

# Story as Infrastructure:

## *A Stubborn Belief in Ordinary Voices*

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Presented by Brooke Hessler (StoryCenter · California College of the Arts)  
on behalf of Joe Lambert

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*"The story is never a private act. The moment you tell it, you are making a claim on the world."*

# The Room as Coalition

*Here is our interpretation of the other speakers' practices and how we see them representing distinct but deeply related story traditions.*

## **Isaac Samuels OBE** **People's Voice Media**

### *Story as co-production in health & social care*

Community reporting as a political tool — bringing the lived experience of disability and mental health directly into national policy. The first person with lived experience to co-chair the APPG on Adult Social Care, his OBE recognises 25+ years of championing voices that social care systems routinely marginalise.

## **Dr. Somina Fombo** **Blak Wave Productions**

### *Story as reclamation of Black & queer history*

One of the only Black-owned production companies in the South West, making films for the BFI, BBC and C4 that centre women, queer Black communities, and untold social histories. From her TEDx Talk to the Iris Prize, her work proves community-rooted storytelling and broadcast production are not opposites.

## **May Abdalla** **Anagram**

### *Story as bodily, immersive political witness*

A twice Emmy-nominated director whose work merges physical experience, technology, and storytelling. From blindfolded journeys through displacement to a VR encounter with an AI border guard at the Imperial War Museum — her practice asks what it means for story to live inside the body, not just on a screen.

## **Leila Gamaz &** **Hanna Kubbutat-Byrne**

### *Story as counter-archive and belonging — Sea for Yourself, Plymouth*

An Algerian-British artist and a socially engaged storyteller, both South West-based, collaborating on commission for Plymouth's Sea for Yourself programme. Their practice centres on who gets to tell stories, how narratives shape belonging, and the role creativity plays in restoring relationships between people and place — working with The Box archives to weave a patchwork of community memory around Plymouth's coastal identity.

## **Joe Lambert / Brooke Hessler** **StoryCenter · StoryHost**

### *Story as 40-year democratic practice*

The methodology and movement behind digital storytelling — first-person voice, the facilitated circle, community ownership — spread from Berkeley to 50+ countries over four decades. Now actively exploring how story work addresses aging, erasure, and the challenge of sustaining democratic culture under pressure.

# The Current Moment in US: What's at Stake

## THE ERASURE PLAYBOOK

- Dismantling of federal cultural agencies (in the US our NEH, NEA, Institute of Museum & Library Services; in the UK national as well as council funding)
- Removing equity frameworks from educational curricula
- Defunding or censoring community resistance archives and oral history programs (note the assault on our Park Service histories of women and BIPOC resistance, and even the investigation into Southern Poverty Law Center this week by our Dept. of Justice)
- Rewriting official narratives about race, gender, and history
- Algorithmic suppression of dissenting voices on platforms

## THIS IS NOT NEW

- ◆ Every authoritarian project begins with controlling whose story gets told.
- ◆ There is a long history of creative resistance in all countries in elevating the stories of the most oppressed and marginalized.
- ◆ Personal stories are in essence ungovernable. They live in bodies, kitchens, community halls.
- ◆ Community media projects in their countless manifestations have always been the counter-archive.

# Whose Story Gets Told: Digital Storytelling

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Two examples. (We will share just one for now. See more at: <https://www.storycenter.org/stories>)



*Ghost Dance* by Tommy Orange

<https://youtu.be/z5plHAdBums?si=HSSzrGFzr3WlpCks>



*Distance* by Maria Corona

<https://youtu.be/qhd9SDFjopU?si=9x7qbLwM4oXX373J>

# The Digital Storytelling Method and Movement

## The Workshop Model

- 21 hour in person - 12 hour online curriculum
- Begins with principles of story (7 Steps or other)
- Build community through the story circle facilitated process
- Self-paced approach to process of writing, recording, editing video
- Create realistic goals for each participant so they complete a project to share during a final screening

## The History and Practice

- ◆ Began as after-school, general public, personal expression process
- ◆ Became tied with the digital divide and media literacy communities as a new educational mechanism
- ◆ Expanded to broader community-based implementations by media organizations (e.g., BBC's *Capture Wales*), and countless grassroots and local community activists and organizers
- ◆ Became an internationally recognized and heavily researched practice in public health, violence prevention, human rights, and social work contexts

The community of practice has held some 20 international festivals, and 12 International conferences on five continents.  
Most recently: <https://dst2025.org/>

# What We Stand For

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## First-person voice at the center

The storyteller is the expert on their own life. Facilitators create conditions, not content.

## The circle as sacred space

The workshop circle is not a classroom. It's a covenant — what's shared there is held with care.

## Community ownership of stories

Stories belong to the communities that make them, not to the institutions that host the workshop.

## Story as democratic practice

When ordinary people gain the tools and skill to tell their stories with craft, power shifts.

## Facilitation as witnessing

The deepest service a facilitator offers is full, attentive presence — not instruction.

## Cultural humility over expertise

The practitioner's job is to learn — not to impose a framework developed elsewhere.

# What They Cannot Take Away

*Community storytelling is not a program. It is an infrastructure — distributed, peer-to-peer, ungovernable from above.*

## 01 It lives in the circle

A story circle requires only people willing to listen. It cannot be defunded, delisted, or deplatformed. The methodology travels in the hands of trained facilitators — not in servers.

## 02 It is always already multilingual

Story work trained in cultural humility operates first in the language and frame of the community. It was never dependent on English-language AI or centralized curriculum.

## 03 It generates counter-archives

Every digital story is a document that exists outside official memory. Thousands of stories made in community workshops are now held in university archives, family collections, and community servers.

## 04 It builds the social fabric erasure destroys

Authoritarianism thrives on isolation and fear. Witnessed story — told in community — rebuilds exactly what it attacks: trust, dignity, shared history.

# A Global Platform:

## *Shared Principles of Story Work as Democratic Practice*

*From Berkeley to Bristol, São Paulo to Seoul — practitioners in this tradition hold these commitments in common:*

### **First-person voice is sovereign**

The storyteller is the authority on their own experience. Facilitation serves the voice — it never replaces, interprets, or claims to know better.

### **The circle is the unit of practice**

The workshop circle — held with care and full presence — is the irreducible foundation. It cannot be automated, outsourced, or scaled into a product.

### **Community owns its stories**

Stories made in community belong to that community — not funders, institutions, or platforms. Distribution requires ongoing consent, not one-time release.

### **Story work is civic infrastructure**

Participatory storytelling is not a program or a service — it is the connective tissue of democratic culture. It must be sustained, funded, and protected as such.

### **Facilitation carries ethical weight**

When we enter the circle we take on lasting responsibilities — for wellbeing, cultural humility, power, and the long afterlife of the stories we help bring into the world.

### **We build the counter-archive**

Every community story is a document outside official memory. Deliberate, community-held archiving — across geographies and generations — is an act of democratic resistance.

*These are not StoryCenter's principles alone. They are the platform of a global movement — one older than digital storytelling, and larger than any single organization.*

# The Work Ahead

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*We are not the observers of this moment. We are its practitioners.*

## 1 Deepen the transatlantic partnership

StoryCenter's methodology and the UK community media ecosystem have parallel DNA. We should be sharing facilitation research, ethics frameworks, and training pipelines — not reinventing separately.

## 2 Build the counter-archive, deliberately

Every story made in a community workshop is a document. We need intentional archiving strategies — in community hands, not only institutional repositories — that survive political weather.

## 3 Connect the Global South

DST2025 in São Paulo was a milestone. Karen Worcman and Museu da Pessoa (<https://museudapessoa.org/>) have been doing this work since before 'digital storytelling' had a name. The ecosystem needs stronger North-South flows.

## 4 Sustain the circle

Brooke and I return to the same conviction after four decades: the workshop circle, held with care, is the irreducible unit of democratic culture. Protect it. Fund it. Train the next generation of facilitators.

# Thank you.

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**StoryCenter:** [storycenter.org](https://storycenter.org)

**StoryHost LLC:** [storyhost.net](https://storyhost.net)

**Elderware Podcast & Newsletter:** [elderware.ghost.io](https://elderware.ghost.io)

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*"How does one consciousness touch another?  
That is the question we have spent our lives trying to answer — at every scale,  
from theater to community organizing to the digital story workshop."*

— Joe Lambert

# Hungary, April 12, 2026:

## *What Happens When Citizens Keep the Counter-Narrative Alive*

### The 16-Year Grip

Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party held power for 16 years by fusing political authority, institutional control, and a captured national narrative — controlling most media, rewriting school curricula, and framing his opponents as enemies of the nation.

### The Counter-Story

Péter Magyar and the Tisza party offered a different story: one of dignity, Europe, and democratic belonging. With no equivalent media infrastructure, they relied on grassroots organizing, social media, and — crucially — citizens willing to tell each other a different version of Hungary.

### The Record Turnout

April 12: 79%+ voter turnout — a record — as Hungarians voted in what many called their last, best chance to change course. JD Vance had traveled to Budapest days before to boost Orbán. Tisza won a supermajority. Obama called it 'a victory for democracy around the world.'

*"Most of all, it's a testament to the resilience and determination of the Hungarian people — a reminder to all of us to keep striving for fairness, equality and the rule of law." — Barack Obama, April 13, 2026*