

Co-creative processes in the Big Stories Small Towns film project

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Big Stories Small Towns is a multi-platform process-driven documentary project that works with communities to create micro documentaries, photography and digital stories. At the heart of Big Stories is a question - can you have both community ownership through process and a high-quality media product at the same time? In communication for social change literature, the discourse of participation has in many ways remained rigid while practice continues to evolve to meet audience and participant expectations.¹ As process-driven media projects reach broadcast scale and quality, a more intimate and nuanced understanding of the co-creative process is needed.

Big Stories Small Towns was a community based film project that took place between June and December 2014 in Beaudesert, a town one hour south of Brisbane, Australia. I was the Producer of the project, working with a filmmaker in residence and facilitating community participation as well as seeking to understand the project as an ethnographic researcher.

Big Stories is a project that has a high level of innate complexity that attempts to produce community ownership as well as high aesthetic aims. These aspects make it an excellent case study for researching process versus product driven practice and aspirations in the field.

Where other online participatory media liter-

ature has broadly considered voice and participation² this study seeks to make a unique contribution by giving an insider's perspective on process-driven community practice and different expectations and aspirations of people involved in such a project.

Big Stories, Small Towns began in 2008 with a three month residency in Port Augusta in South Australia and the website www.bigstories.com.au was launched in February 2009. The program ran in Raukkan and Murray Bridge in South Australia, and in Banlung Cambodia in 2010 and in Strathewen in 2012. It is now in its third iteration with funding from Screen Australia for platform and audience development, and has run filmmaker in residence projects in Cowra, New South Wales, Beaudesert, Queensland and Queenstown, Tasmania in 2014. It has also branched into the Asia Pacific, with Big Stories Small Towns projects in Raja Ampat, West Papua, Flores, Indonesia and Bongkud, Malaysia.

As the creative team we were tasked with producing web documentaries, vertical films, photo essays and text with the community. The resultant stories were screened and exhibited in the community at the end of the project as well as a screening and filmmaking forum in Brisbane and published on the Big Stories Small Towns website. The main interface of the Big Stories, Small Towns website is a grid of 24 squares, as illustrated in Figure 1. Each square represents a piece of video, photo essay or text content.

Community-driven aims and goals

Big Stories Small Towns Beaudesert came about through connections with the Beaudesert community that I made in 2013 leading up to the "This Is Our Story" event, which commemorated 150 years since the first Australian South Sea Islanders arrived in Australia at the cotton plantation of Robert Towns. It led to many different groups in the community working together in an unprecedented way.

After the commemoration, the community expressed a strong desire to keep using the arts to weave people's stories together, and I suggested Big Stories as a potential opportunity. This gained

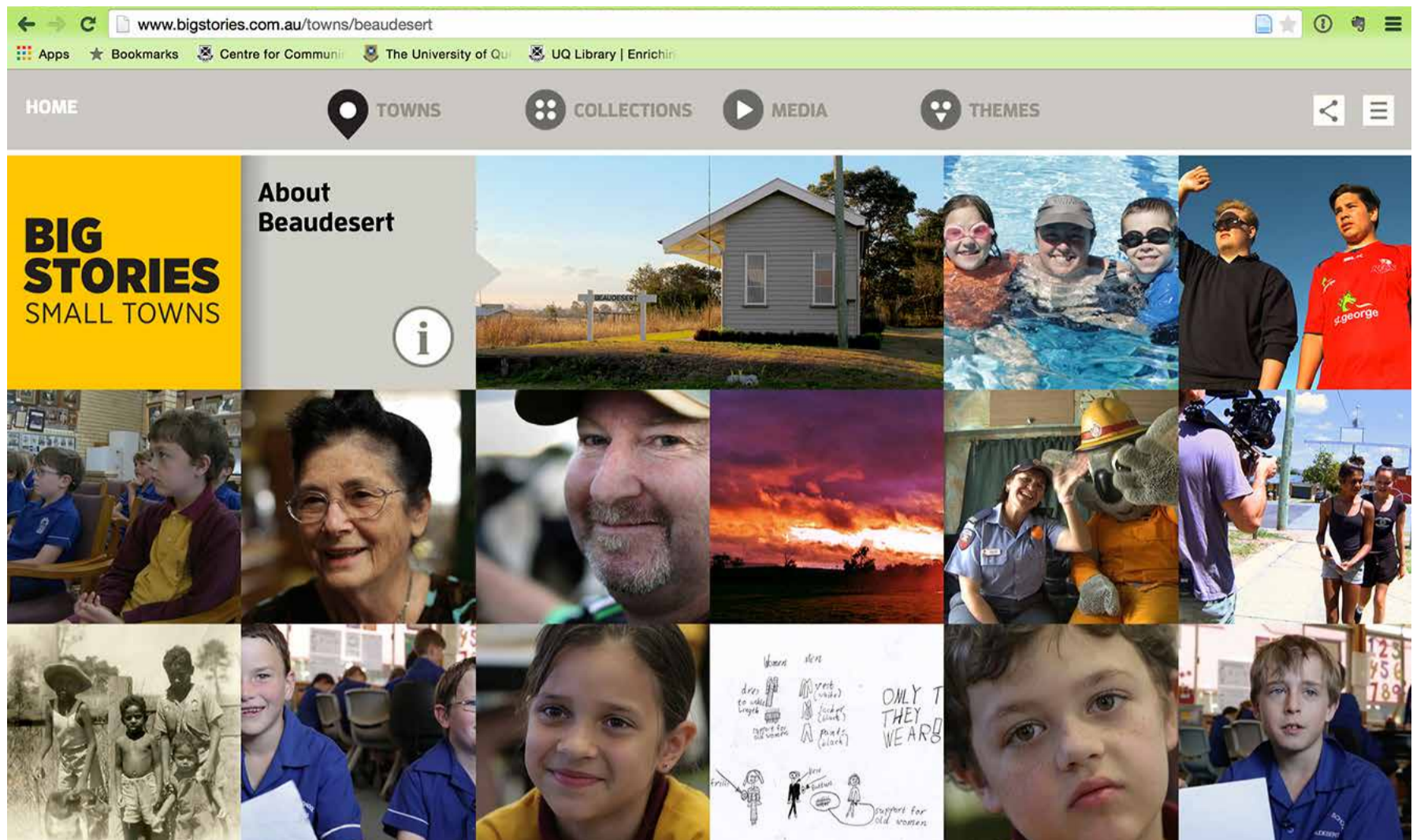


Figure 1. The Big Stories website interface.

strong community support and together we were able to secure funding from Regional Arts Development Fund, Artslink QLD and the Scenic Rim Council. Funding from the Scenic Rim Regional Council was tied to their Vibrant Communities visioning fund, which will inform their strategic plan for Beaudesert for the next 3-5 years.

From the beginning the project had a strong community building process as its goal. When asked what they felt Big Stories could give to the community the community arts officer said:

“I think people work in silos and they’re not hearing and they’re not understanding the rich history and the rich tapestry that is Beaudesert. And so it isn’t the sum of its parts at the moment. It is a disjointed community and I think that pulling it together in some ways through a project like this is one step closer to making it a stronger and more cohesive community. If I look around the room when we do the launch and I see different groups nodding and talking and feeling, going away and saying ‘I didn’t know

that about that group’ They’ll have a better idea about what that group does and will start to make connections and will start working together. That will show that that’s worked.”

The co-creative process

Stories produced through the project varied in levels of co-creativity with the community. The co-creative process began with an arts dinner in the community hall. We presented the project and a showed reel about Big Stories featuring films from previous projects, explaining that it was a project “for and with the community”. We conducted a community café with a room full of local people from the Scenic Rim area, asking them questions about what they would like to reflect out to the world about Beaudesert.

The questions were laid out on butcher’s paper on two tables with pens and markers, and community members moved between tables to answer each question. The producer and filmmaker moved between tables meeting people and discussing their ideas. The result was a mix of story ideas and old ghost stories, local histories and con-

cerns and issues that people had for the future of their community (see Figure 2). All of the written responses were gathered and collated by one of the community members.

Following the community café, the creative team brainstormed the ideas that had arisen, and interviewed key people in the community, such as the Community Engagement team at Council and local historians. This gave a broader context to the storytelling project.

Through community consultation, relationship building and research, we were able to create 13 films with varying levels of involvement with the community over a four-month residency. These ranged from profiles of local community members and a local young men's group, which were made by the filmmaker. We also had more co-creative projects that we worked on, depending on what the interest and skills of the participants were.

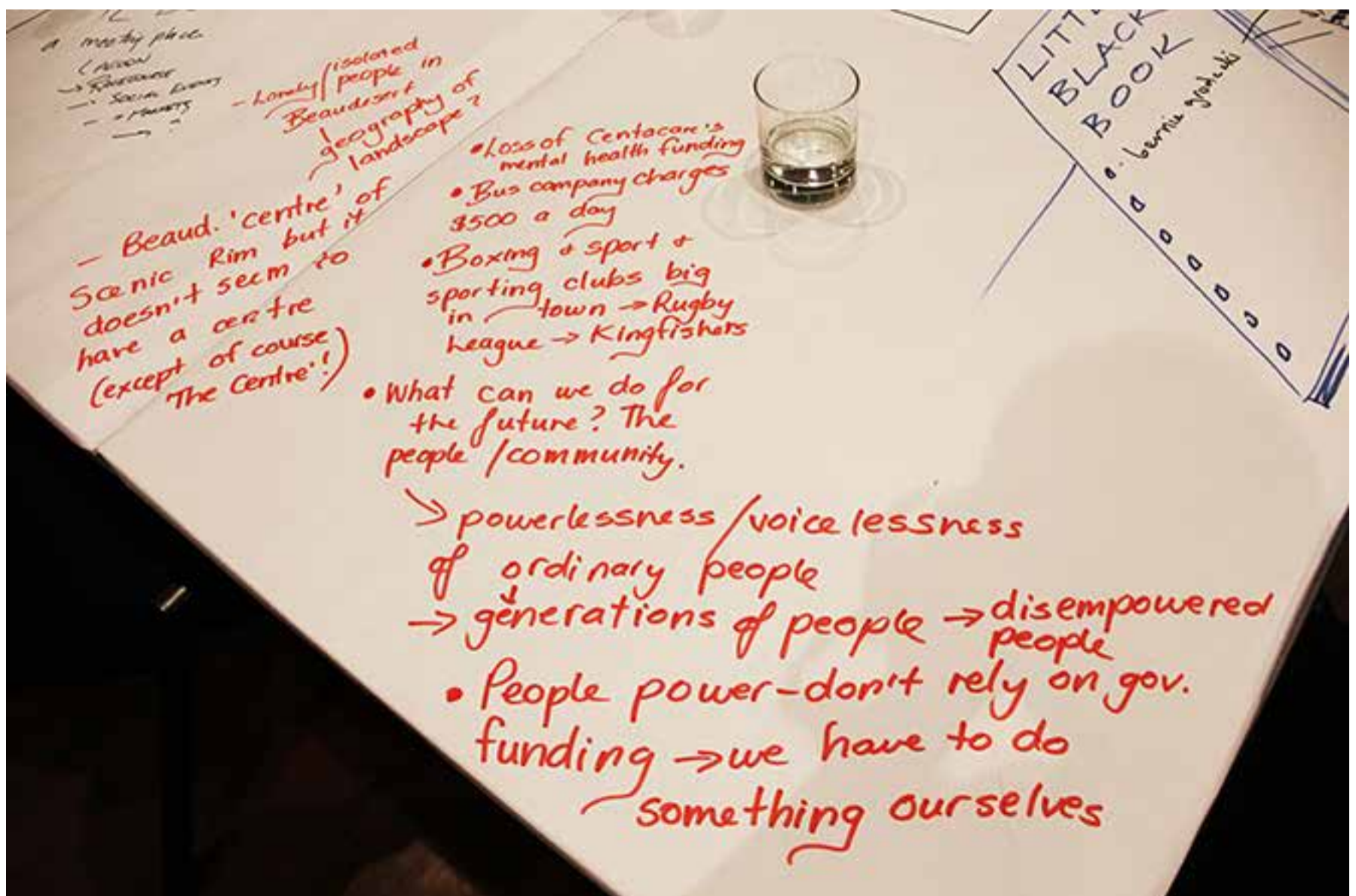
A young emerging filmmaker was engaged as a Local Content Producer and mentored by the

filmmaker and production team to create two films about the Australian South Sea Islander history of the region.

The Beaudesert Historical Society was paired with the two local primary schools that were covering local history in their Year 3 and 4 curriculum. The two groups were able to interact through a storytelling session at the local Historical Museum, filmed by the filmmaker, as well as artworks that the students created afterwards and used to reflect on their interpretations of what they'd learnt.

Young Mununjali students from the local high school were engaged in participatory theatre workshops to create and shoot their own drama. They helped with the filming process and a "Making of" film was created and shown at the community screening. This group of high school kids was the most deeply engaged of all the groups. Such a film which tried to incorporate a participatory process as well as to document it as a pro-

Figure 2. Community responses to the question, "What are some of Beaudesert's Big Stories?"



fessional film had not been done in a Big Stories project before.

Another participatory aspect of the project was the Skippy Deluxe storytelling booth. This was designed as an arts intervention to involve the biggest cross-section of the community in the project. A caravan was parked at the Beaudesert Show, the biggest community event of the year, allowing for people to come in and record a message with the filmmaker about what Beaudesert means to them and what they would like to see happen in their community in the future. These responses were edited into a short film and screened inside the caravan at the community screening.

In the Beaudesert project we also had the involvement of Participatory Media Production students, which has added a layer of richness and complexity. They created digital stories with community members over a period of time, plus interactive elements such as multimedia postcards and a “mapping Main Street” text map that collated Main Street shop owners feelings and concerns about the present and future of their town.

At the screening and exhibition community groups to show their photography and art works that tied in with the stories that we’d created. One of the stories was about a local dairy farmer overcoming depression and starting the region’s first robotic dairy. A series of his photographs, which had helped him as therapy during his depression, were exhibited in the foyer space. The painted works of local Mununjali artists complemented their digital stories about their connection to community and country.

Participation and co-creativity: a more nuanced perspective

I’ve outlined here the different ways in which we’ve worked with the community in order to show how complex and diverse the work can be. It must be noted that only in the drama project did community members participate in the traditional sense of participatory media, with the participants holding the cameras and writing the script.³

However, all participants who had films made about them had the chance to watch the films before they were finalised and screened, and to have a

say about the way in which they were represented. This dialogue and the engagement with the community to gain their consent is a key element of the process and integral to maintaining the trust of the community. It is also a sign of respect and partnership with the people that you are working with.

There were only a few changes made to the films as final pieces – one piece was taken out where a young girl talked about giving other kids a bloody nose, another was taken out where a young boy talked about his family, another small part was taken out where an older local had referred incorrectly to the landscape. This raises questions about the expectations and desires of community participants in these projects, and highlights ideas of process that are rich for further exploration.

It still remains common practice for participatory video and other aspects of practice such as digital storytelling that they are only created for a small audience with the aim of presenting selves and eliciting dialogue. However, when these media are created for a wider audiences and these audiences are part of the expectations of participants, the need for aesthetic beauty and for the work to communicate and evoke an emotional response must be balanced against the need for voice and ethical process to be equally respected. This balance can cause conflict and friction within these projects, particularly when participants come from different approaches and have tight deadlines competing with high expectations.

Project outcomes

Overall I believe that the project achieved what it set out to do, and feedback from the community has been predominantly positive. One participant and audience member said:

“What a wonderful gift you gave to the community last Friday evening. It was just another jewel in the crown of how the arts, culture and heritage are slowly being valued in this district. I have had such fun since, talking to others who were there and comparing which segments we each liked best, which brings different responses according to our

own interests. Your photography, production skills and communication were evident to us all”.

Some of the films raised awareness in the community of their diverse history. One audience member and participants said of the Australian South Sea Islander films:

“Not a lot of people know my heritage from my father’s side, and I am still learning more and more as I get older myself. My great, great grandfather was a victim of Blackbirding, being lured on to European ships with lollies and chocolate in Vanuatu as a young boy along with his twin brother, not knowing the ship would sail away never to return. Once they arrived in Australia, all the family was separated and sent to work for different wealthy men but my grandfather and his twin brother, they were sent to Tweed Heads to work on banana plantations. The story touched me deep within my soul, questioning, creating tears, emotions and curiosity. This story has changed me from within and now I finally see!”

This feedback is anecdotal and it must be noted that one of the things that holds back understanding of these projects as well as the field as a whole, is the lack of resources and time given for proper evaluation.

Conclusions

Audience and ethnographic studies of online participatory media are a nascent field, where there is much work to do. Further insight is needed into what constitutes participation and co-creation in a project like this which has multiple aims in terms of both product and process.

As practitioners we must ask ourselves, how can practitioners balance these competing agendas and desires? What is it that participants and audiences of such projects actually want? Often texts dealing with this field can frame themselves in quite idealistic, black and white terms around ideas of participation and power, without a more nuanced and complex depiction of what this ac-

tually looks like in practice.

As projects like this get larger and larger they are confronted by pressures to find a market and sustainability models for the work moving forward. This is an exciting area for practice and research that needs to be better understood. ■

Notes

1. Carpentier 2014, Nash 2014.
2. Carpentier, Schroder and Hallett (2014), Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) and Markham, Livingstone and Couldry (2010), among others.
3. Lunch and Lunch (2006), Milne, Mitchell and de Lange (2012).

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