on voice. This approach was described as particularly useful for children as it limits their screen time. Others have organised events called ‘Story Slam’s’ which are live storytelling competitions where the participants do not previously prepare.

Another respondent has established "FIABE IN DIRETTA" (Live folktales) which streams live on the Facebook page "La Cantastorie"⁴ (which boasts a following of 3666) from Monday to Friday. Having started on 25 February 2020, the project has managed to establish a strong and active community. Others have worked with the National Story Network⁵ (NSN) in the USA to develop and organise their web presence. Virtual storytelling is reportedly well developed in the USA due to the long distances storytelling professionals would have to cover when travelling for work and events even prior to the pandemic.

A few respondents reported carrying out online events and performances but cited income generation as a major issue. Some feel that they cannot ask their audiences to pay the same for a virtual experience that they would for a live one. This is based on the idea and assumption that online offerings are – for the moment at least – not on par with traditional live and face to face sessions. There is acknowledgement that the current pandemic has had a negative economic impact on the clients of storytelling professionals as well. This poses an additional barrier to income generation.

Others have opted to wait out the pandemic and look forward to when they can be reunited with their live audiences. The primary reason for this is that many feel that storytelling via digital methods and platforms will never be able to replace the vibe and energy of interacting with a live audience. An additional concern raised, was whether quality online storytelling products could realistically be produced by individuals not acquainted with digital tools and methods. Depending on the complexity of the online storytelling project or activity, a fair amount of time and resources would need to be expended by storytelling professionals to enable them to create their own digital outputs. Finding the time, finances, and knowledge resources to begin this process may prove to be a daunting task for many. The potential proliferation of low-quality digital storytelling products due to poor production, is viewed by some as a threat to the profession.

Some respondents reported that working with unstable internet connections, and poor sound and video quality has been exhausting. Issues such as time lags can derail the narrative thus negatively impacting the storytelling process. This has reduced enthusiasm for working online. Those who have begrudgingly switched to working online, view it as a temporary solution to a problem with an end in sight. Some storytellers are able to take time out during this period to reflect, study and prepare for the lifting of restrictions.

⁴ La Cantastorie: <https://www.facebook.com/martinacantastorie/> website: <https://lacantastorie.com/>

⁵ National Story Network: <https://storynet.org/about-nsn/>

Which of these platforms are you working on?

Survey respondents were asked to provide details of the digital platforms that they currently make use of. A total of 216 responses were generated with respondents able to make multiple selections from the ten options displayed in Figure 5. Zoom - the video conferencing platform that allows for one-to-one chat sessions, group calls, training sessions, webinars, and global video meetings for up to 1000 participants with up to 49 on screen videos – was the most popular selection (25%). Facebook was the second most popular platform (22%) followed by YouTube, Instagram and Skype with 16%, 9% and 8% respectively.

“Other” made up 6% of selections and included the following platforms:

- LinkedIn
- Webinargeek
- Jitsi Meet
- Google Hangout
- Zoho
- Microsoft Teams
- Anchor
- Thinkfic
- Garage Band
- Messenger
- Mp3
- Blogs and Radio

Twitter, vimeo, SoudCloud, “none” and Acast were the next most selected options.

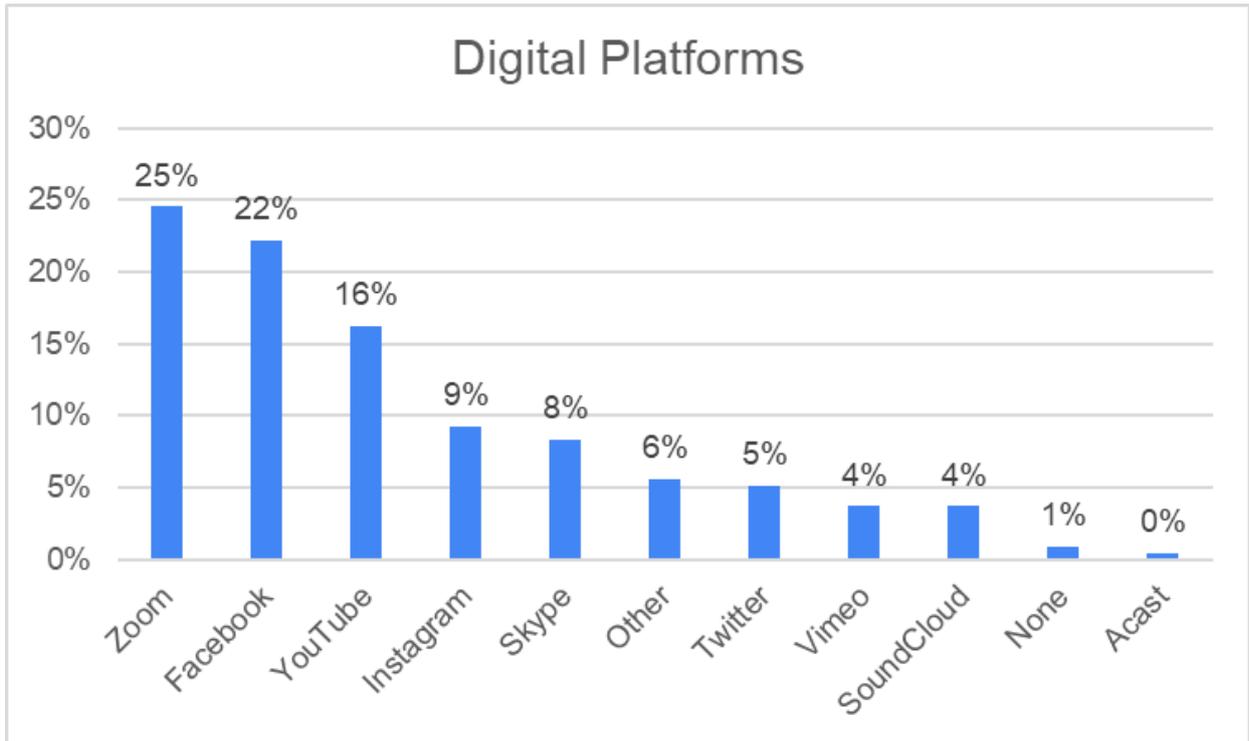


Figure 5 Preferred digital platforms.

What kind of tools do you use?

In terms of content production tools, the smartphone proved to be the most popular option making up 29% of a total of 170 responses. This was followed by “Other” which made up 18% of responses and included PC’s, Mac computers, iPad’s, and microphones. Video camera and editing tools were the next most selected followed by sound recorder and editing tools.

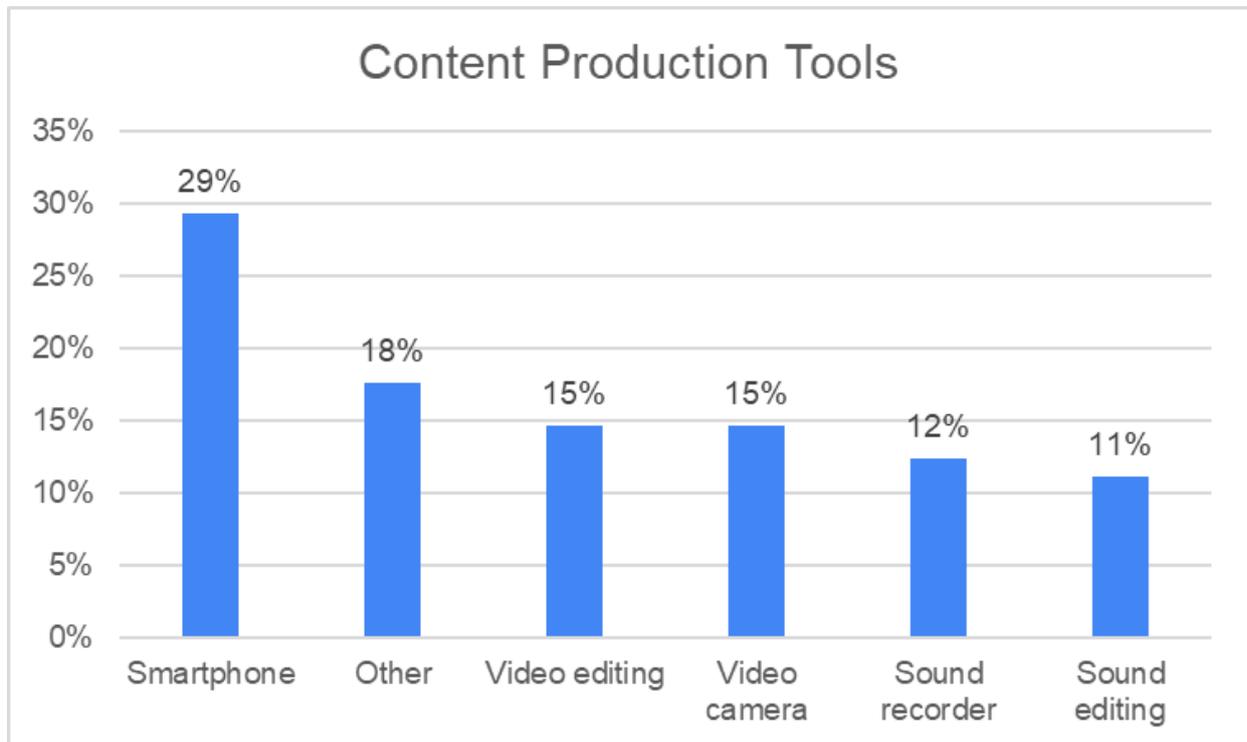


Figure 6 Preferred content production tools

How long does it take for you to plan and produce your digital content?

Respondents were asked to provide details of how long it took them to produce online content. The content produced by storytelling professionals comes in multiple forms and can be pre-recorded or live. Therefore, the time it takes to complete this process will vary and likely include preparation (pre and post production) as well as the performance or activity itself.

Some of the types of content included: online seminars, podcasts, videos, classes, and live streams. The shortest productions were 15-20 minutes while the longest ranged from 5 days to a couple of months. One respondent commented that they usually took two months to produce and deliver a seminar. This included learning the tools needed and experimenting with different types of media formats. Others reported producing several story segments each lasting 5 – 8 minutes. It is acknowledged across the board that shorter sessions are preferable as it is difficult for audiences to concentrate on a screen for more than 30 minutes. In addition to this, live performances or classes done via streaming or video call are reported to be more difficult and intensive than when done in person. Interactive events can be slightly longer.

A respondent who was involved in the Beyond the Border International Storytelling Festival⁶ reported that 5 weeks of Storytelling Friday events, a mix of short videos (2 mins max) and a live stream (10 mins) were produced online. They are currently hosting a series of webinars (1 hour each) and have further plans in the pipeline. Adverse Camber Productions⁷ has plans for a short series of online animated videos and story sharing. The delivery of these will be dependent on funding and delivered in short format.

How do you reach your audience/participants?

Social Media was chosen as the most popular/widely used medium for reaching target audiences. Respondents selected “Other” as the second most popular choice, some communications utilised include: E-Mails, magazine articles, newsletters, in-person (socially distanced) meetings, membership of organisations, charities, personal connections, churches, phone calls, WhatsApp, websites and word of mouth. The third option, “Newsletter” made up 24% of the total number of responses (139).

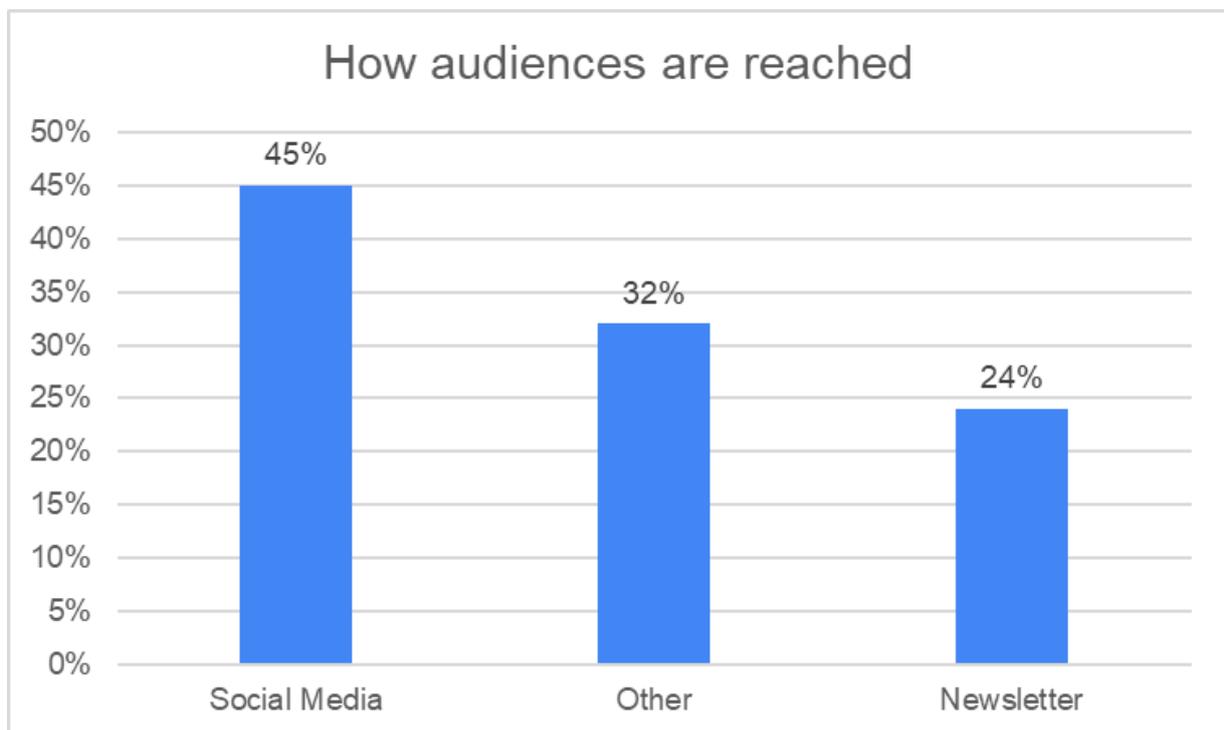


Figure 7 How audiences are reached

How do you finance the digitising of your work?

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt across multiple sectors of society, particularly the arts. When asked how storytelling professionals have been financing their digital/online work, the option “I do it for free” made up 42% of the 114 responses. The next most popular responses were “An organisation pays for me” and “Other” which each made up 18% of the total. Receiving a grant, voluntary audience payments, and participation fees made up 9%, 8% and 5% of responses, respectively.

⁶ Beyond the Border: <https://beyondtheborder.com/>

⁷ Adverse Camber Productions: <https://www.adversecamber.org/>

The comments collected from those who selected “Other” alluded to selling digital work, using personal savings or not being able to generate income at all. This is particularly true for storytelling professionals living in countries which offer limited support from the government or organisations for the arts.

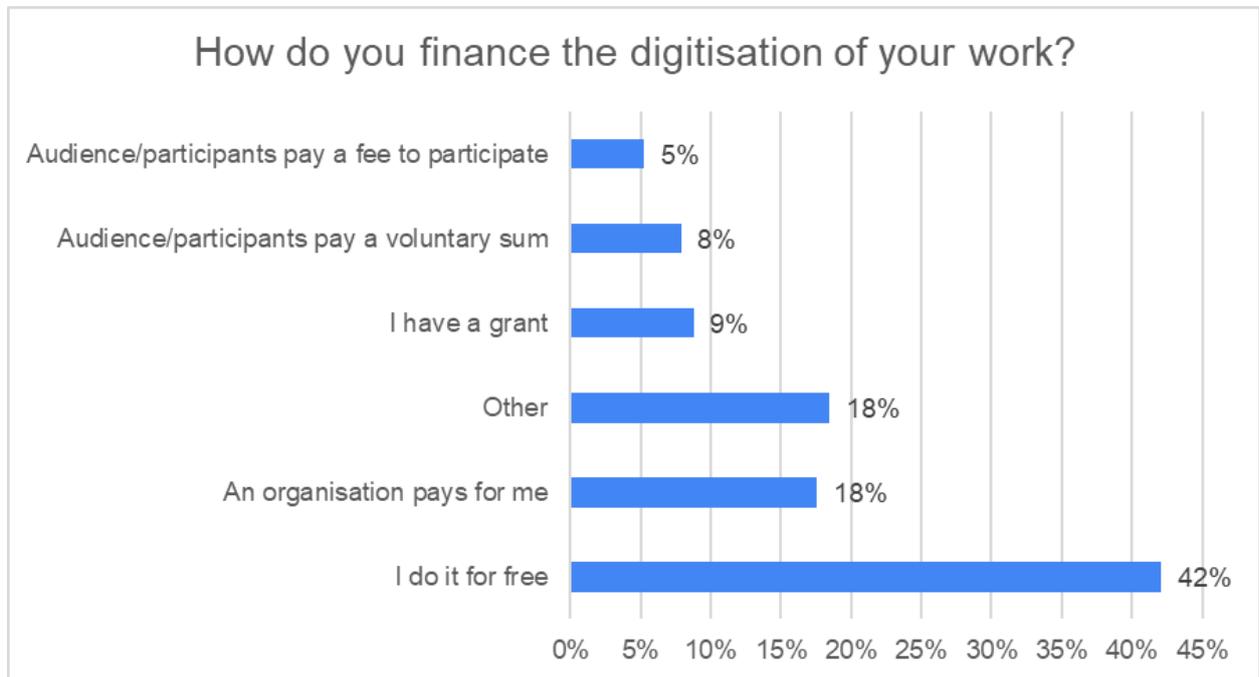
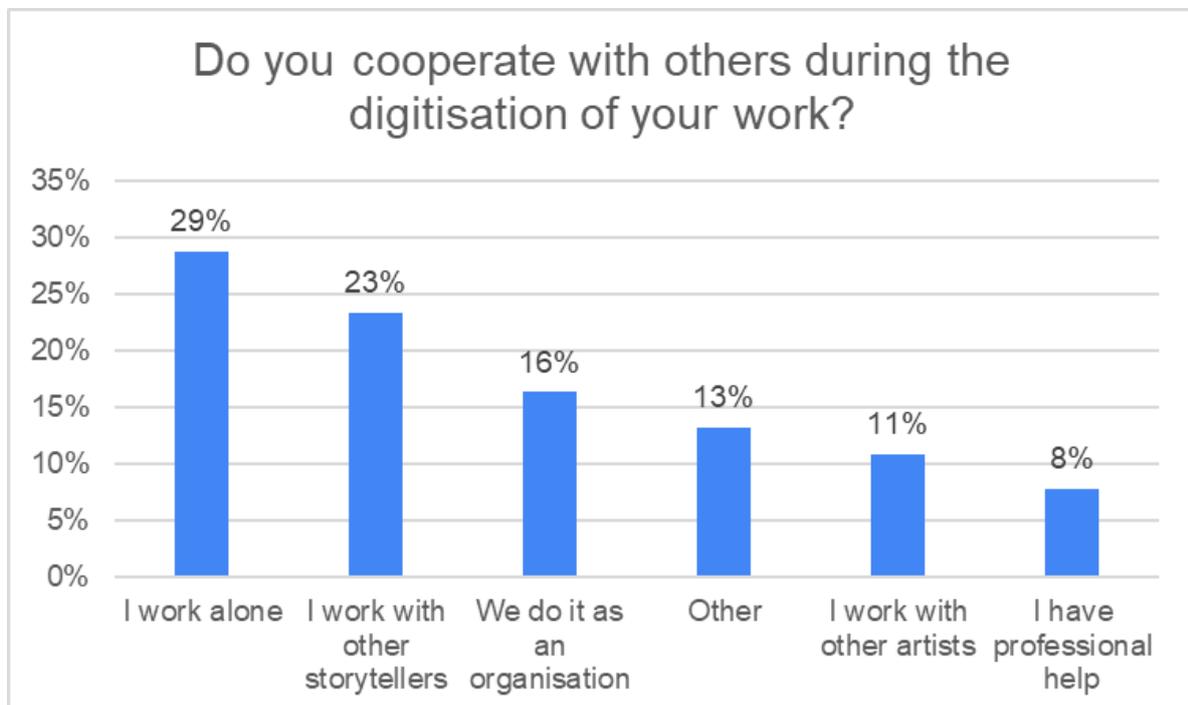


Figure 8 Financing the digitisation of work.

Do you cooperate with others during the digitisation of your work?

Working alone to digitise one’s work was the most common response (29%), this was followed by working with other storytellers (23%), working within an organisation (16%), other unlisted options (11%) and employing professional help (8%). The comments collected from responses that selected “Other” primarily stated that no digital work – collaborative or otherwise – was taking place.



Can you tell us something about your participants/audience, like how many participated, what was their reaction etc?

Seminars and Webinars

"In my seminar/webinar there are 17 participants. They are very cooperative; they liked the tutorials I designed. But the webinar is still going on, so I am curious to get their final feedback in the end".

"Public events have gathered 50 participants in both webinars. The audience was bloggers/vloggers/influencers, marketing, sales communications are PR experts".

Social Media

"Good comments on Facebook, increased volume of listeners than prior to Corona".

"I do not get any direct reaction, but a few people commented positively on my Facebook posts. (which I use to direct potential listeners to the radio channel)".

"When I put teasers on Facebook, sometimes the teaser is being seen by more than 10000 people. But the actual films - I seldom get feedback, it is teachers and students".

"The reactions of the people who received the link per WhatsApp were full of gratitude and appreciation. We received more positive comments shared personally, and a few on social media. The views on YouTube are many for some podcasts or videos (100-300) but others are few or little (7-70). The material for which the artists herself did a promotion "friend to friend" are the ones with the higher views, the material lacking this isn't so viewed".

"The show I shared on Facebook have had more than 1000 showings, and the reactions were great".

"It is vastly different, My LIVE storytelling hour, I have 150 followers, who regularly participate in my two weekly programmes. My stories at YouTube and storybox.dk has been visited by a few hundred which is rather much compared to my small mother tongue Danish".

"The live streams had 25-50 people, while the posts on videos on Facebook had up to 700 views. When the lockdown started in Greece the reception was enthusiastic. People were anxious to do things. Now, it has winded down a lot".

Storytelling Groups and Meetups

"We have around 15 participants in internal SMK storytelling group meet-ups. These are practicing storytellers, writers as well as marketing and communications experts practicing storytelling".

"my local events are replicated on zoom and only advertised to the usual email list - keeping it local. That has about 8 people on average (my usual live event will have 8- 20 people - access to technology that stops people. I also run an open to everyone event which has a mix of people and gets about 14 randomly across the country".

"I host a weekly zoom session with up to 50 listeners and encourage contributions of stories, music, and song - free!"

"18 max for story circle, very positive, most return monthly but free event".

"Reactions to my story-calls (Stories as a gift are 100 % positive - people are very happy to get story-calls. Also, the storytelling's via zoom - for schoolkids in Canada and India work very well. Kids enjoy the stories via video-call".

Storytelling Performance

"We had about 100 participants, many from outside our local region Berlin. We asked participants to have their cameras on because we find it more engaging. 80% had their cameras on. People seemed very eager to connect the first time, at the beginning of the Corona crisis. As time goes by, people do not seem as ""excited"" as the first time".

"Storytellers are not as prepared as they seem to be on stage. The stories are more informal, enjoyable, but not always on the level we need them to be for our radio show broadcast".

"FIABE IN DIRETTA was met with unexpected enthusiasm by the audience and my Facebook page started growing almost immediately (I just achieved 3000 likes almost from scratch). Children love to interact through comments and were able to engage in 30 minutes storytelling sessions through live broadcasting. This was astonishing to me. People write me every day and share a lot of passion and curiosity for all the folktales I collect and tell".

"I have an audience of 30 persons, there are some who don't want to miss a single Sunday and others who don't show up every time. The feedback is really nice. Some asked me to continue after lockdown".

"In the low 20s".

"Many really enjoyed it and I saw the following advantages: as a listener you can stay at home/ you can hear only one story and then think about it/ you can hear stories more often/ people from various places can participate even if they are geographically spread out".

"I host a weekly session through zoom with 60-80 participants each week and host events - 89 last week for Daniel Morden concert".

"Participants are generally low, with minimal involvement".

Teaching and Knowledge Sharing

"100 participant, target group work seekers, rather positive but not as concrete as they wanted towards finding a new job".

"I'll talk about my students: at first some of them were very worried and anxious about the results of digital meetings and, in addition to their personal professional and financial problems, had at first the thought of leaving the group, but afterwards, especially when they realised that the rest were contented by the results, they left back these thoughts. So, for me, the challenge now is not to lose any student (for the moment this is the case) but I (as well as all the other teachers of the group) we have assured them that every single hour of planned lessons will be fulfilled (and at least one weekend course will be added -for free, from teachers' perspective)".

"All of my students are willing and able to follow the digital lessons and they are very happy the lessons can go on this way".

"Grateful but unaware of what they were missing in the limitedness of the medium, other than through being told. Their experience because of being students on a long course cannot compare what they are receiving to anything else. They receive online as a 'better than nothing' I had one small group of 9. And in Toronto I will teach two groups of 70 and another in the 30-hour course between 24 and 80 I would say. They will not enrol until later".

"Number of reactions? Not easy to find out - we normally reach about 1000 children a year. Unfortunately, it is not clear, how children of parents with underprivileged educational backgrounds benefit".

"

To that I add the zoom sessions: usually they have an attendance of 20 people, both for school sessions and for regular audience...so we are way below regular. Unfortunately, but are trying our best to raise those numbers. We have not tried our ""big shows"" online yet, as we are not sure to take this step..."

Discussions with Storytellers

In addition to the survey, FEST carried out several interviews with storytelling professionals or individuals in other professions that regularly employ storytelling in their work. The intention behind these interviews was to gain a more in-depth perspective of how people operating in the storytelling sector are adapting and coping with the restrictions imposed because of the pandemic.

Roberto Carlos Marçal Gamboa

Location: Portugal

Current occupation: Physics lecturer at a Polytechnic

Storytelling Activities pre pandemic

Roberto has used storytelling to teach physics as well as maritime technology. He has done this by incorporating it into practical and theoretical lessons primarily by telling stories that inspire questions.

Storytelling activities during the pandemic

During the first lockdown, in-person classes were stopped, and Roberto began working from home using Zoom. He was somewhat prepared for this as his institution had already been using the Moodle E-learning platform⁸ for sharing documents and interacting with students. Moodle is a free and open-source learning management system written in PHP and distributed under the GNU General Public License. It is unsuitable for use by individuals but is a useful tool for large organisations such as educational institutions.

Interacting online has been a really different experience for Roberto as “storytelling is not just about words; it is about voice and body”. Many of his students did not have cameras or would switch them off making it impossible to see their faces. He overcame this issue by focussing on one or two students in order to extrapolate the attitude of his audience.

To assist his online teaching through storytelling, he uses two cameras. One is pointed at him whilst the other is pointed at a piece of paper where he draws while he talks. This creates interest as the students can look at something happening in real life in front of them. Other tools such as PowerPoint do not provide this kind of dynamic action. Using short films is also useful in this context.

The second lockdown introduced an additional challenge as he was required to do lab work and physical demonstrations with students. He has adapted to this by giving students instructions on how to carry out simple experiments and demonstrations using their own kitchens and materials around the house.

What type of support is needed for people operating the storytelling sector right now?

Roberto believes that advice and guidance about the technical aspects of operating online would be useful. Using a static camera makes it difficult to perform and connect with the audience. Having the opportunity to learn how to incorporate multiple cameras and angles into one’s work would improve the quality. In addition to this, receiving advice about applications that can be used for editing and tailoring would be helpful.

Useful Digital tools identified by Roberto include:

Zoom – video conferencing.

Moodle – online interaction, document sharing and evaluation.

Caood - Italian quiz platform.

Applications for cameras to show drawing.

Miro - used for brainstorming using Postit’s online that can be moved around the screen. Questions can be launched to get answers from people. This is useful for the preparation of a final product using design thinking. It also has drawing facilities.

⁸ Moodle: https://www.hubkengroup.com/moodle-lms?utm_term=%2Bmoodle%20%2Bsystem&utm_campaign=N_Moodle+LMS&utm_source=adwords&utm_medium=ppc&hsa_acc=4449136178&hsa_cam=6478566459&hsa_grp=83087962932&hsa_ad=479947647565&hsa_src=g&hsa_tgt=kwd-336084168695&hsa_kw=%2Bmoodle%20%2Bsystem&hsa_mt=b&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_ver=3&gclid=CjwKC-AiAo5qABhBdEiwAOtGmbvJ6iU4-104yGDZnrDREquvH6XwF8n2v49wDPDjZ1r3Ocos4chA8iRoCKtMQAvD_BwE

Name: Steve Kilick

Location: United Kingdom

Current Occupation: Psychologist (primary occupation), interested in the use of stories in therapeutic and education settings. Also Works on school projects using storytelling.

Storytelling Activities pre pandemic

Prior to the pandemic, Steve worked in South Wales on *Feelings are Funny Things*⁹ which is a teaching and learning programme that uses storytelling to build emotional wellbeing and understanding. The Project has been run with storyteller Phil Okwedy for approximately two years and has helped students in years 5 and 6 transition from primary to secondary school. He was about to start another big project to develop the language skills of children entering school. This would have been in collaboration with multiple agencies. Unfortunately, both projects have been postponed due to the impact of the pandemic on the school's ability to reopen. Overall, a lot of work has been lost.

Storytelling activities during the pandemic

Despite having many of his school projects postponed, Steve has secured work via the health services, employed as a psychologist working with older children in secondary school. In his view, this is extremely important as storytelling will have a huge role to play for kids returning to school after time off due to restrictions. It can be used as a tool to create a feeling of safety and enjoyment during the current tumultuous period. His current work involves training wellbeing support staff entering schools. The training takes place online, but the actual work would take place face to face and has thus been postponed. He believes that it is important to do the actual work face to face because psychological theory is built on the idea of relationships and attachment. In addition to this, children's minds need to be developed around interactive relationships.

Steve notes that there have been some institutional barriers to generating more storytelling work focussed on emotional wellbeing. There is a lack of openness and understanding of storytelling. There seems to be a preference for projects more clearly branded as psychological interventions, even when they incorporate a heavy storytelling component.

In terms of performance storytelling, he has been using Zoom to participate in storytelling circles and clubs. The advantage of these being online is that he has been able to take part in activities all over the world. He – along with David Ambrose - also presented an online storytelling performance titled, *The Green Meadows of Enchantment*¹⁰ as part of B.L.A.S.T! (Beautiful Lies and Startling Events)¹¹. For his online performance, he initially invested in a separate camera and microphone but eventually elected to use his PC camera. Online performance has required many storytelling professionals to adjust working in front of a camera and being unable to see their audiences. This is a skill itself.

Steve is a member of the board of directors for the Beyond the Border International Storytelling Festival held annually in Wales. There are plans to facilitate greater access to the festival online, these were already in the pipeline prior to the pandemic but have since been accelerated. In 2020, Beyond the Border presented events via Zoom. For the 2021 festival, they are working to create more virtual spaces online. They are working with a programming company to achieve this.

What type of support is needed for people operating the storytelling sector right now?

⁹ Feelings are Funny Things: <https://feelingsarefunnythings.org/>

¹⁰ The Green Meadows of Enchantment: <http://www.b-l-a-s-t.co.uk/events>

¹¹ B.L.A.S.T : <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1487865594850686/>

Although he prefers working face to face and in front of live audiences, Steve acknowledges that many professionals in the sector are starting to warm to the idea of working digitally. He believes that resources that provide a guide to how to work online would be useful. One that he has already engaged with was training provided by the George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling¹² in Wales. The training was free to access and took place prior to the global pandemic. The Centre hosts an annual symposium as well as a programme of research seminars.

Name: Rich Sylvester

Location: United Kingdom

Current Occupation

Historical and Greenspace Guide and Forest School practitioner.

Storytelling activities pre pandemic

Rich worked as a guide to green spaces and old places, primarily working in museums and on local history walks. He is also a Forest School practitioner and trainer in the woodlands in Greenwich where he would incorporate storytelling into the work that he did.

Storytelling activities during the pandemic

Everything changed in March 2020 when the first lockdowns occurred. The museum which was his main employer closed and he has carried out minimal work since. He has had three engagements since 2 March. One was a long-standing project that was transferred online and presented via Zoom. He has also told stories to a gallery of approximately 60 people online, which was a new experience.

The biggest challenge for Rich has been a sense of disconnect as a non-digital native. Although others have enjoyed the experience of working online, the inability to tune into how people are responding and reacting to an audience has been difficult. For Rich, being able to respond in the moment to audience cues is an important part of storytelling performance.

“Sense of iterative feedback and mirror of the audience allows you to adjust”.

Rich has experienced a deep sense of grief and loss because of not being involved in performance.

“Makes me wonder who I am, a powerful wave of who am I when I am not storytelling? It is like enforced retirement”.

He reports that he is taking longer than some to digitise but will do it eventually once he figures out how to adapt his work in the green space genre to online working. This may involve breaking some rules and principles that have existed in his mind. This includes using more images where in the past, he would focus on speaking. He has considered using more puppets as well as background images on Zoom to evoke context.

Going forward he is looking to advertise storytelling for outdoors on the playground for schools. He also noted the importance of the application of storytelling to the field of mental health to help people struggling with the impact of the pandemic. This – he believes – requires a level of empathy that cannot be achieved online.

What type of support is needed for people operating the storytelling sector right now?

¹²

George Ewart Evans Centre: <https://storytelling.research.southwales.ac.uk/seminars/>

Rich notes that there are good support mechanisms in the UK. One example is Cyber Mouth which is an invite only online forum where people post course ideas. He is also aware of multiple resources and courses available.

Name: Aron Saltiel

Location: Austria

Current Occupation

Aron has two parallel careers which often overlap - Psychotherapist and storyteller who chooses stories about personal and spiritual development.

Storytelling Activities pre pandemic

Aron worked with adults in both storytelling and psychotherapy. His story performances were often accompanied with music and singing. He identifies strongly as a singer and regularly invites his audience to sing along with him. He sings traditional songs primarily originating from his birth country of Turkey. These include elements of his Jewish background as well as Muslim storytelling traditions.

"In these cultures, stories have been used to teach people what it is to be a good person".

He would generate an audience for his performances by inviting people via email, and advertising in local and national newspapers. Through this, He amassed a healthy database of followers. He also did music events and live radio and TV performances.

In his psychotherapy work he would offer workshops for people working as counselors or therapists. These would be used to train people in different counselling methods. They would usually be in the form of a weekend workshop. At these workshops, a two-hour stretch would be devoted to storytelling and music related to what was covered during the day.

Storytelling Activities during the pandemic

Since the start of the pandemic, all his workshops have been cancelled. He has continued with online field supervision groups for therapists and sees clients online. In the past, he would have travelled to Vienna several days a month to do this, but not anymore.

He admits that he has not had the initiative to start an online storytelling project thus far. The barriers to this include the amount of time needed to produce work online as well as the lack of reward when not performing for a live audience.

"When you tell a live audience, you have a sense of how it's being perceived. Mutual support, we are both receiving something. I cannot transpose this onto an online setting. Continuing field supervision is different because it's part of the trade to ask what people want. People are able to share their issues and problems. So, before anything starts there is active participation from the audience which I don't know how to do with an online storytelling event".

Aron believes that the barrier towards working digitally for storytellers has been lowered due to the pandemic. The digital medium also allows for group participation for people across long distances which was not possible in the past.

He has taken part in professional training offered from colleges and joined various online activities including a performance by Armenian storyteller, Verigne Gulbenkian. He also has his own online profile, www.Saltiel.at.

What type of support is needed for people operating the storytelling sector right now?

The type of support that Aron would find most useful is assistance with the groundwork required to operate online. The process of creating an online profile as well as production work requires a time investment, particularly if one needs to first learn how to use the different tools. In addition to this, he thinks that a resource that provides guidelines on how to set up online events would be helpful for storytellers.

“Storytelling in schools is needed more these days. This would be important to support any action in this direction. Bringing in visions of the possible, especially as people currently feel constricted. We need that, stories can be absorbed very effectively by younger people. If I were a kid I would be discouraged right now and could not rely on parents and teachers to present a different life perspective. The same is needed for adults in the form of consolation. But there is a whole world of images and emotions that are as much within reach as they have always been”.

Name: Fiona Collins

Location: United Kingdom

Current Occupation

Community storyteller, occasional performer and former teacher and storyteller in the education sector.

Storytelling Activities pre pandemic

Fiona did a lot of storytelling work outdoors and carried out regular sessions for Cadw¹³ – the Welsh government’s historic environment service. For the last five years, she has been involved in an education programme running throughout Wales called *Lead Creative Schools*¹⁴. The programme brings creatives into schools to work with students and teachers on a long-term basis. Fortunately, this work stream has continued despite the pandemic and moved online. She has also coordinated a storytelling club which has been meeting for the last 8 years, the club would occasionally have a guest storyteller, but its primary purpose was to give members an opportunity to tell a story. Meeting in person has had to stop due to restrictions.

She has been learning Welsh for a number of years and won a competition becoming Welsh learner of the year in 2020. She felt that the use of folktales would be beneficial to adults learning the language and wanted to introduce this to tutors. To do this, she began visiting Welsh language classes to talk about stories and answer questions (all in the target language).

Storytelling Activities since the start of the pandemic

Her storytelling club has continued via phone as opposed to online. This was done to accommodate members who did not have adequate internet access. Communication was initially sent via email to inform members that they could call in on a specific day and time and listen to a story. This would be done one to one. In the summer months, the club met outside on the grounds of a stately home. As a result of good weather, they were able to continue meeting up until November.

Her work with adult Welsh language learners also continued as she was asked to produce online content for the Welsh language school’s social media platforms. To date, she has made several story videos for them.

¹³ Cadw: <https://cadw.gov.wales/>

¹⁴ Lead Creative Schools: <https://arts.wales/creative-learning/about-creative-learning/lead-creative-schools-scheme>

She was part way through a Lead Creative project when the pandemic started. It was run by the Arts Council of Wales which paid every artist their whole contracted salary. They then adapted and set up online projects in June for which she applied. She worked with a school in South Wales for 4 weeks which she usually would not have been able to do due to distance. The Arts Council of Wales also facilitated meetings for artists from all sectors, during those meetings they were able to share ideas about working with digital technology.

The school that she worked in did not allow any face-to-face teaching with the kids, not even for the teachers. To circumvent this, she would make short videos and send them via WeTransfer, each week. Her videos would be played every Monday and include a short story relating to the school theme which was exploring local folktales. In addition to this she would make short videos for every day of the week which included a task for the students. The advantage of this was that she was able to contribute to the lessons every day. In normal circumstances prior to the pandemic, this would not be possible.

She adapted her usual storytelling methods for online, for example she would ask the children to reconstruct story scenes using toys and other household objects, take a photograph and upload it.

“We were working on a story about King Arthur and his Knights. My favourite one was done by a little girl who had used all her Barbies, Ken was King Arthur and she had made him a little crown out of tinfoil and all the Barbies were the knights and had a My Little Pony”.

She has another upcoming Lead Creative project which will be blended – both online and face to face. For this she will work with a filmmaker which could provide interesting results.

So far, Fiona has made use of multiple applications to produce and edit her own work. The most used one being Photobooth¹⁵ which is available on the App Store. She uses the app to record and edit short videos which she sends via WeTransfer. The first video that she made was a bilingual story for Beyond the Border.

She was initially ambivalent about learning to use digital technology for storytelling as she felt like she was “too old”. In addition to this, she did not have a financial push factor that made working online an urgent need. However, she has been able to adapt well to using Zoom and is contemplating upgrading to a ‘Pro’ account which will allow her to run longer sessions. She plans to launch an online Welsh language storytelling club with another storyteller, learners from all over Wales and elsewhere will be able to participate.

“Working online is really good for equal access”.

She participates in a storytelling group called *Comfabulation* which has been running for years and involves storytellers writing to each other. Prior to the pandemic, they would have an annual weekend away which was difficult to attend for members living in other countries. In 2021 they plan to have a Zoom meetup which will allow for everyone to come which was not possible before.

What type of support is needed for people operating the storytelling sector right now?

There are a lot of storytelling events, workshops and support groups happening online. Some people are less inclined to search for these resources, a central directory or list may be useful.

¹⁵

Photo Booth: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/photo-booth/id1208226939>

Name: Phil Okwedy

Location: United Kingdom

Current Occupation

Oral performance storyteller working in schools and community organisations.

Storytelling Activities pre pandemic

Phil has been working with *Lead Creative Schools* in Wales, he has worked across multiple schools to bring creativity into the curriculum. He has worked with storyteller, Steve Killick on *Feelings are Funny Things*. The first iteration of this was a pilot project where they worked with six different primary schools using story to build emotional intelligence and wellbeing. They also worked with a secondary school and several of its feeder schools on a project titled, *Here Comes trouble* using the Odyssey. The focus of this project was to address wellbeing and the transition from Primary to Secondary school.

In terms of storytelling performance, 2020 was a breakthrough year for Phil. Three years prior, he had taken redundancy from his teaching job so that he could focus on storytelling fulltime. He has since performed at multiple venues and festivals and for different storytelling groups in theatres and clubs. He was due to perform at a festival in Belgium which would have been his first solo performance abroad. After this he would have performed at *Festival at the Edge* in Worcestershire and at the *Beyond the Border Storytelling Festival* in Wales. This would have been the first time that he would have taken a main stage to perform at such events. In addition to this, he along with storyteller Daniel Morden were working with Tŷ Newydd writing centre to present *Tale on the Tongue: Storytelling Weekend*. Unfortunately, these upcoming events were cancelled or postponed due to the pandemic.

Phil has been conducting story walks in his local area in Wales for almost five years. The walks involve him taking people around the coastal headland and telling three folktales related to the landscape. He was due to do work for the National Theatre Wales and his local school. The school children were going to create a myth and he was going to take them around on a story walk to show them stories in the landscape so that they could then create their own. These activities had to be adapted for online use.

Storytelling Activities since the start of the pandemic

Despite several setbacks, Phil has continued to work and perform as many activities have moved online. No longer limited by a need to be physically present, he has been able to take part in a wide range of virtual events around the UK. His planned story walks with students from a local school were converted into online video presentations with the help of National Theatre Wales who provided the services of a filmmaker. The videos incorporate multiple camera angles, drone footage, editing, graphics and voice over. When producing work on his own, he has done video recordings using his iPhone.

He has received a sustainability grant from Arts of Council Wales which has allowed him to continue working on a new show with storyteller Michael Harvey. The first iteration of the show was presented on Zoom to an invited audience which included other storytellers, representatives from National Theatre Wales, and professionals involved in storytelling events. Feedback was collected from viewers and will be incorporated into the second performance, part of which will be filmed in addition to being performed live online. A limited (homemade) set will be used for the performance with plans to project photographs onto the set in the future. A blog will also be produced as part of the project.

An additional project that Phil has worked on is called *Stories to the Door* where he worked with an organisation to reach out to isolated individuals at their homes. The idea behind the project was to elicit conversation with these individuals by sharing a story with them. After lockdown, the activities were carried out via phone or on Zoom.

Prior to the pandemic, the need for a social media strategy had periodically crossed Phil's mind. He has not yet clarified if or how he will go about implementing one but is aware of its importance, now more so than ever.

What type of support is needed for people operating the storytelling sector right now?

"We are very lucky in Wales because Beyond the Border have done quite a lot of things. When we could still physically meet, they were already beginning to think about it".

Beyond the Border held a one-day event where people were invited to share their experience of filming and share ideas about how one might film. They have been running a series of workshops online about podcasting and other topics. There is also a forum for storytellers to come together and informally share information. Phil suggests that more events and activities like these would help support the sector through the current period and beyond.

Name: Daniel Morden

Location: United Kingdom

Current Occupation

Storytelling performer, author

Storytelling Activities pre pandemic

Daniel had ongoing work within the education sector conducting one off visits to schools, either in the capacity of storyteller or that of author (where activities invariably involve some aspect of storytelling). Alongside that, he had two major projects that would tour venues. One was commissioned by Beyond the Border and was to be a series of traditional stories centring mainly on the work of Roman poet Ovid and how the constellations in the night sky came to be. He was working with storyteller Hugh Lupton, to premier the show at the Beyond the Border Storytelling festival. They had also decided to incorporate the contributions of a sound artist into the production.

He would also regularly tour nationally with two musicians, playing theatres, art centres and small-scale venues like village halls. They had applied for and received funding to create a new piece – *The Beast in Me* - which would be the sixth that the company (*The Devil's Violin*¹⁶) had put together. For the Autumn of 2020, they had a whole season of community workshops – working with asylum seekers, youth groups and, people with learning disabilities. The idea was to use ideas from the programme to develop confidence and self-esteem – the project has a theme around body dysmorphia.

Storytelling Activities since the start of the pandemic

A small percentage of his work at schools continues. He made the decision to not actively pursue work in this area as schools have been heavily impacted by the pandemic and need to focus on meeting

¹⁶

The Devils Violin: <https://www.thedevilsviolin.co.uk/news/>

current challenges. All the community workshops for the Devils Violin have been cancelled, they may be reinstated post pandemic, but this is uncertain. There is however an online workshop for one of the community groups coming up.

In lieu of the planned cross-country tour, The Devils Violin received funding for a podcast titled, *A Month of Sundays* which is borrowed from the popular British saying “never in a month of Sundays, something won’t happen”. The podcast allowed the company to generate an income for themselves as well as sustain a relationship with the venues that they would have been playing. The venues were able to disseminate the podcast to their client base thus in turn nurturing those relationships and maintaining the sense of community essential to its existence. A lot of audience correspondence was generated as people lamented the loss of group gatherings and shared experiences. The process of producing the podcast also allowed for the company to continue communicating and planning for when a degree of normalcy returns to the sector.

After the first podcast, Daniel successfully pitched the idea of a serial podcast of self-contained stories across six episodes to the Arts Council of Wales. This generated a positive response from venues and audience members. He has noted that a positive element about working online is that one’s audience is not restricted to those who can be physically present at the venue. Having previously toured in the USA, he found that his followers located in that region were able to access the podcast and thus drive traffic and interest to The Devils Violins’ online platforms. This is a client base for the project that was previously untapped.

After the projects concluded in August 2020, Beyond the Border recommended that he apply for funding from the Arts Council of Wales resilience fund. He received the funding and elected to put out another podcast consisting of eight episodes of stories which had some relevance with the current situation. This generated a high level of response from his audience from all over the globe. *“It’s not frightening any of the major podcast producers of the world, but I am getting sort of 500 streams at a time”*.

Daniel has found the process of learning to work with digital tools and platforms illuminating. He had previously perceived himself as someone who did not work digitally or online or easily learn new technological skills. He did not initially embrace the new opportunities presented but he eventually realised that he had nothing else to do. As a result of all his usual engagements being cancelled, he had the time to explore the digital world. He still does not particularly enjoy working in this way but definitely enjoys the outcome. *“It’s always an effort of will to try and learn something new and put it online”*. For his personal website, he has some assistance but generally tries to empower himself by learning how to resolve issues on his own.

Social media has played an enormous role in his current work, the podcasts are an example of this. The platform allows for one to see how many people have listened or downloaded the podcast as well as their locations. The other major benefit of social media are the extensive interactions he has had with his audience. This is a level of correspondence he has not experienced before. He does not have a plan or strategy of how he will maintain the momentum of his digital work once live performances resume. He maintains that this type of work is not the reason that he got into storytelling. *“I don’t for a moment pretend that live streams or podcasts replace storytelling to a live audience. It is the best we can do. When it is no longer the best we can do, I don’t know what I will do”*.

The work that goes into producing these digital projects is time consuming and therefore does not make sense unless one can generate revenue from them – or receive funding.

What type of support is needed for people operating the storytelling sector right now?

Having carried out extensive digital work since the start of the pandemic, Daniel is experiencing a degree of Zoom and online fatigue that is no doubt familiar to many.

"I feel like my tank is empty and I would really love to hear some practitioners whose work I rate, talking about their practice and just remember again what first inspired me to be a storyteller. I feel like I have been putting out, and I would really enjoy – in the coming months – the chance to receive".

Name: Tamar Elund Williams

Location: United Kingdom

Current Occupation

Bilingual professional storyteller (Welsh and English) and Local Engagement Co-ordinator at Beyond the Border.

Storytelling activities pre pandemic

Prior to the pandemic, Tamar would usually spend the first three months after Christmas working with schools. She had planned a school tour in England and was also working on 6 projects funded by the Arts Council of Wales. For the summer months she was booked for multiple performances at several festivals. In 2019 she had just started performing at international festivals such as Alden Biesen and was hoping to explore further opportunities abroad. She also had several story club performances booked which would have been planned 6 months to a year in advance.

Storytelling activities during the pandemic

There was a 2 - 3-week period after the lockdown began, where Tamar was worried about whether she would be able to continue to work. Luckily, several clients who had made bookings prior to the lockdown requested that she adapt her performance by filming her performance instead. This was a new experience as she had not filmed regularly before. She did, however, have a decent camera and tripod and was able to quickly learn how to edit films on her computer. This allowed her to create good quality digital storytelling products. As her filmed work progressed, she had several requests for 'story films' from other individuals and organisations.

A big learning curve was understanding how long it would take for her to finish a film and how much she should charge for her work. A lot more work is required for digital products as they need to be conceptualised, filmed, and edited. In addition to this, she often had to work bilingually which would mean filming twice.

The Arts Council of Wales launched a stabilisation fund which offered grants to creative professionals. The application required applicants to provide a description of how they intended to adapt their work around current restrictions and what type of financial support they would need. Tamar secured funding to create a set of virtual story walks which involved her recording herself as she plotted routes around the city of Cardiff. People would then be able to follow the walks themselves whilst listening to her stories. Her funding pitch emphasised that this process would allow her to develop her video, audio recording and editing skills. This would improve her ability to produce a project entirely online without live delivery. At the time of writing, this project was still ongoing. The second part of the project involved making contact with other storytellers around Wales, mentoring them through the process of learning how to record their work and paying them for their time.

Off the back of this project, Cardiff Local Council have requested that she produce another set of story walks aimed at children. As the year has progressed, multiple people have requested that she produce content for them. Overall, she has almost been busier since the beginning of the pandemic than she has in the years prior. She believes that a lot of the opportunities she has had are related to arts bodies and organisations wanting to offer funding opportunities for professionals to build digital skills. The

fact that she is based in Wales and can work bilingually have also been important factors when securing work.

As a storyteller, she has tended to work more with schools, museums, and council's rather than theatres and arts venues. The former have continued to commission work as they need to continue engaging with their audiences and already have funding. The latter have had to close and are facing their own financial challenges which makes them less able to pay for projects.

She has generated work from her existing connections and client base but has also used social media to promote her virtual performances. Importantly, she spent time revamping her website and online presence which have become avenues through which new audiences and clients have found her. Her online portfolio has substantially increased over the past year. This makes it easier for potential clients to view examples of her work.

It has been difficult to gauge audience reactions to her work when pre-recorded or delivered live via Zoom. Some events such as the *World Storytelling Café* generate a lot of feedback as they are frequented by other storytellers. On the other end of the spectrum, some of the work produced for other organisations does not generate any audience feedback. To get around this, she runs a story club which has met regularly on and offline prior to and during the pandemic. This provides the opportunity for her and other members to perform live on Zoom (with camera's turned on) and provide feedback for one another. These meet ups provide a much needed 'mental health check-in'.

Although Tamar maintains her love for live, in-person performance, she acknowledges that working online has quite a few benefits - one of these being inclusivity. Individuals who previously would not have been able to attend story clubs and meetups in the past can now take part. For this reason, she believes that it is important to maintain a degree of momentum for digital offerings once in-person performances resume. For her personal future work, she intends to focus on audio – *"telling on video is a different art form and not the way that I want to be doing storytelling"*.

What type of support is needed for people operating the storytelling sector right now?

Tamar acknowledges that being a digital native with an affinity for technology makes one less apprehensive about using a camera and going on Zoom. Some storytellers struggle with finding a starting point for running storytelling events on Zoom because they do not understand how it works. This results in them missing opportunities for paid work. Getting the correct equipment, experimenting, and then learning how to produce a high-quality product is very important for the maintenance of professional standards.

With *Beyond the Border*, she has offered webinars which cover topics such as 'how to use online platforms', and 'setting up storytelling scenes and backgrounds. They also invited a filmmaker to talk about filming oneself and what technology would be required for this. They also covered online marketing and social media. In addition to this they have covered bilingual storytelling, and how to tackle stories with difficult content. She started an event called Casglu (gathering in Welsh) where storytelling professionals were initially invited to discuss training online once a week (Friday). The response to this has been overwhelming and discussion topics have expanded to cover multiple themes including how to support emerging storytellers.

Name: Aurora Piagessi

Location: Italy

Current Occupation

Storyteller and professional working the Italian national broadcaster

Storytelling Activities pre pandemic

Prior to the start of the pandemic, Aurora was working as a solo storyteller having just parted from Raccontamiunastoria (RUS), a storytelling company which she had worked with for four years. During her time with RUS she had developed several storytelling projects primarily within the education and healthcare sectors (which she continues to do). As a solo artist, she had been working on several international storytelling events where storytellers were scheduled to travel to Rome.

Storytelling activities during the pandemic

When the lockdown started, Aurora was able to keep her full time job at the national broadcaster and was saved from the financial uncertainty caused by the pandemic. She was however, very keen to keep up the momentum of her solo storytelling career and maintain the contacts she had made in the sector.

She began to explore the digital space by joining international storytelling activities online. In one of the conferences she attended, John Rogers put forward the idea of a multilingual storytelling project and invited storytellers to take part. Aurora got in contact with him, and the early stages of the project began to be conceptualised, with the help of Richard Martin and Tellers Without Borders (who later left the project). Together they created Storyflix which is an online catalogue of stories in multiple languages. In addition to this, they decided to set up a collective network for storytellers producing work via digital media. The current name of the network is, *The European Storytellers Collective*. FEST has assisted the collective in their development by providing guidance and support for their webinars.

The launch of Storyflix has been met with positive feedback from the storytelling community. The next concern for Aurora and its other creators is how to generate profit from the platform so that it can finance itself along with new projects. For example, they want to collect stories from people speaking minority languages in Europe or involve the sign language to create a more inclusive experience.

In terms of adapting their work to the digital space, the collective was able to access help for the development and design of their website. Having studied film and worked in the industry, Aurora was able to use her knowledge to produce high quality video content for Storyflix. She reports that Richard Martin and John Rogers quickly learned new digital skills, and were able to identify the best approaches for improving their work.

What type of support is needed for people operating the storytelling sector right now?

Adapting from live events to digital telling has been challenging for many storytellers. This especially true for individuals less familiar with the digital environment. An additional concern for Aurora has been that of generating payment for online events. She has observed that a lot of great digital storytelling content is freely available online, as a result it has become unviable to create online events that require payment.

Another concern is that many storytellers may not be aware of how to market their events and material. Many lack the skills or equipment to produce high quality video material and may also fail to adapt their performance for different media. She believes that it would be a good idea if storytellers tried to find support when tackling unfamiliar technical/digital aspects of producing digital work. The

danger of not doing this is that one's work can be severely undermined as a result of low-quality production.

Although storytelling through various digital platforms has grown during the pandemic, Aurora does not think live performances will ever be replaced. She also noted that there are many creative ways to continue storytelling without moving online.

"I wanted to give you this testimony of a teller that I know, she is not really actually a storyteller, she reads to children. During the pandemic, she started to put some books in a bike basket, and she went in front of the houses where the children were, and she read aloud, outside, so children could watch her and listen to the stories from inside. So, I think that there are creative ways to continue being live even with the pandemic".

On the other hand, she is excited about the possibilities that digital media present for storytelling. She is working on a new virtual reality project with a friend and will continue to work both on and offline.

"If I didn't believe in the power of digital media for storytelling, I would not have created the European storytellers, collective or whatever the name would be? Because I think that we are continuously evolving. And I am intrigued by the possibilities that we have with this new medium."



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