

Guest Editor's Section — Audio- and Videoconferencing

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National Storytelling Network
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—NSN Board of Directors 1/21/16

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Cover: Ryder is no more, no less than a name on a piece of paper. No artist biography to influence your impressions, no collection overview to police your critique, just the art laid bare. As Barthes stated, "it is language which speaks, not the author" and so we have given Ryder a voice, and allowed the art to do the talking.
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Ways Storytellers are Using Audio- and Videoconferencing For Training, Discussion, And Performance



Eric Miller

The Storytelling Revival, which began in the 1960s, was based in part on some people's inclinations to connect with other people directly, with no electronic mediation. For these people, the Revival involved a reaction against the dominant role that television and other mass media had come to play in their lives.

Fifty years later, we are living in a somewhat different media environment. Social media—media operated by individuals on their personal, increasingly portable, electronic communication devices—are major and growing factors in many peoples' lives.

It has become a very useful marketing tool for professional storytellers to place video recordings of their performances on YouTube and other video sites. Another set of options the new media landscape presents is audio- and videoconferencing for training in, discussion about, and performance of storytelling. These electronic conferences, or "e-conferences," can also be called "teleconferences" (one meaning of "tele" is "from a distance"). Teleconference participants can hear, or see and hear, each other. Teleconferences can be observed simultaneously by people who are not participating in them, and recordings of teleconferences can be made available online.

Two types of teleconference are: an audio teleconference, and a video teleconference (which typically also involves audio). An audio teleconference—also known as an audio conference—is a type of "audio-mediated" communication. Audio conferencing can be done for

free through services such as FreeConferenceCall.com. A simple telephone call can also be called an audio teleconference, although the term, teleconference, is usually reserved for meetings of more than two people. A video teleconference—also known as a videoconference, video call, or video chat—is a type of "video-mediated" communication. Videoconferencing can be done for free through software programs such as Skype, FaceTime (for Apple devices), Zoom, and Google Hangouts.

In mediated ways, teleconferences can enable one to meet and interact with many people. They increase one's reach through space and—through recordings of teleconferences—time. The Age of Teleconferencing is just beginning. Teaching, tutoring, training, coaching, counseling, selling, and consulting are just some of the activities that are now being done via teleconference. Through teleconferencing, one can provide specialized services

to people around the world. To give just one example: languages—including rare and ancient ones—can be taught via teleconference using storytelling and other forms of verbal play.

Although I sometimes use them, personally I am not comfortable with terms such as, "storytelling through teleconferencing," "audio-mediated storytelling," and "video-mediated storytelling," because in a sense an event is only fully a storytelling event if the participants are physically present to each other. Do we really want to bestow the word, storytelling, on teleconferences?



Videoconference participants' images are superimposed on each other in contrast to a more typical compartmentalized screen configuration.

A key aspect of storytelling is that participants can, as a story is being told, observe each other aurally and visually (simultaneously or nearly simultaneously), and give feedback to each other. This condition is met by teleconferencing, through the projection and perception of participants' electronic representations. However, in teleconferencing certain aspects of physical presence are diminished or lost, including the senses of spatial depth, touch, smell, and temperature—although technology that would provide information in some of these areas is conceivable.

If we do reserve the term “storytelling” for situations in which speakers and listeners are at the same venue—what about the use of amplified sound and magnified visuals, such as when a speaker's face is projected onto a large screen so that people at the back of the space can see an enlarged moving image of the speaker? These electronic augmentations do not disqualify an event from being “storytelling,” although they may water down the *storytellingness* of an event.

Looking at the larger picture: storytelling-type activities in teleconferencing have the potential to greatly alleviate one of the great difficulties of modern life: alienation. Two manifestations of alienation that teleconferencing could greatly reduce are loneliness and unemployment (and under-employment).

Regarding loneliness: What is needed is a design infrastructure by which a person could, 24 hours a day, find a few other people who *feel like talking*. This could be done through the use of keywords. These small teleconference groups would likely often involve storytelling, as conversation largely consists of storytelling of the type, “This is what I have done,” and “This is what I am hoping to do.”

Therefore, I call on you, storytellers: Please help to save the world by joining the effort to design and implement small-group teleconferencing in which storytelling-type activities could occur. Teleconferencing is facilitating a renaissance of orality—“secondary orality,” as Walter Ong referred to mediated speech in his book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (Routledge, 1982). To make the most of teleconferencing, people need to develop their conversation, as well as their storytelling, abilities.

As teleconferencing is developing, “vertical” packages are being formed. This may involve a phone hardware and software maker, a telecommunication service provider, and a content provider, working together. These kinds of packages may present opportunities for offering training in the form of storytelling. Also, systems are being developed through which members of the public could teleconference with authors for a fee. Libraries, publishers,

and bookstores could facilitate these exchanges.

With the depletion of fossil fuels and the uncertainties of international travel, audio- and videoconferencing are going to further emerge as green alternatives to physical travel. Mediated presence is not the same as unmediated presence—but the same could be said of wearing glasses, using a condom, or wearing a prosthetic limb. Yes, not the same, but one does the best one can with the resources and options one has.

Each medium of communication has its own advantages and disadvantages, and its own biases. For example: Writing tends to be an internal, silent, and solitary activity. As such, its bias is often toward independent thought and the isolation of the individual, and this may influence what stories are conveyed, and how they are conveyed.

Speaking—including storytelling—with people who are physically present may influence speakers to emphasize the importance of each human being.

Teleconferencing, especially videoconferencing, seems to me to have a bi-polar (manic/depressive) quality to it: if it works, one feels great, but if the connection is not achieved, one may feel very frustrated and/or embarrassed. Teleconferencing may also have an epic quality to it: momentous, great fun, and filling participants with senses of wonder and accomplishment.

Guest Editor's Overview

This section has three segments: audio conferencing, videoconferencing, and virtual conferencing. Questions I asked included:

- 1) When did you start conducting storytelling-related activities via teleconference?
- 2) What have been some of your thoughts about these activities? Regarding training people in storytelling, and performing for people—what are some differences between doing so with people who are physically-present, in contrast to doing so with people who are present via teleconference?
- 3) In what ways has your use of the technology evolved?
- 4) What might be some of your plans for use of this kind of technology?

Eric Miller was born, raised, and trained in storytelling in NYC; he studied Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania and has settled in Chennai (on India's southeast coast). He co-founded (in 2007) and directs the World Storytelling Institute (storytellinginstitute.org), and co-founded (in 2011) and co-facilitates the Indian Storytelling Network (indianstorytellingnetwork.org). eric@storytellingandvideoconferencing.com

AUDIO CONFERENCING

A History of The Art of Storytelling Show, An Online Audio Project

Eric Wolf



The *Art of Storytelling Show with Brother Wolf* began in 2007. The original title was *The Art of Storytelling with Children Podcast*, but after about 20 episodes I decided to expand the focus. I edited the beginnings and endings of the early episodes to change the name of the project.

While the show was evolving, my technical ability to produce the show, and the amount of time I spent completing each episode, also increased. The first approximately 50 episodes were recorded using conference call technology. I used conference call software to record, and I downloaded the mp3 file afterwards. However, I was not satisfied with the sound quality. It was at this point that I began recording the show on both my side and the interviewee's side of the teleconference. I would mail a recording device to interviewees and then walk them through using it.

Some interviews were conducted while I was attending conferences and festivals. Episodes were recorded at the Smithsonian African-American Folk Festival, the Talk Story Festival in Hawaii, National Storytelling Festivals, and National Storytelling Conferences. There are no call-in segments in these episodes.

I remember the moment I realized I had created a project that would get national attention and would have a national effect. I describe it as the feeling you get when you reach your hand into the jungle and accidentally grab the tail of a tiger. This was an electric moment. However, a problem with grabbing a tiger's tail is that if you let go, the tiger may turn around and eat you. So I held on tight and followed the tiger.

I became more and more concerned with creating a high-level audio product. However, high levels of quality require large amounts of time, energy, and financial investment. I did not want to charge people to listen to or download each recording; I feared charging such fees might reduce the audience too much.

Around episode 60, I engaged a lawyer to create a contract that stipulated the recordings were my property, while

the intellectual property rights belonged to the guests. The guests from that point on agreed to this arrangement, and most of the previously-recorded guests also agreed, retroactively. I promised the guests who signed this agreement some return on any money made from their recordings. I am very grateful to the guests who trusted me in this regard. The show has yet to generate any direct income, but I wanted a legal structure to be in place in the event there might be any financial gain. All in all, I was never able to figure out how to monetize the podcast, and largely as a result of this factor, I eventually burned out in relation to the project.

I think of *The Art of Storytelling Show* as a PhD in storytelling. It was a wonderful experience to interview approximately a hundred and twenty storytellers about their art form. I feel not including my own storytelling in every episode was a mistake. Even so, the show created many opportunities for me as a storyteller. I toured Hawaii. I was the only Caucasian male MC at the African American Smithsonian Folk Festival, a gig I am immensely proud of. As a result of the show, my name is recognized in the storytelling community.

As the podcast series progressed, I dedicated more and more time to producing it. At the same time, I was touring as a storyteller, which involved spending a lot of time in airports and on the road. I realized I either had to move to a larger media market, or I had to think of storytelling as a part-time job. I was not that fond of traveling and I did not want to move, so I decided to change professions.

If *The Art of Storytelling Show* had received steady and significant financial support—from sponsors, advertisers, listeners, etc.—I would likely still be doing it. I found myself in the position of being an unpaid publicist for a large segment of the storytelling community. Currently all the episodes are available online, and the blog is still up. Episodes are being listened to or downloaded 1,500 times a month for free by people all over the world. Maintaining this access costs me about \$500 a year. I feel the time might be right for this access to be supported at least in part by elements of the storytelling community beyond myself. Please contact me if you might have any thoughts about this possibility.

I believe it's important to orient yourself to the dreams you have, not to the ones you had. After a lot of

soul-searching, I have earned a Master's degree in Social Work and have become a narrative therapist. Not a therapist who tells stories, but one who helps clients discover and shape the assumptions and stories of their own lives. Miracles occur almost every day in my sessions and I am grateful to be able to touch people's lives in this way. I feel that as a storyteller I was selling sand in the desert, but that as a narrative therapist I am selling water in the desert. In April 2017, my wife and I moved from Ohio to Black Mountain, North Carolina, where I will be working as a family therapist. I am considering re-starting *The Art of Storytelling Show*, on the theme of narrative therapy.

I love storytelling and am committed to helping the art form develop. I believe storytelling can save the human race from itself; that as storytellers we can use our skills to help people become more empathetic and kind, as well as more educated. How would you rather learn something? Through the school of hard knocks or through a story? Well, right now the human race is heading for the environmental equivalent of the school of hard knocks and it's not going to be pretty. We could use a good story.

Service is an activity that defines us as human beings, and I believe that storytelling can be a very important service. I often tell beginners in storytelling: "If we only tell to ourselves, we are missing the point. Let your stories have legs and let them tell you. Tell stories like your life depends on it, and also try to have a sense of humor."

For those of you who are interested in creating a podcast series of your own, I have created a set of instructions, available for free. Some of the technical recommendations are out of date, but I believe the strategic advice is sound.

Many of the skills I learned as a professional storyteller and while developing *The Art of Storytelling Show* are useful in my therapy business. Whatever successes I am having now are built on my past experiences and I would not trade those experiences for anything.

- Links to 122 archived interviews with storytellers: artofstorytellingshow.com/past-guests
- "The Zen of Storytelling," an e-course on ways of telling stories: artofstorytellingshow.com/storytelling
- Free e-course on how to set up an arts-focused podcast: artofstorytellingshow.com/podcast
- Narrative therapy resources: blackmountainnt.com/narrative-therapy.

Eric Wolf's first public storytelling performance was in 1978, at the age of eight. He received an NSN ORACLE Circle of Excellence Award for service to the storytelling community for his work on the Art of Storytelling podcast from 2007 to 2011. He is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and narrative therapist in Black Mountain, NC. ericwolf2@yahoo.com.

The Healing Story Alliance Teleconferences are Alive and Well

Elisa Pearmain



It's 8:55 p.m. USA Eastern Time on a Wednesday evening. I'm at home in my pajamas, with a cup of tea at hand. I've just dialed in to FreeConferenceCall.com as the host of the Healing Story Alliance teleconference call. The participants are starting to come in, "ping, ping, ping." "Hi, this is Allison from Seattle." "This is Jo from Maine." "Hi, it's Ben from California."

The flurry of introductions is enough to set this heart a-fluttering with excitement over our shared community.

Once a month, anywhere from 10 to 35 people call in from all over the USA, Canada, Australia, and even India. At 9:05 p.m. all except our speaker usually mute their phones. I press 'record' and the teleconference begins. For the next 30-45 minutes our speaker tells stories and shares thoughts relating to the chosen topic. The rest of the hour is spent in discussion (which may include activities) with unmuted participants of the teleconference.

The Healing Story Alliance (HSA), a special interest group of the USA's National Storytelling Network (NSN), was formed at the NSN's 1999 National Storytelling Conference (NSC) in San Diego. Gail Rosen set the HSA in motion. Soon a board was formed. We hosted our first NSC pre-conference in 2000. Excitement and idea-sharing exploded. Soon we had a bi-annual journal and quarterly newsletters.

There was a desire to keep people connecting, and to keep ideas flowing and cross-pollinating throughout the year and beyond the printed page. As a result, the first audio teleconference was held in 2007. I imagine the idea was born during an HSA board meeting conference call! The technology of conference calls was becoming more affordable (for example, there were no longer fees for basic services). It was exciting that people in a wide geographical area could be reached (through live audio), with little effort and at almost no expense.

Members of the HSA board had a debate over whether this would be an income resource for the HSA, a members-only benefit, or if it would be open, welcoming anyone.

In revisiting our mission to educate, support, and heal through story, we ultimately determined we needed to keep our offerings open and free to all, whether HSA or NSN members or not. We were volunteering our time, and we wanted to expand our community.

The first speakers on our calls included some of the early HSA board members, such as Laura Simms, Gail Rosen, Lorna Czarnota, Lani Peterson, Diane Rooks, and Joan Stockbridge. Soon we realized that our members had many gifts of experience and perspective to offer, and we invited them to submit proposals to speak. Now we also reach out to non-members who are engaged in interesting healing story work.

Examples of our teleconference topics include:

- Expanding understanding of ways stories can be therapeutic.
- Ways to tell a healing personal story.
- What to do after a healing personal story is told.

Another set of topics concerns working with various groups. For example:

- People experiencing grief.
- People experiencing Alzheimer's.
- People thinking about suicide.
- Teenagers.
- Seniors.
- Battered women.
- People in homeless shelters.
- Incarcerated people.

We have had programs on conflict resolution, forgiveness, uses of healing story to teach peace, environmental awareness, community building, and using folktales and myths for healing. We have had several teleconferences on the uses of the Hero's Journey model to help people cope with challenges such as coming of age, and cancer.

More recently we have been working to bring healing story to the challenge of building bridges between diverse communities, and we have been featuring more diversity in terms of cultural and gender identity. For examples: Arthuretta Martin shared the story of her journey to Ghana for the Panafest experience. And Tom DeWolf (whose ancestors were slave holders) and Sharon Morgan (whose ancestors were enslaved) shared their story of searching together for meaningful healing.

We have experimented with teleconferences that were more interactive. Liz Mangual and Bob Kangegis led us to look at and share "Legacy Stories: Using Story to Create and Sustain Community." We felt as if we were sitting around a fire together, sharing stories and making meaning. We also had a workshop teleconference on looking at fears that silence our voices and keep us from telling some

of our most important stories: although with such personal material, only a few people felt comfortable enough to share in this format.

In January 2017, we held our first teleconference story swap. The theme was, Stories of Resistance and Solidarity. Norah Dooley began the hour telling inspiring folktales, biographical stories, and personal-experience narratives. We then heard from other participants in the teleconference. This worked well and met a need for community members to think about how stories can help in a time of upheaval and uncertainty. We are planning to offer more teleconference swaps in the future.

There are a few challenges to audio teleconference programs. The calls tend to work better with landlines than with mobile phones or computers. Connections get dropped occasionally, but people are usually able to call right back in. Sometimes people do not mute, and background noise from another room, or static, can cause distraction. We have a function that can "mute all" which helps with this problem, although this can cause confusion for those who join a session late.

Another issue is that in audio teleconferences, the speaker/teller cannot see any of the participants, and while the lines are muted they get no feedback even in the form of "ahhh's," laughter, breathing sounds, and especially the eye contact that many storytellers depend on. Thus, some speakers have chosen to leave the lines unmuted and have stopped every few minutes to ask for questions and other feedback. Some audience members have found it difficult to insert themselves into the open discussion time without seeing who else is waiting.

The teleconferences have benefitted us as an organization, as well as our listeners, in multiple ways. We are sharing a wealth of experiential information and resources. We are all learning from each other. Understanding is deepening and the field is growing. More people can access these ideas, which leads to more of the work being out in the world.

Since 2010 we have had the ability to record our teleconferences. This allows people to go to our website, and listen on their own time to any of our archived recordings.

In the last year the HSA's Executive Committee has worked to expand our focus to include The Healing Story Social Justice Initiative. Soon our website will reflect this new program. Our teleconference themes have already begun to focus on this area. Our February 2017 speaker, Donna Sife from Australia, was a 2012 recipient of the UN Ambassador for Peace Award for her work helping communities in conflict. Our March speaker was Sara Armstrong from California, who shared her uses of dilemma stories in the classroom to teach social justice issues. In April,

we featured Jenni Cargill-Strong from Australia: her subject was storytelling for climate action. Our May speaker, Matt Hopwood from the UK, focused on ways Sharing Love Stories Changes the World. Jenni Cargill-Strong is our scheduled speaker for June. Following the NSN Conference, we generally take the summers off.

Now, it's 10 p.m. I have just hung up the phone after a happy chorus of goodbyes. I am again aware of having connected to something much greater than my individual existence—a community of curious, passionate storytellers and story lovers who are committed to fostering healing in so many venues and creative ways. What could be better than that?

If you are interested in being a featured healing story teleconference speaker please contact me. To sample the HSA's library of recorded conference calls, please visit healingstory.org, and select "events," then "teleconference recordings." If the HSA's mission of spreading the healing method of storytelling resonates with you, you are invited to join us by becoming a member!

Elisa Pearmain wrote this article with the help of current and former members of the HSA Executive Committee. She has been telling stories professionally for 35 years, and is an award-winning author of two collections of tales and a CD. She is a licensed psychotherapist practicing in Concord, MA. elisa@wisdomtales.com. wisdomtales.com.

VIDEOCONFERENCING

The Uncanny Technology of a Living Story

Laura Simms



Storytelling has become a word used to refer to or describe different kinds of narratives or artworks that are more personal. The storytelling that I practice is more akin to traditional myth telling where language is alive with meaning in direct response to a live audience. My personal study has emphasized developing a sensitivity to the dynamic qualities of spoken story and engagement as an embodied and relational event. Meaning for me in performance arises not only from content but more fully from the energized space and visualization existing between the audience and the teller. Many levels are felt at once; conceptual, imaginative, intangible.

In 2010, I created a mentor program that could occur via long-distance. This program facilitated in-depth preparation of a story for performance. I encouraged a tremendous amount of research, conversations, and personal journaling as part of a step-by-step process of entering the heart of a text and finding deep personal associations to a story. Through various methods of communication, including one-on-one and group audio- and video calls, I helped people shape the story they wanted to tell. My students became attuned to landscapes, patterns of events, structure of the story, the process of engagement, and symbols and metaphors. They immersed themselves in the exploration of how structure, images, meaning, historical context, and place in stories manifest. I appreciated the teleconference

encounters. I could speak with students across the world. Many participants could share their perceptions. And, the exploration offered new possibilities.

The uses I have made of audio- and videoconferencing in this process have been limited to discussion and dialogue about story. I have not invited students to tell stories via teleconference. For coaching of performance, I prefer to rely on the energy and insight generated by visceral presence between people. In my experience, the storytelling manifests in the context of the confluence and reciprocity with the other and the environment in which the relationship occurs. It is in basic presence that I can best invest in sensing what is needed. For example, gestures can either obscure or enhance connection. Since for me each teller is very unique, it is the way I can help someone understand the sense of gesture by being with them.

Recently, working with a woman in my kitchen, I realized that how she used her hands while speaking closed off the space between herself and the listener. It was not a matter of where she placed her hands, but of how she accessed and embodied the energy of language and feeling of that energy moving between herself and others. She got it when I had her speak from different parts of her body and finally extend her hands outward letting aliveness move from her fingertips toward me. She felt it. I felt it. Suddenly, the natural resonance of her story between us was powerful enough to make my body tremble.

Sounds of words suffused by feeling also travel in space between teller and listeners. When a teller speaks from

their body, alive with a sense of place and intention, something remarkable takes place. A word instantly transforms into experience imagined like a waking dream. I am more able to listen into the sound when present with someone because I can see their breathing and feel them. When in reciprocity, and shared presence, the breath, sound, word, and sudden poetic language can be vital and subtle. A memorized, repeated, and rehearsed narration in which the primary meaning is in the known words or message produces a different relationship. That kind of presentation can be entertaining and meaningful. It can be brilliantly wrought. The quality of involvement in live storytelling, however, that is imagined and felt is mysterious. It is always in response. There is an almost sensory excitement and undercurrent of timeless calm aroused in this on-the-spot connectivity.

Audio- and videoconferencing have been brilliant for me. Technology is incredibly useful. However, we need both wings of the bird in contemporary society: knowledge of technology, and a renewed commitment to our capacity for authentic presence and shared space. For me, the communication via teleconference can reveal many things about storytelling. It can relate text and content. But it is not live storytelling. It is time to become bi-cultural; to avoid an over-reliance on digital communication and reinvest ourselves in the potent spontaneous presence of wisdom producing shared story and listening as well.

Laura Simms is an award-winning, internationally renowned storyteller, writer, arts-educator, coach, recording artist, festival director, and humanitarian. She is the Artistic Director of the Hans Christian Andersen Storytelling Center, and is a Senior Research Fellow at Rutgers University for UNESCO. Laura is a co-founder of the Healing Story Alliance (HSA).
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Notes on Videoconferencing

Eric Miller

While doing course work for my Folklore PhD at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, from 1999-2000, I worked part-time in one of Penn's telecommunication labs. I had already been videoconferencing for a number of years. However, at Penn I discovered that universities were not only practicing high-quality videoconferencing over the Internet, but that it



A professional Mahabharata storyteller in Chennai talks with Folklore scholars in Bloomington, Indiana.

had become a common practice to simultaneously relay a videoconference's combined audio and video as a webcast, so that others could observe the videoconferences, live or recorded. The webcasted videoconference is a splendid method of communication.

Years later, I was amazed to discover that Google was providing a lower-quality version of this same service, at no charge, calling it "Google Hangouts on Air," Skype, and Zoom are other popular free videoconferencing sites, but they do not seem to match Google's webcasting and online recording abilities.

In a videoconference, the screen can be configured in a number of ways. I prefer a static side-by-side configuration, so viewers can see both the speaker and the listener. Currently, Google Hangouts limits users to seeing the speaker's image larger at the top of the screen, above the other participants' images. This occurs automatically, based on who is speaking. The initiator of the call can override this and can select whose image is largest.

Videoconferencing has still not come of age. It is widely used behind closed doors, in business and government. Members of the public often use it for communicating with far-away family and friends. But its use is not yet ubiquitous. Reasons for this might include: if using a mobile phone, it is difficult to hold the camera steadily for extended periods of time; it may cost more per minute, and may use up battery power faster than audio calls; and sometimes people may not want to show others how they look or where they are.

It can be challenging to videoconference with people at more than one site at the same time: the quality of audio and video coming from each site may vary widely. Some people are enthusiastic and throw themselves into the activity, while others can be emotionally distant. Also, if the audio is lagging far behind the video, one may decide to use telephones for audio, while continuing to use the Internet for video. If there were more than two participants, they would need to do a telephone conference call.

For years it has been a dream of mine to conduct workshops with mixed groups—some participants being physically present, some being tele-present. In this workshop, all participants would be able to see and hear each other. However, the cameras and microphones built into personal communication devices are designed to give optimum audio and video quality only of a person directly in front of the screen. A workshop situation might call for at least two cameras in the room: one camera directed at the workshop leader and the other at the other participants in the room. It would be ideal if the second camera would have zoom, pan, and tilt functionality. A technician might be needed to operate this camera and mix the two local images. One or more external microphones might also be needed. In addition, monitors would be needed so that everyone in the room could see the images of the distant participants.

I have co-facilitated numerous “ethnographic videoconferences.” Ethnographic videoconferencing—the use of videoconferencing to generate, share, and record ethnographic data—is a development in the evolution that began with ethnographic photography, and ethnographic film and video. Links to writings of mine relating to this and other videoconference topics are at storytellinginstitute.org/224.html. Links to recordings of 16 videoconferences I have participated in are at storytellinginstitute.org/av.html.

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When I addressed the large group at the World Storytelling Institute’s Chennai Storytelling Festival via videoconference in February 2013, I noticed several differences compared to being physically present. First, if I had been there I could have turned my head at any time to take in the full size and position of the audience. I would have had a clearer sense of its mood and responsiveness, and that would have activated a whole set of responses and strategies from me. I could have turned my attention and gaze to different parts of the audience, which can be an extra dynamic in the communication.

It helped me very much that Kamini Ramachandran personally welcomed me into the room, giving me

close-up contact with a person, with the audience members behind her. She mediated, enabling me to project my presence. She also very helpfully showed me around by swiveling the camera to the sides, which gave me a sense of the whole space.

When facing a physically-present audience my attention can be grabbed by individuals, which can affect my delivery and lead to personal interactions. This kind of thing usually does not occur in videoconferences, in part because I cannot see or hear individual audience members very well, nor locate where sounds are coming from. Part of the electricity of a live performance, for the audience, is the visceral sense that the performer is real and is just a few feet away. When the performer interacts with an individual audience member, the rest of the audience feels that could easily be them, and this creates a unique kind of intimacy.

I couldn’t have demonstrated all aspects of storytelling through videoconference. Physically-present storytelling is subtle and fluid in the way the teller can shift roles. Storytellers can move from narrating, to interacting with the audience responses, to commenting on the story, to embodying a character’s posture, and so on. This fluidity occurs partly through body language, but this may not be clear in the limited frame of a screen (especially as screens usually don’t show the whole body of the teller).

Atmosphere cannot be sensed and controlled very well via videoconference. When people are in a room together, everyone senses, usually subconsciously, the mood of the group. As a teller I assess and can change this atmosphere, but over videoconference I may not notice things in the audience’s space that may be affecting their atmosphere. I can generate my own atmosphere and attempt to project it, but much of this subtle communication is lost.

In a videoconference, one doesn’t know what the other person is seeing or distracted by, whereas when telling to an audience in the same room, one does. In a videoconference it’s awkward that the image of the person you are looking at is usually not quite looking into your eyes, as this obstructs the language of eye contact, its subtle messages and rapport. This doesn’t prevent reasonably engaged conversation, but it can reduce the feeling of intimacy and connection.

A core quality and function of storytelling is bringing people closer together. This closeness can be profound and deeply satisfying, and physical closeness aids emotional closeness. But storytelling is powerful, and quickly helps people transcend their conscious awareness of their environment as they are transported into the communal imagination. Storytelling happens best through physical presence, but the art is potent enough to create magic even without it.

Videoconferencing by the Bangalore Storytelling Society

Aparna Athreya, BSS President
(aparnaathreya@gmail.com;
kiddywiki.com)



The Bangalore Storytelling Society (BSS) was founded in 2013, and has facilitated videoconferences (which were also webcast) on World Storytelling Day (WSD, March 20) in 2015, 2016, and 2017, each time using Google Hangouts on Air.

The hosts of the March 20, 2017 videoconference were me (Aparna Athreya in Bangalore), and Deeptha Vivekanand in Chandigarh. The storytellers were: Wangari Grace and John Namai Titi in Nairobi, Kenya; Sowmya Srinivasan and Eric Miller in Chennai; Sheila Wee in Singapore; and Jan Blake who is based in the UK but was in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. A link to a recording of this videoconference is at <http://tinyurl.com/jwurtkz>.

Bangalore is India's leading city for information technology, so it should come as no surprise that the BSS is into videoconferencing. I have worked in the software industry for over 15 years, and a lot of my work involves interacting with individual teams through long-distance, video-based communication. I am delighted to apply this experience to storytelling performance and training. The challenge is to utilize the technology without compromising the "ethos" of storytelling.

The BSS is planning to host a series of videoconferences that will feature a combination of storytelling workshops that will include performances. Storytellers from around the world will teach and tell. There will be people physically-present with the trainer/performer, people participating in the videoconference from various sites, and others observing the live webcast (and afterwards the web archive). Distant observers may support the storytelling by providing visuals and music. Translation will be provided when needed, and teaching-and-learning languages could also be involved.

Deeptha Vivekanand,
BSS Vice-president and past President
(deeptha.vivekanand@gmail.com;
ever-after.co.in)



Storytelling through videoconferencing has a lot of potential. Of course, there are technical snags and bandwidth issues, but I feel storytellers must explore this medium to reach audiences far and wide and create a loyal following for storytelling.

Telling stories to a camera is not something most storytellers are comfortable with. Storytellers like to see and talk with their listeners, employ call-and-response techniques, and draw from listeners' energies. However, with practice it is possible to develop altered techniques to suit the videoconference medium.



Top: Jan Blake who was traveling in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, participating in BSS 2017 World Storytelling Day. Bottom: Sheila Wee participates from Singapore.

Sowmya Srinivasan, BSS Treasurer
(sowmya03@gmail.com;
ssstoryteller.blogspot.com)



I have found Internet videoconferencing to be wonderful for one-on-one training, and panel discussions.

I also use videoconferencing to tell stories to children in a school a few hundred kilometers away from my home. The connectivity is unpredictable and we sometimes struggle with audio-video disconnect (one's audio tends to reach one's videoconference partners before one's video does). In addition, responses come a second or two after they would in a physically-present exchange. Telling stories to groups of children through this medium is challenging due to the lack of connection on various levels, although I am sure the quality of interaction will improve as the technology improves. As this occurs, I believe elders who love to share stories will also increasingly use this technology.

Wangari Grace, Storyteller
(wangari.storytelling@gmail.com;
wangarithestoryteller.co.ke)



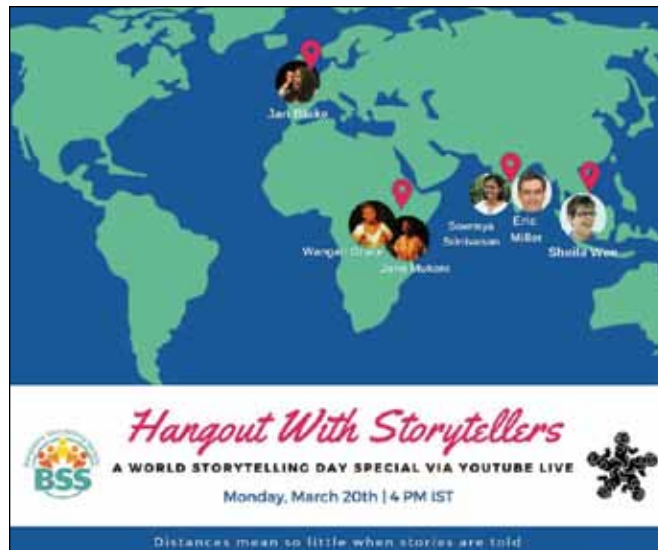
The BSS 2017 World Storytelling Day videoconference was my first time participating in such an event. In the past, I have done one-on-one conversations on Skype with fellow storytellers, most of whom I have met before. Videoconference is a great way to bridge the distances. It is important for storytellers to interact with people of other cultures, to exchange views

about current trends in storytelling, and to observe others' stories and ways of telling them. Meeting online can open up new ideas, spaces, and opportunities, and can expand one's networks. Through videoconferencing I have been able to brainstorm possible collaborations with tellers from around the world.

Getting funding for cultural projects is not easy. Travelling from one country to another is expensive and time-consuming. Thus, there is a real need for high-quality audio- and videoconferencing.

Storytelling is an art that requires some level of intimacy. Unlike theatre or movies where the audience is an outsider peeping into the world of the actors on stage, a

storyteller invites the audience into the world of the story, engaging them as if they are characters in the performance. Physical presence during storytelling allows for effective use of space, body movement, gestures, facial expressions, question-and-answer, call-and-response, music, and dance. Audio- and videoconferencing can limit all of this—although if one is inventive one can find ingenious solutions to some of these challenges. If well utilized, e-conferencing can open new doors and enable worthwhile “halfway meetings”—meetings that are halfway to seeing each other in person.



Poster announcing the BSS 2017 World Storytelling Day videoconference.

Sheila Wee, Storyteller
(sheila@storywise.com.sg;
storywise.com.sg)



It was helpful to see peoples' images to tell my story to, but it might have been better if those little squares with faces in them would have been at the top of the screen, near the camera. As it was, when I played it back I noticed I was looking down and thus had not been giving eye contact to the people whose images I had been looking at in the little squares—and also was not giving eye contact to the viewers of the recording.

Despite the glitches, this is a good way to overcome the distance barrier.

Information about BSS is at
facebook.com/bangalorestorytellingsociety

Videoconferencing via the Cloud Storytelling Project

Manoj Kabre, Educator
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can-trust.org)



I am based in Bangalore, and work with a number of schools in the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. We began the Cloud Storytelling Project in Feb 2014. The medium is Skype video-conference. A storyteller from a distant location comes online at a designated time and narrates stories to a group of children on the other side of the conference, and discusses the stories with the children.

This activity gives children opportunities to improve their listening and comprehension skills. The storyteller is a stranger to them, so they learn to express their thoughts to strangers. This helps the children reduce their stage fear and inhibition. There has been a dramatic improvement in the courage and power of expression in the children who attend these sessions. It also teaches them discipline and an organized way of working, considering the fact that the time schedule needs to be strictly followed. The effort that somebody is making to conduct a videoconference session all the way from UK or USA makes a big impression on the children. Different time zones can be a challenge; one person conducted a session at midnight, her time.

Shanthi Krishnan, Storyteller
(shankri86@yahoo.co.in)



I have been telling stories to school-children over Skype for the Cloud Storytelling Project over the past five years. I tell stories from my home in Bangalore. When Mr. Manoj asked me if I would participate in this project, I was a little hesitant. But with help from my neighbor and family members, I learned to Skype.

Storytelling via videoconference has its limitations. The movement of the storyteller is restricted by the position of the computer camera,



Children in Chennai and Philadelphia play singing games together as they practice speaking Tamil during a videoconference.

unlike physically present sessions in which the storyteller can move around the entire space. Positives include: the comfort of telling stories from home, children get to hear stories from storytellers from different locations, and there is a huge variety in the stories told.

When it comes to the influence on children, I don't see much difference between physically-present and videoconference storytelling because ultimately the joy of hearing stories and the moral lessons of the stories prevail on the minds of the listeners.

Videoconferencing for Arts Education in the Classroom

Mary Blue, Virtual Learning Specialist
(bluem@gtc.edu)



In Wisconsin, schools started using videoconferencing to share coursework and for virtual fieldtrips around 1998. I coordinate the videoconferencing between Gateway Technical College and our partner high schools.

One interesting project was "The Virtual Storytelling Experience," which was a collaboration between 1) the Milwaukee Public Museum (Distance Learning Program), 2) the Milwaukee Public Schools, 3) Milwaukee Succeeds, and 4) the First Stage Theatre Company. Storytellers told stories to children (via videoconference and webcast) and engaged in follow-up educational activities in schools throughout much of Wisconsin.

Related materials are available at storytellinginstitute.org/223.html.

Eric Miller, Guest Editor

In 2013, Mary Blue and I co-facilitated a videoconference between high school students in Chennai and Wisconsin. Information about and a link to a recording of this videoconference is at storytellinginstitute.org/36.html.

Two educational videoconference projects were the Megaconferences (which involved college and university participants and began in 1998), and the Megaconference Jrs. (which involved K-12 school participants and began in 2004). Both were discontinued after 2013. These events were produced by Internet2 (www.internet2.edu) a USA computer-networking consortium of organizations from the realms of research and education, industry, and government. Megaconferences were annual marathon videoconference events composed of segments by teams of videoconferencers on subjects in the Humanities and Sciences. They typically lasted 12 hours, and were composed of 24 separate half-hour segments. The videoconference segments were webcast live,

and recordings of the segments were available online for years afterwards. Internet2 continues to be used for high-quality videoconferencing. Over 250 USA colleges and universities are members of Internet2, which has Special Interest Groups dedicated to Education and Performance.

On the practical side: Organizations through which one can apply to be hired to give performances and teach classes via videoconference with students include:

- Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration: cilc.org
- Skype an Author Network: skypeanauthor.wikifoundry.com
- Skype in the Classroom: education.microsoft.com/skype-in-the-classroom/overview

VIRTUAL CONFERENCING

A Virtual Reality Storytelling Series: Chew on This Storytelling

Cici Woo

**(Chewonthisstorytelling@gmail.com;
ChewOnThisStorytelling.com)**



Since January 2016, I have been curating and presenting storytellers in virtual reality, enabling storytellers in the San Francisco Bay Area to interact with audiences worldwide. As far as I know, this is the first storytelling series in virtual reality.

People participate via audio and avatars (two-dimensional visual representations of themselves, which they can manipulate using various kinds of input devices). Our avatars sometimes gather around an image of a campfire. Many participants find the process supersedes any other electronic technology in terms of how immersive it is, and of how strong a feeling of togetherness it generates. One of our future guests specializes in piano performance improvisation based on what is being spoken.



Avatars, representing live participants, in a Virtual Reality storytelling session.

Not appearing in the Magazine -- An additional note:

Here are three examples of ways people can draw, and can process images, in videoconferences -- for fun, self-expression, art, or any other reason:



A recording of the videoconference these images are from is at <http://tinyurl.com/y6uaotj9> .

This link -- and links to 15 other recordings of videoconferences I have been involved with -- are at <http://storytellinginstitute.org/av.html> .

Best regards,

Epic Miller