

# Storytelling Goes Digital

**Traditional storytelling has moved from an oral and written form into the digital format, which has huge potential for public awareness programmes, advertising and brand building.** By JACINTA FREEMAN

“Let me tell you a story,” was the popular line by actor-compeer-food critic Moses Lim as the screen dad on Singapore’s comedy sitcom *Under One Roof* in the mid-1990s. His purpose for relating the tale was to impart a moral teaching, but his teenage and young adult children have heard it once too often. If, however, he had used the tools of modern technology, reaching out to tech-savvy youths might have been a far easier task.

We are now in the digital age, where the oral tradition of storytelling can be given a new twist via animations, blogs, photographs, videos or web pages. This technological progress is what is termed as Digital Storytelling. In essence, it is the “modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling”, says Leslie Rule of KQED Public Media for Northern California in a brochure for a workshop conducted by the Digital Storytelling Circle (DiSC), an initiative by the National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDCS).

However, Digital Storytelling can be said to be still in its infancy, developed only in the mid-1990s to help ordinary people tell their life stories in a short two- to four-minute presentation. “So far, the movement has been concentrated at the cultural, educational and non-profit levels. Somehow, the private sector is still not biting even though there is a huge potential for business and tourism,” says Aurelia L Castro, one of the coaches for the workshop and the volunteer co-director of the DiSC.

The former business journalist at the *Cebu Sun-Star*, a newspaper in the Philippines, and currently a writer with



Screen Grab of *When I Wept With Esther* video.

The Navigators Singapore, believes that the personal approach has great impact on businesses. According to her, the late Dana Atchley—recognised as the father of the Digital Storytelling movement—was behind the successful Coca-Cola campaign in which a man told the story of how his bottle of Coca-Cola journeyed with him throughout WWII and now sits on his mantle as a symbol of hope. “It’s not the traditional top-down approach of advertising, but rather a rougher personal experience—a real story from the consumer’s point of view,” Castro explains.

“Just as everyone has a story to share, every business has its own start-up story, every organisation started with somebody or something that happened,” agrees Angeline Koh, Castro’s co-director at the DiSC and partner in

coaching. The Communications Director by profession says stories have a way of captivating people to listen, “so why not use it to your advantage”.

## THE STORY WITHIN THE DIGITAL FRAMEWORK

“A video producer and avid storyteller, Atchley came up with a way to put digital storytelling (video production) into the hands of lay people—both young and old, and with or without experience in movie production or computers. In 1993, Joe Lambert (now Executive Director of the Center for Digital Storytelling) assisted Atchley in teaching three digital storytelling workshops. The movement has since taken flight in the US, then the UK with BBC, Australia and other parts of the world,” shares Koh. “As far as we know, Singapore

only introduced it in 2007 when the NBDCS invited Denise Atchley, wife of the late Dana Atchley, for a digital storytelling boot camp as an additional activity for the traditional storytelling festival here,” says Castro.

While both Castro and Koh are hoping the movement will eventually culminate in a digital storytelling institution or a movement beginning in Singapore and moving into other parts of Asia, they are more concerned at the present moment with inculcating the heart of digital storytelling, which is the story itself—personal stories told in the ‘I’ voice. “The story is the content, while the digital portion is just the hardware. If you throw out the story, the framework becomes useless,” says Castro. “Even computer games have stories,” she emphasises.

How stories are important is in the way they affect people and how they create resonance in others, shares Koh. “When you tell a story, you’re actually processing the information in your own heart and mind. Sometimes, it gives you deeper understanding of past events and can even help bring closure. In a way, it helps people get in touch with themselves and their lives,” she explains.

“Since most stories are about universal themes—parents, siblings, families, pets, best friends, journey-changing careers, loss of jobs and struggles in life—you’ll find a connection even though you might not know the storyteller,” Castro states. “There is a sense of camaraderie talking about these things. It unites people and builds community,” Koh adds.

An example of this was a video produced by a student of the two women. The Filipina lady was a volunteer at one of the rescue missions of the Ondoy flood in the Philippines. Her story was about her experience with one of the victims who had lost her two children. The plight of the woman and her neighbours touched people as far as the US, so much so that donations started pouring in from these individuals who have seen the video that was posted on YouTube. “And that is the power of this tool,” Castro affirms, “It might look rough—not as polished as a profes-

sional piece—but it is authentic and engaging.” What is important is for the digital story to have a meaning for the person who views it.


## THE BRANDING GAME

The Coca-Cola campaign was an example of how a personal story could be made relevant to a wider audience, and as such used as a marketing tool for a company. The idea took advantage of an existing story and turned it into a successful instrument for branding. Stories abound, but it is up to the companies how they make use of such opportunities.

The Ondoy video mentioned earlier, for example, was an excellent prospect for Jollibee, McDonald’s rival in the Philippines, shares Castro. According to her, having a meal at Jollibee was every child’s fantasy. The Ondoy video could have been exceptional in reinforcing this mindset because the storyteller

had taken the victim for a meal at Jollibee. In the video, the woman broke down because her son’s wish to dine at the restaurant was not fulfilled as they didn’t have the money then. Now, with him gone, his dream would never be realised.

It might seem callous to use the sufferings of others to further a cause, but this is just an example of how stories can be significantly used in an advertising campaign. What Jollibee could learn from this is to go around the country collecting stories to reinforce their brand, shares Castro.

In fact, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) might even want to use this idea to promote the island-state, suggests Koh, sharing that Castro had posted so many stories about her life here that many of her friends have visited Singapore based on that. Getting tourists to talk about their experience...now, that’s a branding potential for STB! 

## PEACH BLOSSOM FAN

February 26–27, Esplanade Theatre

A 17th-century Chinese operatic masterpiece comes alive with 21st-century contemporary direction and vivid costumes and sets. The classic 300-year-old tale of two lovers torn apart and the fan that marks their lives’ travails was created by Confucius’s descendant in 1699. Revived by director Tian Qinxin to the tune of RMB 5 million (about S\$1.02 million), the opera also marks a spectacular recreation of Ming Dynasty Nanjing.



## TO KILL A MOCKING BIRD

February 26–March 14, Drama Centre Theatre

Harper Lee’s moving 1961 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of racial injustice and the destruction of innocence is showcased in an unconventional adaptation by Christopher Sergel. Performed by Toy Factory Productions, the play is “aggressively modern and assertively trendy”, so says the press release. Featuring a multi-racial cast of veterans and promising actors from both stage and screen, the stylised rendition promises an intoxicating illustration of the co-existence of good and evil.

## MODEL CITIZENS

March 3–14, The Necessary Stage Black Box

Urgent contemporary issues in our society come to the forefront in Director Alvin Tan and Playwright Haresh Sharma’s thought-provoking work. Performed in English, Mandarin and Malay with English subtitles, it will be an intricate study of human relationships seen through the eyes of three women. Whether they are indeed model citizens as the name of the play suggests remains to be seen.



The Necessary Stage