

MOHEG Student Essay Award
An Introduction to Digital Storytelling for Healthcare Managers
University of Missouri Department of Health Management and Informatics, May 2017
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The healthcare revolution will not be televised. Instead it will be streamed, downloaded, and shared across an array of laptops, tablets, and smartphones that have become intimately entwined with their users' lives. These technologies will impact how consumers think about and what they expect from our healthcare system. One product that users are increasingly consuming across these platforms is the digital story. Digital storytelling is already finding notable footholds within healthcare: think Cleveland Clinic's "Empathy" video.¹ For today's healthcare managers, digital storytelling offers exciting opportunities for those willing to embrace change.

Experts define 'digital stories' and describe their use in many ways. A simple introductory account is that digital stories are short (usually 3-5 minute) narratives presented via digital media. Most readers will be familiar with YouTube videos or short audio segments on radio or podcasts. As with most conceptions of storytelling, digital stories often involve first-person accounts, which have the power to lend new energy to familiar ideas. Storytellers play an important role in shaping the presentation of their stories, and the finished products often capture the storyteller's unique personality. As audiences become inundated with more opportunities to consume digital content, many are increasingly gravitating towards options that offer value and authenticity. Healthcare organizations can benefit from the fact that, when done well, digital stories are often therapeutic, educational, and engaging.

Among the earliest users of digital stories were organizations that sought to offer those suffering through health, emotional, or social challenges the opportunity to tell their stories as a form of catharsis. These organizations, like StoryCenter and Patient Voices, continue to allow storytellers to work with professional facilitators to create their own digital stories.^{2, 3} Storytellers benefit emotionally from the process of finding the words to describe their experiences and can be empowered by the opportunity to share their struggles, and hopefully triumphs, with a broader audience. Healthcare leaders are rightly taking notice of the potential impact that patient stories can have in their communities.

One important benefit of digital stories is their ability to educate patients and providers using an engaging medium. Patients can learn about medical issues directly from other patients facing the same challenges in a format that is accessible, even to those with limited literacy skills.⁴ For providers, hearing patient stories can offer insight into the full patient experience, including the emotional and practical impacts of illnesses that may be less visible in a clinical setting. Digital stories can serve as a powerful tool to help develop empathetic clinicians ready to rise to the task of treating whole persons instead of just treating clinical symptoms.^{5, 6}

Ultimately the greatest benefits arise from digital stories' ability to engage an audience in a way that words on a screen or purely informative videos cannot. By sharing patients'

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experiences of their organization, leaders can highlight to employees and the public what makes their organization unique and valuable. Offering this kind of information to the public fits into a trend within marketing known as “content marketing.” Traditionally advertisers have paid to have their brands featured alongside existing content--a commercial break during television shows or a banner at the top of a webpage. New media has made it easier for consumers to bypass or ignore traditional advertising. Content marketing is an alternative approach to these formats in which a company creates its own branded content. By creating material that is valuable to consumers--because it is engaging, entertaining, or informative--companies can earn their audience’s attention while promoting their brand and demonstrating their own expertise in a subject area through the quality of their content.⁷

Digital storytelling offers a valuable array of benefits to healthcare organizations. However, there are a number of important considerations to address before adopting digital stories.⁸ The most important considerations are the ethical and legal challenges that accompany the creation and distribution of digital stories. Sharing medical stories exposes very personal aspects of patients’ lives. Institutions must develop release policies that allow them to obtain and share patient stories, and help patients understand how stories might be used. Ensuring that these policies comply with HIPAA and other standards protects both the patients’ and the institutions’ interests.

Obtaining legal releases to record and share patient stories is an important first step, but institutions would be wise to go beyond this minimal standard. The unique nature of sharing true patient stories warrants several additional considerations. First, hospitals should think carefully about how to identify and approach individuals who might want to share their stories. Frontline clinicians can play an important role in the process. Caregivers’ knowledge of both a patient’s diagnosis and personality can offer insight into which patients have compelling stories as well as which might be willing to share. These caregivers could also be the first to ask patients whether they may be interested in sharing their stories.

Second, open communication is key throughout the process of creating digital stories. It may be appropriate to consult with providers regarding whether they feel the patient is ready to share his or her story. Institutions should be completely transparent with patients about how their stories may be used or edited and about the potential emotional risks that might result from sharing a painful experience. Ideally, institutions should also have a policy that allows a patient to recall a story, even after it has been published, if they no longer feel comfortable sharing it publicly.

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Third, institutions should clearly understand their own expectations. The value of digital stories lies in their authenticity. They may not always paint the perfect picture of care that institutions are hoping for. Institutions must resist the temptation to influence patients to alter their stories for the sake of institutional gain.

Finally, managers must consider the technical challenges of producing quality digital stories. There are a number of skills needed to produce digital stories that existing marketing departments may not possess. Digital stories require video and audio editing. Producers must work with storytellers to construct compelling, unified narratives. Once created, marketing experts must decide how to effectively deploy digital stories to achieve the organization's goals. Healthcare managers will play an important role in deciding how to develop these capacities, whether through hiring, contracting, or some other route.

As with many emerging technological trends, digital storytelling offers a unique suite of benefits to healthcare organizations, and with careful planning the challenges that accompany it can be overcome. Thoughtful managers who do their homework should be able to navigate these obstacles and unlock the exciting potential that digital stories can bring to their organizations.

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