

UTILIZING STORYTELLING WITH NEW AGE MEDIA IN RURAL
COMMUNITIES: A COMPLEMENTARY JUXTAPOSITION FOR PLANNING
PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

by

JILL CHRISTINA THOMPSON

(Under the Direction of Daniel Sniff)

ABSTRACT

Seeking community involvement during the planning process of local government is critical to success. Providing technological solutions such as new age media, alongside storytelling, is likely to increase broader participation from rural community members during planning development. Due to society's current reliance on communication technology, this study represents the profound impact storytelling and new age media can have in rural environments and supports storytelling as an effective application for local government processes. This research focused on new age media due to shifts in society's preference for technology advancements, whereas new age media is digitally accessed using the internet for any form of communication. Both historical and present-day storytelling were examined to help validate how its pairing with modern technology creates a harmonious link between communities and public officials.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to address the question: Does the combination of storytelling and new age media affect participatory planning efforts within rural communities? With a comprehensive literature review, case study methodology,

interviews, and survey data from Georgia county officials, this study examines how local governments can increase local-level engagement in the participatory planning process. “Community storytelling can show not only the intrinsic worth of intangible assets like culture and identity (Ramos 2019) but also their ability to foster new economic development opportunities, foregrounding the knowledge and experiences of rural residents” (Lowery et al. 2020, 6).

This research design provides a broad contextual analysis of rural communities and explains how storytelling and new age media can facilitate local camaraderie. Descriptive case studies, interviews, and survey questions within this research sought to examine: *(a) the effects of storytelling and new age media within communities; and (b) the participation of communities utilizing their combination.* With the implementation of new age media storytelling, rural areas can better assist their communities’ proposed developments garnering support and mobilizing stakeholder involvement. Because technology is ever-evolving, this research is essential to the progression of the general public and warrants continuous monitoring. Ultimately, this research hopes to broaden knowledge by which communities are better served, and community participation becomes more than a paradigm but exists as a working structure of the future.

INDEX WORDS: Planning Participation, New Age Media, Technology, Storytelling, Rural Communities, Public Officials

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B.S., The University of Georgia, 2009

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2023

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August 2023

DEDICATION

To my sons, Maximus and Leonidas.

It was within you both that I found the impossible...possible!

and

To my Mema, I love you a bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck. You always believed in me in everything I had ever done and continued to pursue. I also knew you would have been my biggest fan if you were still here in the present. To me, this dissertation is just as much yours as it is mine. We did it...our utopic exposition.

Here's to US!

“Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution—more so than opposable thumbs.

Opposable thumbs let us hang on; story told us what to hang on to.”

- Lisa Cron, Wired for Story

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Pursuing a Ph.D. was one of my life's most rewarding yet tumultuous times thus far. While there were moments I thought of quitting, the continued thoughts of what I wanted my children to witness and a goal I knew I could not shy away from got me to the finish line. Always having the passion to further my education, completing this dissertation was a milestone I am pleased to have met. The finish was well worth it. This dissertation is also a testament to anyone who thinks you cannot do what you have set out to accomplish - you can and will triumph!

To my Mema, whether from this Earth or in Heaven, you have undoubtedly been my biggest advocate. You listened when I had too many words and compelled me to keep trying when I wanted to give up. You never once questioned my actions in life, even when they seemed a bit preposterous. I love you, Mema – a bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck. Thank you for your never-ending belief.

To my husband, thank you for your willingness to put up with my desire to challenge myself continually. Your patience for my passion to grow and learn is one that many would never understand, and your devotion gave me the strength required to tackle this arduous task. To my sons, you have shown me life is precious and kept me motivated through it all. It is an absolute blessing to be your mother, and I will always be forever grateful to have had you two in my life.

To my mom and dad, who made me mentally tough enough to manage all of life's obstacles and stand strong against those barriers which often blocked the way. Each of

you has been an advocate in one way or another, encouraging me, even when words were left unspoken. Mom, you always supported the pursuit of education, and I appreciate you cheering me on during the process.

To my teachers, in all stages of my life, thank you. My memory still sits lectures and praises from so many of you today, along with a specific chant attributed to St. Jerome that I continue to live by, “Good, better, best. Never let it rest. ‘Til your good is better and your better is best.” I have done some of my best and hope to continue making you all proud.

I want to thank my University of Georgia family and my other committee members, Dr. Crowley and Dr. Yilmaz, for providing the tools and resources I needed to complete my work throughout my graduate education. Because of all the things this great university encompasses, I have been able to continue improving myself and extending this educational journey.

To all others - family and friends, many of whom had no idea what I was studying but always offered kind words and encouragement. To my team of reviewers, thank you for your support and for agreeing to read and critique my work when you did not have to. Because of you all, I remained vigilant and dedicated to continuing this race.

Finally, I owe my deepest thanks and appreciation to my major professor, Dr. Daniel (Danny) Sniff. You were always there with recommendations and, more importantly, motivation. You were a visionary, an advocate, and a mentor. You have aided my overall personal and professional growth, and I could not have done it without you. Words cannot express my utter gratitude. Thank you a million times over for sticking with me through the end!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The concept of what makes for a thriving community has emerged in the last decade, with innovative tools and dynamic strategies being applied to address common barriers in both urban and rural areas. Characterized by a sense of purpose and trust amongst those that live in communities, people crave and desire a place where they feel connected, respected, and supported. With the passing of time, a community's needs change, and it is imperative that a community's local government present constant attention and nurturing to sustain their well-being. "How communities deal with these changes depends not only on the 'delivery' of services, the maintenance of infrastructure and economic development, it also relies on local people using assets in new ways, working cooperatively, improving networks, mobilizing existing skills, and putting innovative ideas into action" (Cavaye 2001).

This research will emphasize the importance of implementing a community-based participatory planning strategy within local government that mimics the demands of all people and places during a society's transition. With a focus on rural areas, this study will work to include successful methods of encouraging participation by community members. "Much of the literature suggests that local governments can achieve multiple advantages by employing social media in their citizen communications, outreach, and participatory engagement strategies" (Tucker 2011; Bell 2013; Shark 2015). Social media - defined as social interaction with the integration of technology. Because of this

rise in technology, our lives through social media tools are overwhelmingly changing our possibilities in living within a new digital environment.

For example, the lightning speed of technology and the reliance on fast communication have transformed how we connect in the present-day. Regardless of location, the ability for citizens to interact and join together is made possible with technological advancements. However, this dependence on technology can cause unfamiliar issues within local governments, especially in rural areas with limited connectivity. In addition, how to effectively implement social media strategies to achieve the goal of increased rural participation can be an enormous obstacle for local governments as they work to maximize the value of their delivery and minimize societal risks simultaneously.

Due to the demand of people wanting to unite in innovative ways previously thought historically impossible, this study will help define the need for local governments and their essential role in providing a storytelling service component for both engagement and efficiency. This study helps to answer the question of how communities can work alongside their rural government to build local cooperation and assist in fostering the passion of all community members so that local members have the spirit to participate in government activities. It is different from the idea that every member of every community must participate. Still, every member must believe they are free to contribute and that their contributions are appropriately valued.

Academics often define efficiency in communication as clear and concise, with accuracy in conveying ideas. Other definitions of communication are any act by which one person receives or gives information to another individual about that person's

perception or knowledge and could take countless forms. The English term ‘communication’ is derived from the Latin word ‘communicare,’ which means ‘to share or to participate.’ Communication, while at times complex, can more easily be defined as the exchange of information, ideas, and knowledge between sender and receiver to convey transactional material. It is something we, as humans, do every day. We communicate more often than not through stories. Communication is about creating those connections, and language is a powerful tool. How society connects and how a person is understood is quite possibly the essence of human life. This study depicts effective communication by inclusivity and encourages collaboration and participation between various individuals within their communities.

Though communication may sound simple, research has shown it has a natural ability to either build or destroy a planning agenda. Therefore, how society communicates should be seen as fragile and pivotal to local government. Leaders must conduct simple communication strategies that offer participation from community members in all avenues of community development for successful planning implementation. Effective communication has been deemed the cornerstone of functionality for any rural community. Developing and utilizing tools already provided as a result of innovation can allow for increased community relations and encouragement of resident participation.

Purpose of the Study

Consensus shows citizens expect governments to collaborate with them, not for them, in a “do-ocracy.” According to Cavaye (2001), many of today’s citizens see the government’s help as confusing and frustrating, in which government responsiveness to communities is often mediated through powerless “consultation” processes and a

complex system of agency-based decision-making. This form of agenda is inexcusable in today's world, as we have many tools that can assist in embracing new forms of community involvement. Local government has a wealth of opportunities to tap into while using ground-breaking technological advancements and advanced strategies to achieve democratic collaboration. Dealing with technology in isolation for democratic development is not the best practice. Governments, especially on a local level, can no longer rely on tools of technology as a sender by one-way only information. Local governments should take an ecological approach in thinking about the interrelationship communication technologies can deliver and focus on what is viewed as the most beneficial and fundamental for a highly effective twenty-first century democracy. Societies can now create and administer tailor-made approaches to issues within their neighborhoods. "In an era of change and uncertainty, policymakers recognize the need to engage community and voices to pave the way to develop shared strategies for creating even stronger communities" (Burnside-Lawry and Carvalho 2016, 5). As the government starts envisioning a better tomorrow, communities are looking for their elected officials to include them in that projected path toward progress today.

To sufficiently plan for the future, participation within a society is increasingly necessary for all government areas. This is especially true regarding the underserved, such as rural neighborhoods. While rural areas are often more and more challenged by a disconnect in their outreach capabilities, tools have been created to help narrow the gap in their community silence. Storytelling is one of those practical tools. Collaborative planning is best served if tools such as storytelling are combined with modern new age media in which issues are made accessible and implemented in as many avenues of

public decision-making processes as possible. As the research will discuss, these tools add value to a community where everyone becomes well-represented. Public support is imperative and should always be taken seriously as local governments continually strive toward an inclusive execution of their planning agendas.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain insight inside a community's own lived experiences, even with differing values and backgrounds, in how a society can be incorporated into the participatory development of a successful planning process. Participation is used as a term in both community life and democratic processes. This research explores how new age media storytelling can be used as a two-way communication tool to help foster change and increase citizen participation. By using local government interaction to shift the citizen-government relationship from an often top-down approach to a more authentic participatory-based relationship, this research helps showcase the importance of storytelling as a tool to effectively increase the needed engagement of all parties within a society.

For this research, stories and narratives are used interchangeably throughout the study. Both are considered umbrella terms to reflect a meaningful definition. However, in their simplicity, stories are often more commonly defined as something with a beginning, middle, and end. Stories are used more generically, while narratives often explain circumstances with more descriptions. Nonetheless, narration is the art of storytelling, and storytelling is the use of stories made through narrative means. "Through narrative, listeners can extrapolate from a scenario in one context to what might be involved in implementing a similar practice in their environment" (Denning 2002, 1). It may be helpful to understand narrative as simply, "a language act by which a succession of

events having a human interest is integrated into the unity of this same act” (Cerquiglini 1973, 186). “Furthermore, in research, stories are the ‘phenomenon’ being studied, and the narrative is the researcher’s ‘inquiry’” (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Each component builds upon the other in a structured framework of story terms. Overall, this research finds narrative and stories as the foundation for participation and finds the two, even if contrasted by other research, avenues that contain storytelling to a degree in which an experience is shared, emotionally attached, and have encouraged community engagement.

The study aims to portray technology-driven storytelling as an avenue to disseminate stories created by a local government with internet means. A technological component, often progressive in its implementation, is still just as vital in this research as society becomes more aware of stories within their local governments and is actively willing to participate in their creation. People are excited about stories, and the passion that stems from storytelling can be used to articulate a local vision. Stories encourage stakeholder dialogue of all backgrounds and sectors and allow citizens to actively share experiences with their community to build relationships and harness local government support in an official capacity.

The research hopes to garner support for the storytelling tool as an effective planning element that may have been overlooked, underutilized, or unknown in government applications. Whether due to the lack of resources or knowledge, storytelling has proven to be a valuable part of inclusive participation that could provide a participatory component often missing in rural community agendas. This research defines storytelling

in a way where proof of involvement can include relevance to the planning field, especially in rural areas that need it most.

The study recounts the developmental history of storytelling as a communication tool. It has concluded that the use of stories can profoundly influence and aid societal goals when applied to rural areas. Public participation has been recognized as essential in establishing effective working relationships inside a district's community and with neighboring localities. Furthermore, it is understood that the sheer worth of a person can ultimately increase their efforts, in which civic members actively want to participate and contribute to all things related to their surroundings. "Participants' stories can provide insight into their backgrounds and experiences, giving a greater understanding of them in context" (East et al. 2010, 18). These enhanced understandings can contribute to the overall wellness of a community. "The central premise retains a belief in the transformative potential of citizen participation and a view that engaging citizens in policymaking is not only beneficial but essential in seeking solutions to major challenges" (Burnside-Lawry and Carvalho 2016, 7).

In recognizing roadblocks faced by rural communities, especially in technological innovation and understanding of best practices, this study explores how storytelling can provide a collaborative approach and facilitate knowledge of local government practices with technology aid but not sole independence on technology. Storytelling, if given the avenue to share information and similar efforts made by local governments even in areas where technology is sparse, the potential for community participation can be amplified. The ultimate goal of this research is that storytelling is the tool, in conjunction with the necessary technology, which pushes the envelope and breaches barriers of local

involvement toward a path of planning victories. With the rise in people's requests and demands to be informed, public sector organizations and local governments arguably must adopt tools that provide the participatory experience expected by their citizens and patrons. Storytelling has existed in many different forms throughout time, morphing its way in how society includes it relative to citizens' preferences today. Because more fields of study other than storytelling's everyday use in healthcare are beginning to witness its powerful effects, the influential, routinely remembered tool is starting to appear in academia. This study aims to show that government services will benefit considerably from implementing the communication instrument and increasing engagement channels.

Storytelling is proposed as the complementary approach alongside new age media in encouraging citizens to involve themselves in communal applications for both vision and planning contexts while still taking notice of potential drawbacks and challenges. To assist in driving a "common language" among the communities, whereas society's use of storytelling develops a communicative approach to catalyzing learning with reflection, knowledge, and participation in the case of the research.

Stories are avenues to streamline and provide an understanding of local governmental complexities. Civic engagement is likely to increase if citizens utilize a storytelling tool significantly. "Stories enable a leap in comprehension so that the audience intuitively grasps what the change involves, why it might be desirable, and how the organization or community might implement it" (Denning 2002, 1). This research seeks to express the heavy need for further investigation around the beneficial aspects of stories within a planning process but also recognizes the value of stories and argues that there is still

much to be explored. Continuous research is needed not only for the monumental effects stories can have on an entire municipality but because local government organizations are often less constrained than their federal counterparts; ways to provide alternative outreach procedures can take off and offer excellent lasting results. How technology is a driver in displaying today's stories and how technology can keep a term as old as time relevant, indicates this study's significance.

“The way we experience story will evolve, but as storytelling animals, we will no more give it up than start walking on all fours.”

~ Jonathan Gottschall

Our current world has a surplus of options for connectivity. Storytelling offers a potential investment in local government, as it can increase participation and engagement between citizens and their governing bodies. That relationship is invaluable. This research aims to show that, unlike other linear theories of transformation, storytelling and new age media have the strength to bridge knowledge and action in a transdisciplinary manner and channel social change. New age media storytelling can subsequently promote advocacy, where informed local voices are more easily heard. The combination should also noticeably prove the impact of the change needed within rural communities. It can then provide continuous advancements directly affecting local authorities' crucial decision-making. “For it is in the local, placed-based arena that community members can have their most direct impact on policy” (Hussey).

Focus of the Study

To ensure that any local government is being as effective as possible and tailoring to the needs of their community residents, this study focuses on how a storytelling tool can be successfully adopted to improve citizen participation within local government organizations in the United States. Storytelling is used as a mechanism that allows every individual to relate and is a vehicle for input from a wider audience within communities. To identify storytelling as a practical application, this investigation will focus on its function as a tool with new age media to improve and simulate participation within rural communities. New age media means digital media and communication platforms, whereas communities can utilize technology to spread and share information quickly. New age media's capabilities also allow for effective engagement of its shared members of rural areas and include citizens in a two-way communication style.

Coupled with technology, storytelling can as well provide a sense of connectedness and offer improvements in government-citizen relationships that often need improvement in planning efforts. For both rural and urban communities, progress and advancement toward successful planning are usually defined in terms of community well-being, a sense of belonging, evaluation of the quality and quantity of local assets, and monitoring of the progression within a society over time.

Research literature recognizes storytelling's potential liberating and healing benefits, but inclusive links between rural development utilizing storytelling and technology for research purposes have yet to be drawn. Evidence of storytelling as a research tool and its effect on modernizing rural area development is minimal; however, it has surfaced in various forms over decades. While past examples of historical storytelling have been

Research Questions and Objectives

With increased involvement from community members, this research challenges other means of dated communal communications (town halls, flyers, etcetera), whereas storytelling alongside new age media can be a tool to deliver high success in group participation and knowledge. “Social and economic changes are transforming rural and regional communities. How communities deal with these changes depends not only on the “delivery” of services, the maintenance of infrastructure and economic development, it also relies on local people using assets in new ways, working cooperatively, improving networks, mobilizing existing skills, and putting innovative ideas into action.” (Cavaye 2001, 110). The tools of storytelling and new age media can work to elevate the lost sense of togetherness and create a positive transformation of planning ventures through equal relations and collaboration.

This research will focus on peer-reviewed published literature and survey methods concentrating on the power of storytelling and new age media as a united means of area planning within communities. Case studies will be examined to guide interpretations and allow for new developments in the planning field locally within county governments.

State officials in elected roles within Georgia will be contacted using what else but technology. The target population size will be represented of 600+ Georgia State Officials contacted via an emailed survey. A brief questionnaire will ask the selected individuals of the type of online media each of their counties have implemented and their familiarity and interaction with today’s technology. An analysis will help define how each of the 159 counties throughout Georgia operates, providing supplementary context to the progress each has made in conjunction with new age media

platforms. A storytelling component will be included to gather reactions of the commissioner's opinions in its content. The work outlined within this study should have continual interest since much of the state's use of technology is still in its infancy, especially in many remote rural areas to be discussed. While the state of Georgia was chosen as a case study state, this research provides relevance to any local government of the rural regions in America. "Broadly speaking, since the 1990s, we have witnessed a rapid expansion in formal, state-based initiatives to facilitate public participation in decision-making, where communities are invited to engage beyond voting" (Hussey).

Figure 1.2 below illustrates the targeted research areas. The Georgia map includes all 159 counties where the study survey was dispersed.



Figure 1.2: County Map of the State of Georgia (159 Counties)

Source: http://accg.org/georgia_county_map.php

Carrying the weight of what makes an impact, I hope this qualitative research revolutionizes how people view storytelling and new age media as a research tool, having

the means to be the most powerful, trend-setting phenomenon. Furthermore, storytelling and new age media become the frontrunners for including individuals in community decision-making. Lastly, I hope the research confirms that these tools are pertinent to local government affairs and elevate the need for storytelling and technology's capacity. This study will share that with proper execution of storytelling while applying new age media, rural communities can thrive. The results of this study could contribute to positive social transformation in rural planning by creating opportunities for both state officials and the public alike.

The study will explore this phenomenon through the following research questions:

RQ1: Could local stakeholders successfully use storytelling and technology to construct alternative narratives about rural planning?

RQ2: Can new age media storytelling be bridged in the sense that storytelling and new age media provide increased awareness, knowledge, participation, and ultimately action toward rural planning within communities?

RQ3: How can storytelling and new age media be used to approach local communities in support of rural planning efforts?

Objectives addressed by these tools:

1. Address local challenges brought forth by the community
2. Liaison between information and the public
3. Identify future barriers/challenges
4. Address important planning-related terminology
5. Provide visibility – connectedness

6. Discussion of urgent matters that pave the way toward a thriving future
7. Increase awareness and active implementation with backing

The proposed approach seeks to mobilize action not through a linear array of information but by using compelling stories in planning, whereas engaged stakeholders and all those within communities can see themselves playing their role and essential part. The stories interact with spectators in an informative way. This style of community planning provides a comprehensive approach to understanding a community's barriers. It lends to the experiences of others in which rural individuals hold power by fostering participation. An all-inclusive approach is much more effective than partial involvement in delivering perceived needs in government services, as engagement in a comprehensive plan often results from existing motivations and includes access to information and other critical factors. Partnership, coordination, and fostering local motivation are just as essential in planning as any other area in rural government's agenda as it spearheads willingness to participate.

Additionally, advocated research tools allow for a cyclical process of ideas and knowledge, whereas there is an ongoing interaction between public members. "Active, diverse, and engaged populations—those that routinely address community concerns among a representative set of stakeholders—are thought to have the greater adaptive capacity" (Berke et al. 2021). Diversification can result in more significant support and novel approaches to problem-solving of government's efforts, all while developing an elevated perception of communities as additional stakeholders in the overall process of a government's planning agenda.

Similar to other tools used in the engagement of communities, I hope the dynamic duo of technology and storytelling will increase the participatory process to support all those within a community and promote an open dialogue about desired futures that can assist in positive outcomes within planning, recognizing that building more collaborative communities elevates a positive overall experience. Participation by a diverse group of stakeholders leads to higher-quality plans and improvements in outcomes over time, which also takes into account marginalized and often overlooked voices. “Proving the value of story should feel like an exercise in proving the obvious-something everyone already knows” (Haven 2007, 4). This study supports that while new age media storytelling can catalyze participation, more effort must be made to have complete government and community consent. By embracing and encouraging the proposed participation tool, policymakers can make more informed decisions with additional assistance from their local communities. Furthermore, the acceptance and decisions within a society then become local knowledge, which builds upon an inclusive environment of trust. “Processes that encourage communication between government agencies and the public foster a sense of openness and dialogue resulting in citizens developing a more favorable view of government officials and agency processes” (Kang and Gearhart 2010). Participation and engagement could be seen as the backbone of community optimization. “Community engagement is important as it takes action to influence stakeholders with government, political or funding power to implement public projects and policies that primarily benefit individual communities and drive social change” (Hussey).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

How planning departments on a local level design and deliver public services is essential to success, and history has shown that healthy rural communities thrive when decisions are made to include civic involvement. Communities of any size become what they are based on the choices people within them make. With this in mind, communities must be involved in all levels of their local development processes to be effective. For an entire community to grow and change together, a vision of what all members within their community want their futures to resemble should be reflected upon. “Community engagement can lead to improved outcomes for communities when government organizations and public decision-making entities seek out the aspirations, concerns, and values of communities, who, in turn, share their aspirations, concerns, and values with governing entities” (Hussey).

According to the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development Office of Community Development, the community development process carries three distinct phases: strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation. This process allows for the order of importance within community settings and knowing how to achieve the goal of where society wants to subsist in the long run. Observation of how well the entire process worked should be documented following its completion. While each phase enables people to become more active during this course of action, all diagrams must include the critical concept of community input in the overall process. This study aims to

portray the binding element often missing in the cyclic cycle of the development process in rural communities: the idea of a community's participation throughout its entirety.

This literature review will investigate how the tool of storytelling and modern technology, like new age media, can bolster the often-deficient participation component in rural areas amongst their local governments. Participation has shown to be an incredibly significant element for thriving rural communities and necessary in creating positive environments with citizens and those they have elected to represent. The following sections will offer insight into the contextual evolution of technology and societies' reliance on its offerings and present evidence that the tool of storytelling is a significant compliment to drive local government initiatives effectively.

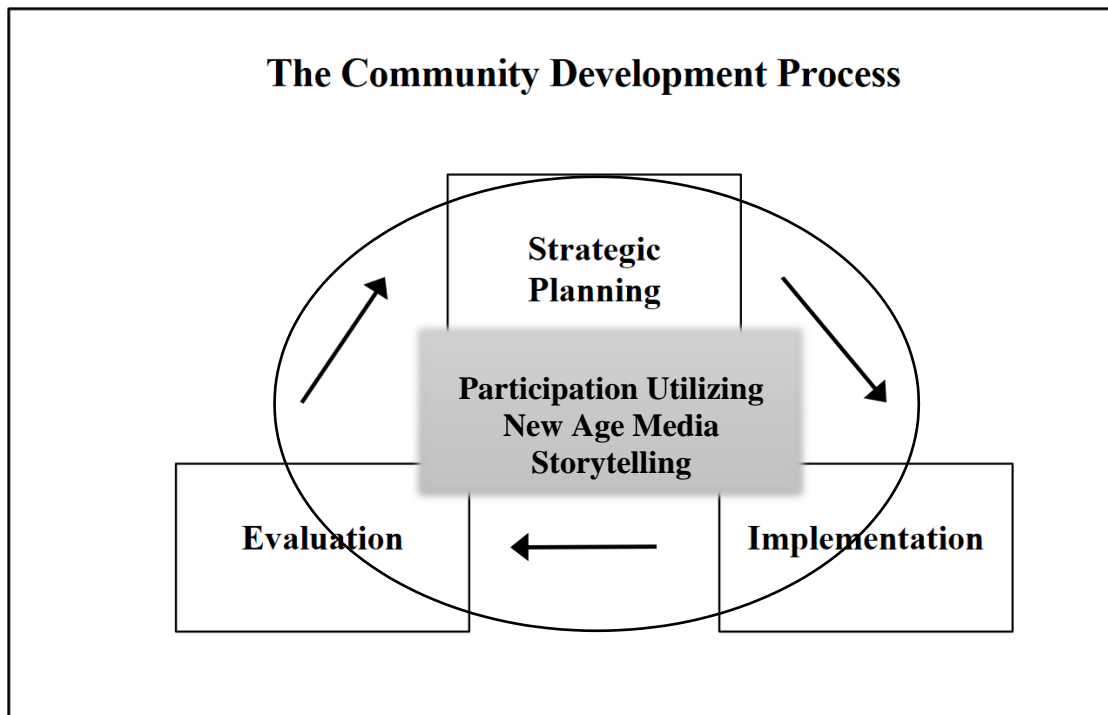


Figure 2.1: Modern Community Development Process with an Addition to Include New Age Media Storytelling in Community Participation – Jill Thompson

Because this research focuses on story use within rural areas, storytelling narratives must contain a particular context and concise organization of those stories being shared to have a positive political effect on participation. A community assessment of those populations in which local government hopes to achieve elevated levels of involvement depends on how the storytelling tool is employed to involve as many community members as possible. Stories are a valuable tool for inclusivity because storytelling can be tailored to make the definition of what someone is trying to say simple and accessible. The ability for local governments to share an idea in a non-threatening way is achievable through new age media storytelling, where stories are relayed to the listener and diverse groups can grasp concepts much more quickly in the knowledge shared. Hopefully, this type of communication encourages that vital participation component. Therefore, the community planning process should focus on increasing those who participate and allow for an all-encompassing productive planning process. The two elements of storytelling and new age media technology can have a substantial influence when exercising this comprehensive form of a community-based approach, whereas the development that transpires is often associated with a community's doing. "Storytelling cannot substitute for changes in strategy, programs, budgets, incentives, personnel, measurement, and all the many coordinated actions needed to transform a large organization. However, it is a tool that managers can use to elicit decisions to implement such changes in the first place" (Denning 2002, 3). Local communities take ownership and responsibility for their environments; it is not just the actions of their governments. However, a government's agenda must reach the community using a broader method and eliminate sole focus by narrowed techniques.

In addition, for community collaboration to occur, a storytelling process assists in minimizing destructive elements within a civic discussion, which can often create a new or even stronger divide in the societal discourse of what should be an inclusive process. “New media has been used in community engagement, but externally initiated projects applied to communities by government or commercial bodies have encountered difficulties where the project’s goals do not correspond to the host community’s” (Foth, Klaebe, and Hearn 2008, 2). There is a growing need to understand how technology impacts society, especially in ways that socially engage others to participate in governmental discussions and activities actively. To adequately create opportunities for all people in a community planning process, engagement is increasingly necessary for all government realms, whether this includes urban or rural areas. As action transpires, so does a collective being of more community members willing to participate. Research has shown that traditional community participation methods do not work, as the dated means of meetings and organization of communities are tiring and seem to exist by default. Studies show urban areas accelerate faster than their local neighbors; data shows that many urban areas participate more in governmental matters. Is this because of novel approaches, access, and opportunity? New age media storytelling can widen how local government reaches out to its community members, hoping to narrow the urban-rural gap and bring the countryside closer to its nearby metropolis.

Throughout this study, it has been repeatedly stated that people expect results by using a social way to participate within their communities. While various rural areas across the United States have worked vigorously in adapting to changes utilizing technology and implementing whole community-led initiatives to facilitate support, neighboring areas

need to catch up in their development. And while rural planning is in this constant state of flux, many areas need to get closer to government focus on what needs to change and how.

This study can help define how new rural agendas of every rural region can begin their focus in an innovative way for embracing that participatory piece by applying a storytelling tool. This tool can activate passion toward participation and facilitate the efficiencies of place, influencing all rural areas in amplifying real community contribution to local involvement.

In considering planning at any scale, this study aims to define the very definition of planning between urban communities and planning at a local level. How planning is addressed and the importance of the concept will be further explained in context for a greater understanding of what community planning encompasses.

Community Planning:

It is safe to assume the American definition and lexicon for community planning departments. Wikipedia defines urban planning's history as "a technical and political process concerned with the use of land and design of the urban environment, including air, water, and the infrastructure passing into and out of urban areas such as transportation and distribution networks." "It involves ongoing economic, social and environmental improvement - sustaining a desirable environment; having a vital social system that fosters collaboration, equity, and freedom; and a vital economy that is diverse, competitive and accessible" (Christenson, Fendley, and Robinson 1989). With proper planning, communities have displayed an enhanced quality of life.

Throughout history, the planning of areas coincides with the site itself. Planning is evidence of what a place has become, or in the future tense, is becoming. Extensive literature in the planning field has highlighted what planning is, or as Throgmorton (2003) describes planning as persuasive storytelling. Sandercock (2003) reminds us that not only is an effective plan a coherent narrative but also it is through the crafting of the narrative that diverse players find common threads which bind them to a shared vision. Furthermore, a successful plan is one where opposing parties begin to work out catharsis and healing. “Stories appear to reduce what psychologists call counterarguing” (Rucker and Krause 2019). On the contrary, Sandercock (2003) also points out that circumstances that separate and divide communities can be traced to weaknesses in a community’s foundational narrative. Rucker and Krause (2019) would continue to argue that reducing message processing is part of explaining the persuasive effects in a story. Even Merriam-Webster defines the word ‘social’ within a planning context as, “the establishment of goals, policies, and procedures for a social or economic unit.” It seems universal; planning is a practice that increases influence and requires a response from its communities.

“Community” was a helpful modifier in planning activity for three reasons: (1) it implies that human needs will be integrated inside planning for the built and natural environments; (2) it suggests that planning should consider the quality of life at various scales from the neighborhood to the region; and (3) it conveys the idea that planning is an activity undertaken by the community and involves all who live in it (Gordon 2014).

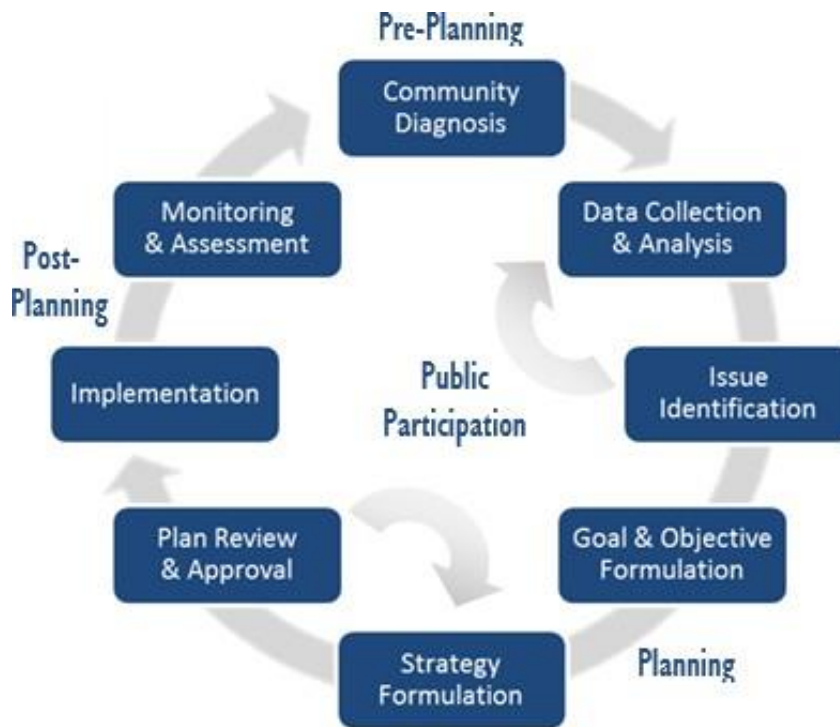


Figure 2.2: Simplified Planning Process, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Figure 2.2 shows a simplified but highly repeated generic planning process diagram. While the public is included in a plan's entirety, its implementation's overall how and more specific process of development is absent. This study will state the need for the permanence of a storytelling tool as an essential component of the participatory element in the planning process itself. Storytelling is to be included in the overall act of community enhancement.

Rural Community Planning:

Rural planning is a broad academic term that depends on several interdependent components of which a fundamental process relies heavily on economics and a resilient functioning community. "Yet key drivers of rural and regional development also include

the passion and motivation of people, attitudes of self-help, effective local leadership and organization, a commitment to learn and change attitudes, thinking about issues differently, and focusing on action” (Cavaye 2001, 112). Identifying and prioritizing the needs of a rural community should be incorporated into rural community planning that supports and improves the quality of life for its residents.

Rural Storytelling:

Rural storytelling places emphasis on experiences, culture, and traditions of individuals usually living in areas with a slower pace of life. This type of storytelling can take many various forms, but the focus is on the content that is being delivered. In this research, the avenue of rural storytelling provides a platform for rural communities to share their stories with their local government in the promotion of community engagement and participation. Ultimately, rural storytelling increases civic involvement in efforts to help local governments understand the needs and concerns of their rural constituents.

The focus of rural planning in this study is on those rural communities and how planning can be organized to include community involvement storytelling to address all areas in a developmental process, such as transportation, economic development, education, healthcare, housing, and more. Through rural community planning, social groups and individuals can willingly cast their ideas into developing their rural place. “It is through action, participation and contact that the community becomes more vital, abler to manage change with stronger networks, organizational ability, skills, leadership and passion.” (Cavaye 2001, 112). Cavaye (2001) additionally suggests that passion and motivation form the “fuel” of rural and regional development.

Humanism is the epistemological premise for what this research views as a thriving society. From this mindset, every human being, individually and collectively, has worth and, therefore, should facilitate the development of all things. “Humanism names an orientation to knowing that describes an embodied way of being in – and thinking about – the world and provides an alternative to the disembodied, objectified world of the analytical model.” (Lake 2017, 303). Research in this philosophical context approaches planning from various critical perspectives rather than comprising itself to a local government’s planning antecedent condition. While a clear direction must still be heavily concentrated in a planning process, the freedom of collective thoughts and the current streaming of ideas brought forth by individuals within rural communities make a successful planning process. People begin to realize they can jointly inhabit one given place digitally or in the present and contribute collectively to what has often been understood as a strictly formal process. This is important to note, as the passion and motivation commonly formed from participation fuel increased desires in the planning process. “A more comprehensive agenda involves engagement that helps people act on existing motivation, includes greater recognition of frustration and anger in regional areas, and helps people gain better access to information and services” (Cavaye 2001, 109). Participatory elements can benefit local governments in a multitude of ways, many of which are based on ethical decision-making using reason and empathy.

When stories effectively do their job in participatory planning, it appears ideas are exhilarated, creating amplified enthusiasm rather than an idea dying on the vine for support before it even begins. Both verbal and digitized stories allow individuals to narrate personal tales with expert guidance as an exciting and stimulating extension of

oral history. To expand on the value of stories, communities can provide workshops on a local level to include diverse participants from all sectors of society.

Various groups of community members are just as essential to steer multiple interests and motivations in an inclusive environment. “Where traditional approaches have been ineffective if non- inclusive in the extreme – community engagement enables better understanding of communities’ needs and aspirations” (Hussey).

Furthermore, additional community efforts can further give local government decision-makers and stakeholders an evaluation tool (internally or externally) for future planning needs. This newness of communication can provide regular updates and information within an area for immediate viewing and response. When used as a tool within the planning realm, storytelling and new age media have the innovative capacity to stand as an evolving instrument supporting areas where rural planning and other development considerations appear to be scarce knowledge. Communities are no longer hindered by communication or limited participation.

Historical Context of Storytelling and Technology

Initially, storytelling and new age media may seem like mutually exclusive approaches to societal transformation; academia has even argued that narrative fascination is a path of backwardness. Moreover, many critics have considered storytelling and its abilities beyond experience. Walter Benjamin believed that under the dominance of advertisement and information in the current world, no place had been left for stories because people had no experiences to share (Markova and Sukhoviya 2020). However, there are far more who believe, like Paul Ricoeur that stories have a place and

can evolve and help individuals determine their true identity. There is substantial evidence that Ricoeur's belief that stories can grow but never die out has held up and so far endured the test of time.

The widespread form in the emergence of how storytelling was built upon different spheres of communicative activity – myths, archetypes, micro-narratives, and sheer entertainment - confirms this study. There seems to be this ever-evolving duty to frequently address how storytelling is trending and transforming society, whether through verbal communication or storytelling in its literacy form. At present, mentioning the entertainment aspect also seems just as essential. “One of the most important parts of storytelling is the presentation structure itself: the existence of a plot, scenes, dialogues, dynamic, making the consumption of a media product entertaining” (Markova and Sukhoviya 2020, 360).

Much evidence from the literature and research proves that storytelling could be the powerhouse for rural planning and an extremely vital asset in areas where information is extra remote and run on a narrower fiscal budget. The study shares the possibilities to expand storytelling when combined with an additional tool of technology, in which planning can become more participatory. Storytelling, in general, “has a particular relevance and applicability to the uncertainty that has emerged at the outset of the twenty-first century, when we are thrown back on our original primeval sources for coping with turbulence and complexity” (Denning 2002, 5). Societies adapt more effortlessly with mechanisms that include familiar strategies for impending change.

A digital influence with technology does not have to be viewed as a societal detriment. Technology can have various uses for society, even though it has been a contested

concept from its inception to the present-day. In hindsight, “technological innovation has been central to the evolution of primary industries (e.g., forestry, agriculture), with resource-based communities continually adapting to stay competitive, and primary industry workers facing the constant risk of layoffs due to automation. Yet, rural and resource-based communities are rarely conceived as the sites of this innovation, which is presumed to originate from clusters of technological and creative capacity centered in large cities.” (Lowery et al. 2020, 6). Due to limited capacity in rural communities, the ability to utilize new age media has had limited developmental skills in local areas. However, its widespread use is not solely the savior of rural participation. The fascination of the public at large with technology’s advancement, and the phenomenon of an entwined element of storytelling presenting itself in every digital facet within its evolution, is why storytelling should be valued on a severe note of importance in local development within government applications.

Evolution of Storytelling

Stories, fables, and legends continue withstanding the test of time. “When it comes to the term “storytelling,” its first use regarding journalistic texts can be found in the year 2000” (Ekstrom 2000, 459). Storytelling, in its straightforward definition, is the process of telling a story as ancient as humankind. “Storytelling has been used for centuries as a powerful vehicle for communication” (Koch 1998, 1182). Historical data has proved that storytelling is an intrinsic human characteristic and is known as one of the oldest forms of communication and a highly active part of human life. The initial form of storytelling originated with visual stories, such as cave drawings, then shifted to oral traditions. Stories were then passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.

Though we cannot pinpoint an exact start date to know how long stories have existed, some of the earliest discovered indications of stories date back as far as 36,000 years ago, where much of the first Paleolithic evidence was visually noted in Chauvet Cave drawings of southeastern France. Chauvet Cave, named after its primary discoverer, assisted in revolutionizing our understanding of human storytelling. The unearthed pictures demonstrated man's ability to imitate or suggest events. Radiocarbon dating helped determine the age of the drawings produced at that time by taking charcoal samples of the cave painting. Because of this remarkable discovery, we have known evidence of the first stable form of communicable art – storytelling.



Figure 2.3: Chauvet Cave Map

Source: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/france-chauvet-cave-makes-grand-debut-180954582/>



The details of the replica (under construction last year), its area nearly the size of a football field, are based on 700 hours of laser scanning in the actual cave. - Stéphane Compoint

Figure 2.4: Interior Image of Chauvet Cave Simulacrum. Caverne du Pont d’Arc, a replica of the end chamber “Gallery of Lions.”

Source: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/france-chauvet-cave-makes-grand-debut-180954582/>

It is just as important to mention that stories told many years ago were considered universal, a language everyone understood and appreciated, even as depicted in stick drawings within mud and clay. Illustrations of animals, humans, and other objects were illustrated in a way that represented a visual story with repeat patterns and techniques.

Humans worldwide were seamlessly able to converse through art within all societies, noting that before there was a written language, stories were still being told. An ever-adapting visual method of communication, stories in an illustrative appearance, has continued to transform our entertainment today. Think of today's "selfies." From cave paintings to the viral images of present-day celebrities, the revolutionary changes in how people now communicate through stories have developed exponentially. And at this moment in time, platforms used for storytelling allow for stories to be only a click away, a button from being heard. A tremendous change in methods to show just how quickly imagery and various forms of visual communication have become mass distributed, unlike cave paintings of our past. There has been a colossal shift, especially in the last decade. Society continues to witness to a more communitive ethos in everyday American life.



Figure 2.5: Chauvet Cave Drawings

Source: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/france-chauvet-cave-makes-grand-debut-180954582/>

Not until later would a morphed version of storytelling form in ancient Egypt. As both symbols and sounds, pictographic characters would become known as hieroglyphics. The word [hieroglyph](#) comes from the [Greek](#) *hiero* meaning 'holy,' and *glypho*, which translates to 'writing.' This alteration appeared as a milestone transformation dating back about 5,000 years, in which stories moved from purely visual representations to an understood form of a unique writing system. Eventually stories becoming more stylized with various techniques. Writing modernized the course of storytelling, giving stories a

new avenue to reconnoiter and a way of safeguarding permanence. This permanence was evolutionary, giving humans the sense of becoming immortalized.

Discoveries have revealed that the development of writing was not as slow and rigid as previously believed. Instead, hieroglyphics seemed more geographically widespread, and its prevalence very distinct soon after expansion. And although in its beginning the written word required an element of literacy, it was not long after that stories were made more accessible, and learning rates rapidly increased.

Nowadays, our symbols of advancement have become common in a separate way, such as with the octothorpe. The widespread labeled hashtag on social media has again transformed into a global understanding, yet another form of a universal language. The hash, pound, or number sign has opened our modern eyes to how a universal element takes hold and transpires. A new alternative way humankind has evolved well beyond those communication barriers of the past, whereas technology made the advancement of the written and oral transition possible. Stories can now be shared in a plethora of methods.



Figure 2.6: Hieroglyphics

Source: <https://www.archaeology.org/issues/281-1801/features/6172-egypt-elkab-early-hieroglyphs>

As previously described, an earlier form of language was a system of drawings, eventually changing into what was noted as a script. Although there seemed to be an overlap between oral to traditional written forms of communication, ancient Greece is predominately viewed as the area from which written culture emerged.

It was from the many types of practices over the years that the variations of an understood written language later came together in a longer format of a storytelling style. Even as an oral tradition started its transition, the illiterate were finding ways to effectively communicate by using plays and relating to their opposing educated class. “A

shift to words formed into narratives, including written, printed, and typed stories” (Mendoza 2015).

As advancements started to take place along the way, so did the printing press, camera, television, and now the heavy influence of ample social media platforms through the internet. Creativity in the vernacular started to blossom, and soon technology took language into this world of endless possibilities.

These days, storytelling has surpassed the initial visualization aspect to an all-encompassing experience. Fundamentally, storytelling has become indispensable within our modern-day civilizations, whereas technology adds daily opportunities and dependence. Storytelling now, in its very definition, has evolved into something humans indulge in, need, and yearn for. It comes as no surprise that storytelling has served the purpose of many. “Narrative is the way human beings manage to understand and interact with other human beings in the world. It has been that way since time immemorial” (Denning 2002, 5). The tremendous use of technology has allowed humans to utilize all forms of storytelling through the later years.

Polletta (2015) asserts, “There is now a huge interdisciplinary literature on narrative, some of which addresses the political uses of storytelling. Scholars have shown that people use stories vicariously to recruit movement participants (Armstrong and Cragge 2006; Viterna 2013), justify political violence (Fine 1999), win policy victories (Stewart 2012), make sense of defeat (Guzman-Concha 2011), evaluate policy options (Stone 1989), decide whether to go to war (Smith 2005; Gibson 2012), deliberate with fellow citizens (Polletta and Lee 2006), forge political identities (Kane 2000; Somers 1992),

communicate across ideological divides (Braunstein 2012), and commemorate the past (Khalili 2008).”



Figure 2.7: History of Storytelling Timeline

Designer: Claudio Rodriguez Valdes

Source: <https://visual.ly/community/Infographics/history/evolution-storytelling>

This study introduces new age media storytelling as an approach to humankind for how something may become standardized and systematic in successful participatory planning. It creates an even further understanding and reasoning for its use.

Storytelling Influence

Over time, storytelling has had undue influence, with stories and storytellers existing as widespread elements of culture. Earlier examples of storytelling, while simplistic, can still have an impact even today. Routine decisions continuously made transformative effects from storytelling in later days. Similarly, society still continuously becomes revolutionized by stories told.

Ultimately, stories contribute in ways to a community's everyday life, and stories and their developments can turn to the planning process. The better crafted the story, the more it impacts citizens' lives and resonates with them, contributing to how often they are engaged or involved in their elected narratives. After all, "lives are like stories because we think in story terms, make sense out of experience in story terms, and plan our lives in story terms" (Haven 2007,7). "It is based on the premise that a good story is more valuable than mere facts. The desire to create fiction that can produce an always-ready present reality (the future urban beach, the next stadium, the essential major project, the inescapable regeneration of docklands...), whose emergence is to be facilitated, can be something other than an aspect of democratic communication—it can be a means of ensuring the collective governmentality of citizens" (Mager and Matthey 2015).

Storytelling Examples and Impact

“The power of using a story to elicit change comes not from the story itself, but from the reaction that it elicits in the minds of the audience.”

~ Stephen Denning

There are several examples in which storytelling has played a part in citizens' lives and shown power in its employment through technology. For instance, the life-altering tragedy of 9/11 was unforgettable to those not around to witness such a devastating event. Now twenty-plus years in time, Americans not only view memories through memorials in its aftermath, but stories have been etched in the minds from the experiences of that day. Now offering insight into the past and adding knowledge to what could have been unknown, stories continue to influence people today immensely. 9/11 was a catastrophe, a moment forever forged in time, and it was with stories that made the event even more unforgettable. While some may argue, stories of this day shaped not only local areas of planning decision-making but worldly views. This event was a true catalyst in a communities' connection to each other domestically and globally. Such a disastrous situation spurred a true awakening in how stories and technology serve as tools, even if it means how to handle what else may come.

Proceeding 9/11, digital storytelling caused a widespread passion for archiving and commemorating stories. To provide outreach to citizens, the website: <https://911digitalarchive.org/about>, was formed to allow society to utilize electronic media for preserving and recording meaningful videos and imagery that continues to

shape people's lives forever. By providing historical context on such stable platforms, storytelling technology has allowed communities to witness past experiences in both glee and sorrow while subconsciously reshaping the future from their collective thoughts and ideas on how to transform in a devoted sense persistently. Communal togetherness and a need for an increase in safety measures were among the many items that stemmed from the 9/11 event. Still, it was also where stories has since guided the future decision-making of communities.

Another fascinating example of a storytelling realm is through the site:

www.storycenter.org. From history and beyond, this website creates a virtual space for shared stories and focuses on creating a better holistic world. In this world, people and their stories are the tools that foster a rich and thriving environment. Like how rural communities power their citizens with stories, StoryCenter uses individual experiences from community-based storytelling and creates an environment full of participation and interaction among community members. Since 1993, accounts of over 20,000 individuals from the site shares with its viewers the impact various storytelling techniques can have. StoryCenter represents a global focus; it should be understood that how the organization engages the public is relevant to this research. Numerous case studies stem from StoryCenter amplifying community engagement such as education, arts, culture, social justice, civic engagement, public health, sense of place, environment, organizational development, youth, and human services. "Using story is a way to bring people together, build leadership from within communities, and inspire involvement in democratic processes" ("StoryCenter," n.d.). Think of the powerful statement local government could provide by taking just one example of these ideas offering public workshops for

rural participation and listening stations used by community members to share their accounts to plan, strategize, and inform. “Citizen participation contributes normatively to the legitimization of policy development and implementation” (Fischer 2000, 2). StoryCenter’s examples could inspire communities to make their own case stories for public decision-making impact. An accessible tool in the local government’s toolbox that could provide a comprehensive approach to participation, which acknowledges and displays storytelling as a way to promote real community contribution. Ultimately, such an example could add to the validity of the government’s efforts toward community involvement.

The Institute of Community Reporters (ICR) is a network of individuals, groups, and organizations working on using methodologies involving storytelling to bring about social revelation. “Central to Community Reporting is the belief that people are telling authentic stories about their own lived experience which offers a valuable understanding of their lives.” (“Our Approach – People’s Voice Media,” n.d.). Community Reporting offers a series of components: story gathering, curation, and mobilization. Every element in the series benefits communities by: (a) finding their voice, (b) challenging perceptions (c) and being catalysts of change. From this network, a charity to promote and expand a storytelling movement came about, People Voice Media. “Since 2005, People’s Voice Media have used Community Reporting (CR), which is a peer-to-peer digital storytelling methodology developed across Europe, as a mixed methodological approach for enhancing citizen participation in research, policy-making, service development, and decision-making processes” (Trowbridge and Willoughby 2021). Drawing on gathering, curating, and mobilizing stories, their storytelling approach supports the community of

people to share lived experiences by having a say in those issues and stories important to them. Submissions by individuals provide rich qualitative data that can help identify themes and aid in creating a dialogue between those involved in community decision-making processes. In the long run, these creations can impact local agendas and policy implementation everywhere and in a political setting. This is an excellent case for rural areas when considering harnessing local members' support. "The premise of digital storytelling is straightforward: It is designed to help people tell stories from their own lives that are meaningful to them and their audience, using media to add power and resonance and to create a permanent record" (McLellan 2006). The ultimate goal of visualization and 'visions' being heard is for political leaders to use storytelling as a tool for democratic planning purposes. Leaders are ones of advice and guidance in the participatory process and alleviating the role of domination such that citizens view themselves as active and voluntary participants.

Unlike the political use of stories this research suggests, it is worth mentioning storytelling use elsewhere and within other practices portray storytelling as a strategy and understanding throughout other various fields. These examples offer further reassurance that the power stories can encompass in numerous respects, such as "the phenomena of interest to nursing are those identified by nurses and patients in the course of their everyday encounters. Clinical narratives illustrate how dialogue could be, and already is, engaged by practitioners" (Gorman 1993). "It makes practice visible. It shows that clinicians or researchers are part and parcel of the setting, context, and culture we seek to understand" (Koch 1998, 1184). Healthcare is an exciting and vital field in comparison to human engagement, as it also led to increased confidence in this topic of research.

For instance, the nursing field is in part transformational storytelling that could be seen as somewhat minuscule in its social context until the unexpected arrival of the novel Coronavirus (COVID). It seems ironic that an adjective attached to the latest pandemic is often coined with the word novel. While stories are widely shaped by an event, a goal, and sometimes unfortunate circumstances – the pandemic created a whole new line of storytelling, which in several ways, altered the world. Like healthcare, academics also felt signs of distress. Creative thinking spiraled into habits of not only how to mitigate cases of Coronavirus but by what method of implementing measures around campus grounds would make students, faculty, and staff feel safe and informed. With a quick transformation of change, several claimed COVID created a swift reorientation of the overall feel and idea of American messaging and a will to engage.

“This is a story that’s not going to be told in days, but in weeks, and months.”

- David Harris, Union College

Like nothing in the past, stories were being fueled by social media outlets. And although much of the initial COVID stories were driven by federal politics, those heartfelt stories from communities drew people in; their livelihoods created that sense of connection with others. Many were impacted immediately by simply viewing and actively listening to identifiable stories. Stories were on full display and spread rapidly. Like the StoryCenter above, an account formulated through social media titled “My Purpose during a Pandemic,” expressed COVID in a way that abetted how many communities were physically surviving. The pandemic effectively identified that

narratives coexisted everywhere, giving meaning to a virtual interaction of stories and allowing for a true sense of connected togetherness of one's 'neighbor.' Although COVID stories were abundantly more present in higher education and the medical field, stories during the pandemic became ubiquitous, no matter the disconnect of a physical setting.

COVID was so much so that when it came to storytelling, the StoryCenter had devoted its own "tab" of case studies from smaller communities and programs establishing in itself people and places during a time of crisis. This act alone conveyed the influence of an event where people's engagement in a topic became an investment of their time and swayed in never-ending interest. In some ways, COVID could be viewed as a liberator in community connectedness across the globe and as another catalyst to show how powerful and influential stories tied together with the tool of technology can be. The multitude of stories can become an endless mix of emotional responses. "Many scholars note that the communicative effect is enhanced by involving an emotional component in storytelling" (Markova and Sukhoviya 2020, 360). It is often noted that storytelling, like the spoken word, creates a more profound effect of involvement than written words. Empathy is achieved, and a sense of identification is evoked. The coronavirus pandemic served as a wake-up call in our digital age. Not only was it in select neighborhoods, but an entire world became aware of technology's influence on civilization and its utilization as a necessary means to participate in society fully. At this point, new age media storytelling could be viewed as an investment communities know they need, and local, regional, and national leaders may now acknowledge it is a tool to work harder to provide.

Lastly, a research-induced motivator and added content of this study's methodology was from a site tailored to storytelling and community connectedness. The West Virginia site: redefinedwv.org, shows stark similarities in how this study envisioned communities using storytelling for change. While the organization does not provide storytelling from a purely participatory realm within local government, it does assist in answering the questions of how to drive planning efforts and what motivates people in their willingness to participate. Although Redefined offers many case studies, the lack of local government involvement is noticeable. Could change happen on a grander scale if local government was similarly included? Nonetheless, this site was one of the study's most prized possessions as one can witness the sharing of stories in a way that continues to influence a population.

“The West Virginia Community Development Hub's *Redefined: Real Stories from West Virginia* storytelling project pairs inspiring stories of West Virginians leading change in their communities with actionable tools for residents to start making a difference today” (“Redefined - Real Stories from West Virginia,” n.d.). Residents from West Virginia have been involved through the West Virginia Community Development's Hub - Redefined, in which they interact in their given communities by creating those opportunities to become more involved. Having started only in the latter part of June 2021, Redefined Project has reached nearly 400,000 people from Central Appalachia.

“Stories of West Virginians leading the charge with creative solutions to common community challenges have significant positive potential in work to turn local economies around.”

- Director of Strategic Communications, WV Community Development Hub

The Hub has four main focuses: invent, build, tackle, and drive. With the primary purpose of innovatively facilitating collaborative partnerships with communities, all while addressing challenges for rural development, The Hub has taken the opportunity to catalyze community growth. The Hub’s physical location is in West Virginia, and it serves as an established organization for entrepreneurs and small businesses. It is designed to be a collaborative workspace where like-minded individuals can collaborate to lift and build neighboring communities through story development. As a result of its work, the organization is helping to develop a more vibrant and inclusive economy in the state. It is supporting local communities in achieving their goals for a better tomorrow. Thanks to the further use of digital technology and the role of storytelling, states like West Virginia are making a positive impact, and people love them for it!

"For more than a decade, we have experimented, learned, and walked beside communities as they have had successes and failures. We have identified strategies for rural community development that can work in any place that has a small group of dedicated, diverse local leaders who want to improve their area.”

- Director of Community Engagement, The Hub

“When it comes to finding the stories, it’s really like a mix of people working towards this. I’m going to towns of like 500 people and doing work on something that is so important to the town, and it’s so important to that economy. And no one is talking about it because it’s a town of 500 people. Who cares? Well, we do!”

- Communications Associate, The Hub

From the many examples shared to limitless ones left to discover, storytelling has impacted history and continues to shape much of today. “Stories provide continuity in our lives, conveying a sense of our history and our heritage” (Denning 2002, 2). “The story format is one of the most common forms of communication in which an individual usually shares their personal experience. The exchange of stories brings societies together around certain topics, making it possible to fulfill one of its most important functions – the consolidation of society” (Markova and Sukhovi 2020, 360).

By using storytelling medium entirely powered by the community in which one participates, stories enable voices to be heard. Change is a product of a community’s engagement in having their stories shared. A person is more likely to use any of the avenues of storytelling if they are understood, easily accessible, and the information appears relevant or captures the attention of a member’s willingness to participate in the first place. People who are often marginalized or overlooked seem empowered through stories, which can generate support for those policies and initiatives benefitting the community as a whole. From this type of democratic process, inclusive environments form and positive forces merge. In addition, others empathize and absorb a different

appreciation of their neighboring community members. An intention of use in particular of rural areas becomes the successful adoption of the multimedia storytelling tool.

Local planners must remember that there will be times when a story becomes ineffective and does not transpire to the audience as initially proposed by the misunderstanding of information altogether. Fischer (2000) calls for meaningful non-expert involvement in policymaking to validate ordinary citizens' impact in solving complex issues, often alleviating problems of deciphering main local planning agendas. Fischer (2000) continues to offer input in which he challenges experts' methodological emphasis on "generalizable knowledge" in this regard. It takes hard work and a thorough understanding of an audience and its current environment to spark the movement toward participatory planning.

In most scenarios, research has found, whether single-handedly or in a group setting – a simple implicit form of storytelling is well received and often included in some form of communal discourse. Societies can shift for many reasons, but importance should be given to the fact that planners can present community changes that can represent a prosperous future to experience in a communities' own collective story. Modern forms of storytelling, assisted with technology, can grab the attention of a community back to reclaim the biological heritage of conscious cognitive reasoning. Engaging citizens in this innovative way can directly affect planning and development efforts. This study has presented evidence suggesting that the simple act of someone being heard, or even the role of a storyteller, deepens the acceptance and support of individuals who may have otherwise been inclined to resist a planning agenda.

Digital Involvement

When first introduced during the earlier days of the new millennium, narratives in the traditional form caused quite a controversy. Few believed tools, such as the printing press, showed the progression of storytelling in a positive light. Yet, as news platforms spread, so too did invention and opportunity. Due to the swift pace of society and the advanced methods of communication by way of technology, it is essential to note that past methods paired with modern elements can be just as effective, if not more so when used simultaneously. As electronic forms of communication continue to blossom, people around the globe are being digitized and have nearly completed eliminating space-time barriers. Instant gratification, on the one hand, has led to personal preferences in media consumption but also spearheaded the possibilities of storytelling used in other influential platforms.

From this fast-evolving storytelling sphere came a new form of storytelling in digital format. It is necessary to elaborate on digital storytelling, as most of the applications to this research apply stories and narratives more often on the digital front, in which technology is the tool helping to promote and deliver the experience using a digital medium. Digital elements are brought together within a narrative structure where computer-based tools are employed to tell stories and present ideas in an enriching experience for its viewer.

This research proposes that storytelling in this digital capacity is one way to work toward using stories effectively, whereas stories become more accessible and increase the critical role of interactivity. Rural communities depend on delivery methods that aid in community development. While organic elements are a desired approach for local

enthusiasm and still have societal benefits, this study shows that initiatives such as storytelling can assist in creating a partnership with locals in an undeniably compelling way. On a digital front, storytelling provides a more tangible component to rural development. A function of a community is not merely through economic means but capturing the communities' attention through entertainment and self-identification with the use of a storytelling platform.

“Digital storytelling applications include short (three-to-five minute) movies featuring images, video clips, soundtrack, and narration; storytelling performances and talks supported by media slideshows for interactive presentations; and web-based applications, including streaming media, podcasts, and blogs. Generational favoritism becomes a part of life with something as simple as TikTok. Other applications include hypertext narratives and interactive video games. But the main focus of digital storytelling is the creation of personal narratives rather than interactive stories or games” (McLellan 2006). “With storytelling, the emphasis is on the performance, and the elicitation and construction of stories or narratives in situ, rather than the story as an object. Why is the story told in a particular context, and how?” (Moezzi, Janda, and Rotmann 2017). Stories over time have become much more enriched and have worked toward providing alternatives to how societies incorporate storytelling into various fields. Digital tools combined with traditional storytelling techniques create an atmosphere for storytelling that is both engaging and interactive. Even with older generations who prefer in-person engagement, technological advancement has continued to push itself into everyone, where residents of all ages are becoming increasingly more dependent on digital offerings. No matter our differences, storytelling “can erupt into the collective

consciousness, producing a sudden coalescence of vision in the minds of the listeners” (Denning 2002, 6).

The power behind storytelling, now being used with advanced technology, is making its way into academia and society. We can now utilize the combined elements and focus on the benefits concerning research. Becoming increasingly popular in both educational fields and professional contexts, storytelling in the new age media world has allowed for ultimate communication and participation of community. From what was once considered separate terminology, new age media and storytelling combined as a research tool can be quite accommodating. New age media storytelling has the power to be a well-designed intervention that collectively aids to the cultures existing within rural communities. This storytelling combination can give insight into the trends and projections of the future for rural communities, addressing a diverse range of issues that guarantee significant planning impact. Using such tools to access potential vulnerabilities is possible through storytelling and provides planners with multiple scenarios to help evaluate communities over time. With use of the mentioned pairings, planners could potentially calculate essential data altogether correctly. Operating at its full potential, traditional storytelling and digital elements would also allow for an increased multi-layered impact of multimedia and interactivity, creating an innovative approach to the planning process.

Storytelling as a Participatory Research Tool

Although the preferred channels of engagement for citizens often vary based on age, general accessibility, and relevance – the storytelling tool has the capacity and potential to harness that array of differences tailored to specific issues or practices which are often

controversial. Storytelling as a research method is an emerging area that complements other, more conventional methods. However, now with the expeditious pace of society, the storytelling method can be seen as an extremely valuable tool that has abilities to connect with all end users to some degree. Stories are a way to push the needle on innovation and local community participation.

Regarding participatory planning, “storytelling is not a panacea for eliciting change in organizations” (Denning 2002, 2). Stories, on their own, are only as good in a planning process as how they are told and how the listener and viewer receive that information. This research articulates that citizens’ input is crucial for the success of community development. Rural areas, especially, need the participation of community members in a storytelling format for how they want their communities to exist to benefit. A story should be constructed in a process that transforms communities, engages stakeholders, and identifies any critical element to planning. “Citizen participation, defined as deliberation of issues affecting one’s own life, is the normative core of democracy” (Fischer 2000, 1). Democracy is founded in a government that faithfully represents the people and their voices. While rural communities can have the best plan for implanting planning agendas, one thing often missing is the piece that allows the community as a whole to be involved during the process. Storytelling, in short, is imperative.

Storytelling benefits society in relating to an individual’s every day. Polletta (2015) claims that research shows that stories are better able than other kinds of messages to change people’s opinions, increasing human’s ability to interact. This is especially true when dealing with rural communities, as the attitudinal change holds steadfast and most often improves with time. “Studies have used stories and storytelling for their value in

communicating with and influencing others. Among the reasons for choosing storytelling as a research tool, one of the most imperative is that it is a highly accessible modality that does not require specialized knowledge and skills to connect with or derive meaning from” (McCall et al. 2019, 3). Overall, stories can enhance values to what people perceive and how they intermingle with the world around them.

“Planners and other policy actors use these storytelling elements both to understand citizen perspectives and influence perceptions of proposed developments” (Lowery et al. 2020, 4). Stories allow for this inherent seemingly norm of subjugated peripheral social voices within rural areas to prosper in a more active environment where local regions become responsive rather than indifferent. Stories, in themselves, are an invitation for listeners to better visualize and imagine an idea and for storytellers to have the tools to capture their audience. For government officials to be influential in planning processes, the message of each story conveyed must be clear and engaging, captivating rural communities to their core. A story will inherently crash if there is no emotional appeal, plain and simple. “Organizations try and fail to tell compelling stories all the time, and fail because they do not include an emotional appeal. They tell a story about *what* their product does, without appealing to *why* their product is so valuable to their clientele” (Sellers 2018).

Throughout the use of stories and storytelling within politics, those select scholars who have studied narratives on a political spectrum were less likely to see stories told as a universal and timeless element. Instead, scholars often found stories routinely contained heavy structure. In some regards, stories were not useable across different contexts. Stereotypes were inherently present rather than a story often shaped by them. This is

important for a valid and substantial reason for the research. If genre, while not solely shaped by those but more so initially guided in politics and transposed from one occurrence to the next, could not, with a general understanding from participants and select audiences, be challenged in which they are effectively changing the status quo? The answer is yes, but...imagining every story along these lines would be complex and challenging to deploy. "Audiences' opinions about characters — about how believable and worthy they are — are not shaped entirely by the genre of plot they appear in" (Polletta 2015, 36). It has also been discovered that "political actors liken themselves to celebrated figures in order to claim authority" (Polletta 2015, 39). It is up to the research and the political sphere within communities to help guide the genre and effectively include the communities in participation by which local government eliminates the status quo of styling oneself just for strategic sense. "Those challenging the status quo often try to link themselves to heroes of the past. But they also align themselves with "ordinary" people who have stood up to injustice. Such people are often, in fact, not so ordinary" (Polletta 2015, 40). "Moreover, the existence of a hero in a story provides the possibility to identify yourself with them" (Yanenko 2017; Van Krieken 2018). Politic figures must then work to build credibility, in which trust is ultimately inherently accepted. At the same time, Fischer (2000) raises the question of whether investing our faith solely in the experts is wiser, given the class-based attitudes and nationalistic views that pervade our Western political system. Broader research would suggest holistic approaches with inclusive citizen participation gives meaning to democracy. A "greater participative democracy must retain legitimacy and add value to representative democracy" (Cavaye 2001, 120).

Political Trust and Community Bias

Stories can recognize the broad applicability in which complex messages are conveyed and more easily understood, in which a diverse audience can be included with a multitude of interpretations that can incorporate many various events.

“Much of the literature on narrative in politics focuses on stories that are told explicitly and focuses on the role of genre in shaping stories. But in politics, as in other spheres, stories are often alluded to rather than told explicitly” (Polletta 2015, 35). Although politics within local communities must work to acknowledge the differences between residents, a unifying narrative must still be achieved. “Recent research suggests not only that stories are more persuasive than arguments but also that the key mechanism is one of identification” (Polletta 2015, 35). “Personal stories can reveal the differences and similarities between people’s experiences (Thomas 2003). Individual stories carry meaning and perceptions (Atkinson 2002) because when stories are relayed, individuals position themselves in the story to emphasize or diminish parts of the story or to prevent themselves from being perceived negatively by others” (Frank 1995). “Therefore, it is important to ensure that time is spent building rapport, and there is an atmosphere of acceptance in a suitable environment to enhance the comfort and safety of the storyteller” (East et al. 2010, 18). Clear and consistent information is also just as vital for storytelling effectiveness.

The utilization of how a story is told and even written holds power to inclusivity, creating meaning and igniting positive societal modifications. Because stories are subjective and influenced by environments, social situations, and even an audience at any given time, input received during times of storytelling can often hold a bias. “To a large

degree, bias and accuracy appear to be in the eye of the beholder, greatly influenced by whether one agrees with the ideological leaning of the source” (Knight Foundation 2018). How does the use of storytelling make us more aware of our biases? How can bias be eliminated if it is perceived to be not for the greater good of those rural communities in which participation is pertinent to how local government operates? Bringing storytelling and new age media collectively into play can assist in the general population’s understanding, attitudes, and behaviors, in the end, providing transparency for all those involved in the planning process. Although transparency can be seen as a nebulous concept that lacks a general definition, often because of the varied use by politicians, transparency is crucial to generate trust. Providing the absence of opacity is needed and an essential role in effective dialogues. By including transparency within government websites and through additional inclusive storytelling, local governments can increase confidence among their citizens. “Transparent conduct of government reduces the information gaps between government and the citizens” (Soonhee and Lee 2017). “Its absence diminishes citizens’ trust in administrative processes and actions as citizens feel distant and often excluded from the governance process” (da Cruz et al. 2015).

We all have stories, but in working on stories that have mutual benefits for everyone involved, local governments have the power to diminish preexisting biases. When understanding rural storytelling in communities, local governments should pay attention to dominate narratives and make sure there is an accurate representation with balance in those stories from an entire community. A variety of voices in community sources could help counteract existing bias and provide that comprehensive approach to policy. When thinking of additional strategies, it is important to include diversity in storytellers,

provide training and resources to develop communication skills, foster a collaborative atmosphere, offer both online and offline platforms to specifically highlight and amplify rural voices, challenge and debunk stereotypes that often come with preexisting misconceptions, and engage and encourage local members to participation in decision-making processes with local governments. Although, we as humans have tendencies toward biases, resembling preferences, preconceptions, or prejudices – it must be said that not all inclinations are inherently evil. Think of the diverse types of meanings due to experiences of place. It could be a bias adds to the conversation of helping drive meaningful change, where individuals learn to work more effectively with their preferences or stereotypes.

Planners can provide an open dialogue using storytelling rhetoric that can help everyone within communities understand what is being done and further our relevance with others worldwide. “One important goal of media education should be to encourage young people to become more reflective about the ethical choices they make as participants and communicators and the impact they have on others” (Clinton et al. 2006, 17). Local government less not forget that society consists of adolescents and seniors, of sparse knowledge and area experts. Participatory approaches can benefit and break barriers in many areas of transparency and conflict. It can also identify planning terminology, such as affordable housing, conservation use, etcetera, which are often unfamiliar concepts. “It has been held that new styles of governance, based on greater citizen engagement, will change outlooks and attitudes and improve public confidence in governments” (García-Tabuyo et al. 2016). “Although we often think of the public bureaucracy as an impersonal mechanism, in fact, behind each of our encounters with

public organizations lies a lengthy and complex chain of human events, understandings, and behaviors developed in the everyday lives of people just like us” (Denhardt 2011, 1). At the same time, developed programs and strategies may not be changed while in action; the ideas and decisions brought about by stories within the communities can be used as tools to elicit future implementations. Having local government expect particular topics to be routinely addressed is necessary; however, concerns and public input should be prioritized if community voices seem to intervene expressively. Clear messages are crucial, and the availability of narratives in which material stems from the collaborative discussion is just as deserved.

Construction of a Story

Regarding political characters trying to drive a participatory process, a story’s “characters should be nuanced enough that they seem realistic but not so nuanced that they seem idiosyncratic” (Polletta 2015, 43). To construct a complete story, whether out of intention or not, “people make choices about what to include, making certain events and aspects visible, while omitting others” (Bauman 2004). Therefore, it is crucial to notice a story’s additions and exclusions and include contextual variation in the planning process. “We adopt the views of the characters with whom we identify, and we identify with characters who are presented sympathetically. Politically, it is characters, rather than the events in which they appear, who win us over” (Polletta 2015, 35). Often this element is not only the necessity of impartiality but the crucial link to a community’s success.

Despite what Babbie (2008) declares, —all of us consider ourselves ethical; not perfect, perhaps, but more moral than most of humanity. Ethics are indeed subjective.

“It is necessary to remember that stories, being subjective accounts, will differ, and that their purpose is to provide insight and understanding into a research focus area, rather than to produce generalizable results” (Koch 1998). While politicians have a crucial role as storytellers themselves, they must work to have the communities’ buy-in that they are also similar to whom they are viewing. “It is likely that readers sometimes identify with characters who are objectively like them, sometimes identify with characters who are presented favorably in the story, and sometimes identify with people who have status outside the story, but we do not yet have a clear understanding of the pattern of this variation” (Polletta 2015, 38).

While research is still needed due to the variation of what drives identification, the mix of contradictory findings only further warrants validity in the continuation of this research. In any case, we can be certain...characters are powerful! If the story is told exactly right, a communities’ longevity together is long-lasting. “The communicative potential of storytelling is explained by the fact that the story format is one of the most common forms of communication in which an individual usually shares their personal opinion” (Markova and Sukhoviyy 2020, 359).

“Whatever our story, it’s only part of the big story of what it means to be human together.”

- Rhonda V. Magee

Contact Theory and Affinity Spaces

Research proves that a storytelling tool is more widely understood in rural settings, as the terminology can encompass various techniques and styles that offer inclusivity. A community-based approach using storytelling and new age media can help local

stakeholders discuss community aspirations while articulating a mutual agenda for change through improved trust, dialogue, and conflict reduction. Studies have also shown that using social media for civic engagement increases trust in institutions (Warren, Sulaiman, and Jaafar 2014). “Collective stories and visions can also be incorporated into the planning process through the technique of scenario-building. When used in participatory planning, scenarios can elucidate the desired futures (and fears) of residents to inform local sustainability visions and encourage community empowerment by challenging ingrained attitudes that reinforce external control” (Bennett, Kadfak, and Dearden 2014).

One such example of using a community-based approach in a planning perspective which drives communities’ participation, as well as aids in the elimination of bias, is through a facilitated method similar to Contact Theory or with the use of affinity spaces. First hypothesized by Gordon Allport (2014), Contact Theory is viewed as one of the most central social theories of the 20th century, suggesting that in-group’s frequent interactions with outgroups have favorable outcomes with fewer negative perceptions. Allport (2014) further explains that “positive effects of intergroup contact occur in contact situations characterized by four key conditions: equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support by social and institutional authority” (Everett 2013). This theory dates back to desegregation, suggesting that contact between members of distinct groups and perspectives can work together to reduce intergroup conflict. “The idea that contact between members of different groups can help to reduce *prejudice* and improve social relations is one that is enshrined in policy-making all over the globe” (Everett 2013).

Even though some theorists believe contact between groups result in conflict, far more oppose such an assessment. Lett (1945) believed interracial contact led to “mutual understanding and regard.” Cornell University sociologist Robin Williams Jr. “offered 102 propositions on intergroup relations that constituted an initial formulation of intergroup contact theory” (McCloud 2023). Nonetheless, there is still a disconnect in which researchers acknowledge there is still more work to be done to determine how positive experiences during in-groups trickle down to all members of outgroups with a positive effect. In this regard, a generalization of positive impacts has not been determined. And even if attempted, there is no guarantee that group members would have enough sufficient engagement opportunities needed to achieve a positive effect with outgroup members. Furthermore, there have been theories that face-to-face may not be necessary, and members could imagine experiences still having that same effect. Even so, this is an excellent example of how group gatherings and the sharing of stories provide positivity and could be included as one avenue toward community participation efforts by local government. On the other hand, even if theoretical extensions to the contact hypothesis were authentic about eliminating the need for in-person contact, stories, in that sense, can have even more power. Due to the ability of stories having ways to be shared by others through new age media, presentations from members in digital format can still provide a positive result.

Table 2.1: Contact Situations Characterized by Four Key ConditionsSource: <https://in-mind.org/article/intergroup-contact-theory-past-present-and-future>

Condition	Meaning	Example	Evidence
Equal Status	Members of the contact situation should not have an unequal, hierarchical relationship.	Members should not have an employer/employee, or instructor/student relationship.	Evidence has documented that equal status is important both <i>prior</i> to (Brewer & Kramer, 1985) and <i>during</i> (Cohen & Lotan, 1995) the contact situation.
Cooperation	Members should work together in a non-competitive environment.	Students working together in a group project.	Aronson's 'jigsaw technique' structures classrooms so that students strive cooperatively (Aronson & Patnoe, 1967), and this technique has led to positive results in a variety of countries
Common Goals	Members must rely on each other to achieve their shared desired goal.	Members of a sports team.	hu and Griffey (1985) have shown the importance of common goals in interracial athletic teams who need to work together to achieve their goal.
Support by Social and Institutional Authorities	There should not be social or institutional authorities that explicitly or implicitly sanction contact, and there should be authorities that support positive contact.	There should not be official laws enforcing segregation.	Landis' (1984) work on the importance of institutional support in reducing prejudice in the military.

Affinity spaces are also conducive to powerful opportunities for learning. Like Contact Theory, such areas can engage community members more deeply and offer active participation. Gee (2004) argues that this type of experience is all-encompassing because people are sustained by everyday endeavors that bridge differences in age, class, race, gender, and educational level. In addition, Gee (2004) claims it is because of this experience that people can participate in numerous ways according to their skills and interests, whereas if a given community participated in peer-to-peer teaching, each of those community members could be motivated to acquire new knowledge or refine their existing skills. Ultimately, this kind of atmosphere allows each participant to feel like an expert while tapping the expertise of others.

Research has found more often that personal and group input during storytelling can promote awareness and offer a reflection on each person's life circumstances. Like healthcare, the time has been invested into storytelling and its power behind the transformation that can occur. Whether variation in a community's planning efforts or one's desires, Cowling (2005) recognized the reflection and desire for positive change accompanying storytelling and dialogue. By drawing understanding from the private accounts of an individual's life, focus can be made on how to proceed with outcomes based on experiences of past events, and research can be expanded even further. Not only is one guided, but those in rural community planning are led by the stories themselves. Frank (2000) stated, "Storytelling is *for* another just as much as it is for oneself." Personal stories can offer assistance to an audience member or reader. We can learn by reflecting on the personal stories of others. Contact Theory and affinity spaces are examples of how local officials can actively invigorate their communities with

participation in which an entire community reaps long-lasting benefits. It is about engaging the communities in ways to bring collective thought and intersect with larger audiences grasping a more profound sense of connection in storytelling experimentation. A non-static way of expression and innovation at its peak, whereas storytelling in group settings is unplanned and localized. Differing groups still have the means to participate together, forming collected action for their rural communities. But also, freedom is given to everyone to move in and out of the discussion as they please, even though not all community members will want to be fully involved and actively participate in this style of a community planning process. “This dilemma parallels the paradoxes between altruism and self-interest, and participative democracy vs. representative democracy” (Cavaye 2001, 122). Due to the motivated few mentalities in this case, local officials must work their stories into as much of the community as possible, where participation becomes conscientiously voluntary. “The new cultures that accompany major changes often involve multiple concepts, attitudes, and skills” (Denning 2002, 2). The ultimate goal for a transition into a successful planning mission of today would be for all members to have an active stake in the created culture.

Storytelling Platforms

Another way to offer positive, participatory engagement, and one of the most crucial to the success of this study, is through the mixed creation of internal storytelling platforms. Local governments can contract aid if needed to assist state and local governments in real time. A tailored storytelling application that peeks and meets the needs of area citizens can frequently drive engagement by the sheer nature of people wanting to be included in the communication between the government and themselves.

This service allows for additional transparency and increases citizens' access to topics of importance. Again, this adds to the involvement of residents and improves the participatory component for successful local transformation. Storytelling is more than surveys, input, and town hall meetings commonly found in a given area's comprehensive plan. The format of a story is enticing; it is engaging. It allows for interaction in a way where relevance is seen in place and time. Community goals should include storytelling as a road map to the future of rural areas, involving everyone in a public process.

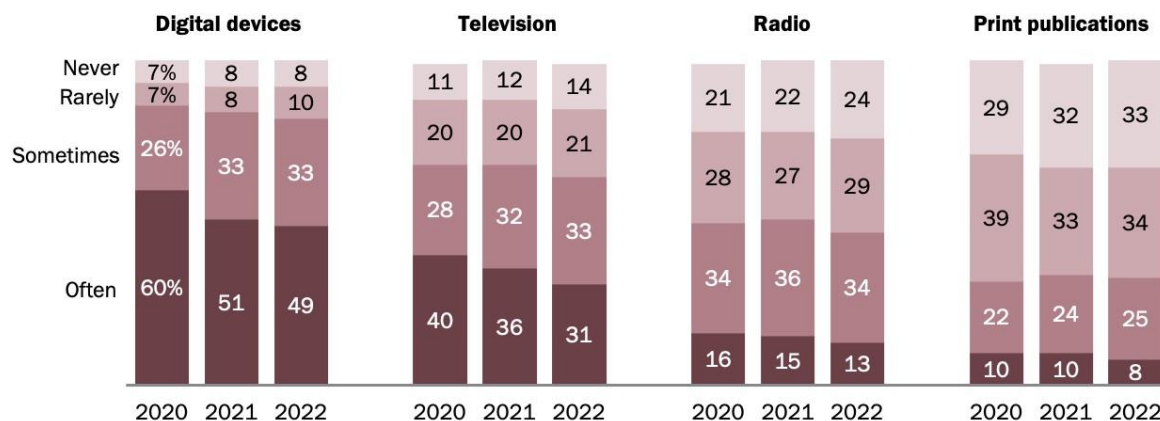
While numerous limitations have long hampered frameworks that integrate human input into everyday community planning practice, this research supports the case that we now have the tools to make participatory planning within rural communities more effective. In the framework for this study, storytelling has been researched as a tool for participatory purposes in local development. The use of storytelling is to provide information to rural community members from their local governments, in which a particular group of people become more successful with increased perception efficiency and influences the communicators. Broader community engagement is not only recommended but takes precedence and eliminates obstacles often associated with those that are disconnected. This interactive approach within a society can increase momentum within a designated neighborhood while involving all public authorities, citizens, and business stakeholders. "Although all ethical research principles must be upheld and suitable processes put in place to mitigate the distress that can occur when relying on experiences, storytelling as a method has many benefits" (East et al. 2010, 23).

Digital Transformation

In today's world, storytelling has taken off even more so, with ample opportunities now presenting themselves through technology. Technology has immersed individuals within an excess of information that includes a variety of stories, where communities can convey advantages for their rural neighborhoods in a planning capacity. "Storytelling has not only shown its viability in the digital age, but has demonstrated the ability to transform" (Markova and Sukhoviya 2020, 361). While preference exists amongst generations for technology's use, and many citizens have created their own digital pathways for receiving information, it should be referenced that news consumption has exceeded an all-time high on digital platforms. The digital savviness of the younger generations and their expectations of providing technological advancements as a need versus a mere choice has helped push the envelope in the public process needing to keep up with current trends. The omnichannel communication used today looks different than the generations before them and will continue to alter for those following generations. However, tools like storytelling is a platform for the everyday and seems to steadily remain current. Luckily, how stories can be displayed may only amplify with time as technology inevitably expands. It is believed that storytelling and new age media can be used in tandem to assist in painting a more contextualized portrait of these rural area communities than other participatory processes. By which, numerous services that benefit from citizen engagement can be digitized.

News consumption across platforms

% of U.S. adults who ___ get news from ...



Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 18-Aug. 21, 2022.

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Figure 2.8: News Consumption across Platforms 2020-2022

Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/>

As technology continues to advance, society continues to see improvement of its services, allowing for more utilization of various formats through numerous media channels. People are becoming what has been coined as, digitally involved. “Digital storytelling takes the cultural practice of storytelling and turns it into a research method” (Rouhani 2019, 575). “Digital storytelling, in particular, helps to connect communities and has thrived as a tool in social transformation and justice. It functions as an enabler to provide citizens with a means of making their voices heard” (Trowbridge and Willoughby 2021). Digital storytelling comes in various forms but “has the aforementioned communication capabilities that are characteristics of traditional storytelling. At the same time, it also carries additional features related to the

environment in which it functions” (Markova and Sukhoviyy 2020, 361). Storytelling used on a digital platform allows for the appeal of various learning styles. By creating alternate avenues of learning, abstract or conceptual information can be presented in a more meaningful and understandable approach.



Figure 2.9: Tools and Media Used in Digital Storytelling

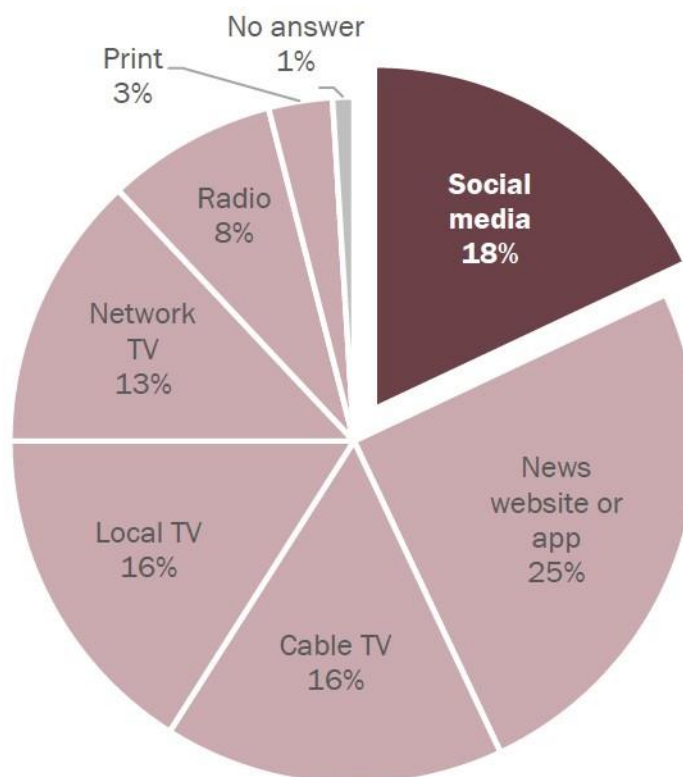
Source: Metaphors We Live by Research.com <https://research.com/education/digital-storytelling>

Such immersion has expanded societal views, increased awareness, and allowed for a connection in a sphere only once dreamed of. “Media platforms such as blogs, Twitter,

Facebook, and Instagram have grown in popularity in the 21st century. Every platform allows users to express their thoughts publicly with everyone on the Internet or to choose with whom to share their information” (Mendoza 2015). While the 1950s saw the everyday use of slide projectors and Cuisenaire rods in educational institutions (De Bock 2020), the majority of students today are continuously exposed to more innovative technologies in the form of digital media such as: podcasts, mobile devices, and interactive forms of presentation.

About one-in-five U.S. adults say they get their political news primarily through social media

% of U.S. adults who say the most common way they get political and election news is ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable"

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Figure 2.10: Political Platform Use for Political and Election News

Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/07/30/americans-who-mainly-get-their-news-on-social-media-are-less-engaged-less-knowledgeable/>

The delivery speed in which stories are told and received, in addition to a stories' effectiveness, has amplified as human-driven technology advances. The reliance on fast instant communication has transformed the ultramodern world. With messages now received almost naturally through this "new age media process," a story's creation is achieved. Bear in mind that a unified message, however, requires attention.

"Unfortunately, there are shortcomings to using social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook to tell stories; now we are always unsure of what is true" (Mendoza 2015).

Kendall Haven writes, "Humans have told, used, and relied on stories for over 100,000 years...Most Western cultures began, en masse, to read and write only a few hundred years ago. Before that, oral stories were the dominant form through which history, news, values, cultural heritage, and attitudes were passed from person to person and from generation to generation...Evolutionary biologists confirm that 100,000 years of reliance on stories have evolutionarily hardwired a predisposition into human brains to think in story terms. We are programmed to prefer stories and to think in story structures." (3-4)

More recently, storytelling has been used as a successful tool in producing community development, starting with the idea that stories can play a key role in raising awareness of issues within a community. They are also used to inform and educate those within areas. "Research shows that stories are better able than other kinds of messages to change people's opinions" (Slater and Rouner 2002). "Stories are vehicles that build bridges

between people and support common understanding” (Trowbridge and Willoughby 2021). The implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to work at the community level are apparent. Participatory methods are as important as ever for helping to equalize power relations between researchers and community members, and the potential of digital technologies for participatory purposes is enormous.

“Stories bring meaning into our lives, convey values and emotions, aid in reaffirming and validating our lives and experiences, and can connect us with our inner selves, with others, and with society” (Atkinson 2002). “In general, emotions are a vital driver of information exchange and of relational practices between organizations and their stakeholders” (Peters, Kashima, and Clark 2009). With stories, we can better understand people and their firsthand experiences in all aspects of fields and life. Emotional states also influence the wish to actively seek, process, and share information” (Dardenne et al. 2011). “Scholars note that the communicative effect is enhanced by involving an emotional component in storytelling” (Markova and Sukhoviya 2020, 360). Many examples help further prove that storytelling is a powerhouse for change by enhancing the world around us and adding to a wealth of knowledge for particular areas of interest.

From our historical past to the present, storytelling has shaped our lives and helped create many environments. “Whether we consciously attempt to develop our perspectives or not, they do develop, and we are guided by them” (Denhardt 2011, 9). There is a wide range of applications involving storytelling. How the world now views and gathers information has morphed from the simplistic storytelling past to this newness of storytelling technique, whereas technology is a tool when layered, assists in amplifying an idea, knowledge, or even creates movements within society today. “There are few

vehicles for conveying knowledge and imparting meaning as universal as the art of storytelling. Telling stories is central to the human experience, a timeless strategy for relaying information between individuals and groups” (Lowery et al. 2020, 4). With the entire community, including local leaders working together, rural communities can apply strategies that increase participation, offering a more inclusive and collaborative environment. By incorporating the tool of technology, communities can reach everyone by way of the digital world and build momentum in community effort. The true potential of storytelling is fascinating, and after extensive research, it appears it should take as much of the credit as anything else as a valuable tool in research.

Connectedness in Society

Places in which technology is readily available, connected regions flourish and combat roadblocks exceptionally well, allowing for greater flexibility, durability, and adaptation of their societal needs. Unlike their rural counterparts, cities frequently develop with access to technology at precipitous speeds because of their broad availability and often free of charge. This technological aid within urban areas helps them to function at full potential with many of their planning goals. It assists in tackling adversity, effectively performing at a much higher level if a sense of participation regarding planning is the overriding goal. “They become adept at identifying opportunities for leadership and accomplishment; they adjust quickly to new situations, embrace new roles and goals, and interact with people of diverse backgrounds” (Clinton et al. 2006, 16). For rural areas to mimic the progressive success of their neighboring urban areas, they must utilize resources provided by technology while also focusing on involving as many community members as possible in the planning process.

Technological innovation involves launching something new, a novel idea, method, or device. Every day in the world of technology is like its inception. This research has found that while technology can alter at sudden rates, technology dependence has become part of our daily lives, and understanding technology's potential is paramount to understanding our world. Where fast-paced means everything, involvement at arm's reach is central to effectively implementing the new age media storytelling tool because of the world's technology dependence. Societies must be ready and willing to assess innovative ideas at speeds never anticipated a few decades ago because communities now rely on the ability to instantly capture real-world experiences by logging into this limitless hub of information.

With heavy reliability on its accessibility, connected users worldwide reap the many benefits from a source that synchronizes with today's populace and their rapid lifestyles - realizing that one of the challenges for many rural areas is financial backing and the ability to carry a technological load at a certain capacity community-wide. Although funding and other factors contribute, oftentimes the disparity among amenities in rural areas often cannot be sustained or financially maintained. Even if funding becomes available, it is pretty standard for those communities to still be without access, as many times, it is difficult for community members to know what is available and understand those active services. Furthermore, for community development to be implemented in a way that shows progress in participation, local government still needs the ability to partner with neighboring areas and disseminate services that help train, coach, and work with communities to improve the disconnect of rural information areas do provide.

While expanding broadband services is a priority for rural communities, many rural areas have yet to see swift action. “Political entrepreneurs with deep financial resources and wide political connections are better able to secure a favorable hearing for their stories and the characters who people them” (Polletta 2015, 43). From the most recent investigations and extensive research, rural-based communities are often excluded from the increasing power of technology and the benefits technology can provide. Rural communities are faced with significant challenges, including the reduction of government support, and sometimes considered having alternative livelihoods due to the shortage or absence even of modern technology. Though these challenges can strengthen communities in ample ways by encouraging alternative social relations, development, and awareness - the much-needed participation component within communities can suffer. “Citizens expect information technology to improve transparency and empower them to monitor and evaluate government performance and foster a broader interaction between them and the government” (Pinilla, Torres, and Royo 2010).

In addition, while development typically trickles down from urban areas to the countryside regarding technology, rural communities are hurt by a copy-and-paste fashion. The trouble here is that without some of those resources being readily available, stories do not have the power to make the changes necessary for those specific communities to thrive instantly. “Rural communities are often overlooked, and this disconnect proves that rural communities have more largely populated and thriving areas, such as cities and urban settings. Natural resource-dependent communities have often been excluded from discourse on sustainability and innovation” (Lowery et al. 2020, 5).

While areas amidst the countryside outweigh their metropolitan neighbors in raw materials, the resource of successful growth in planning falls short and needs to catch up. And although this research will not focus on features from both urban and rural perspectives, it is essential to note that there are quite a few differences. Serious considerations have been made into why a storytelling tool can be deemed a savior of rural communities' concerns and interests, regardless of what may be considered an ultimate redeemer to their urban counterparts.

The absence of broadband in rural communities is easily one of the biggest challenges these communities face when trying to implement modifications by way of technology. For example, the state of Georgia's current broadband map shows a massive portion of roughly one-million Georgians are underserved and lack access to reliable high-speed internet. As countless activities toward progress have shifted online, the world is stuck in what has been coined a "digital divide." Low-income households earning less than \$25,000 per year face even further disadvantages from the lack of connectivity and complete absence of digital devices. This also applies to those with lower education levels, older adults, and people with disabilities. However, providing data across the state for equity of access is not mission impossible; it just takes time, work, and convincing if using new age media is meant for rural development. It becomes critical to recognize the limitations within reach and use tools to establish the interaction between citizens and local government. Full implementation of new age media storytelling could benefit the entire community, providing that accessibility is not only desired but needed in numerous states as seen in Figure 2.11 for the state of Georgia.

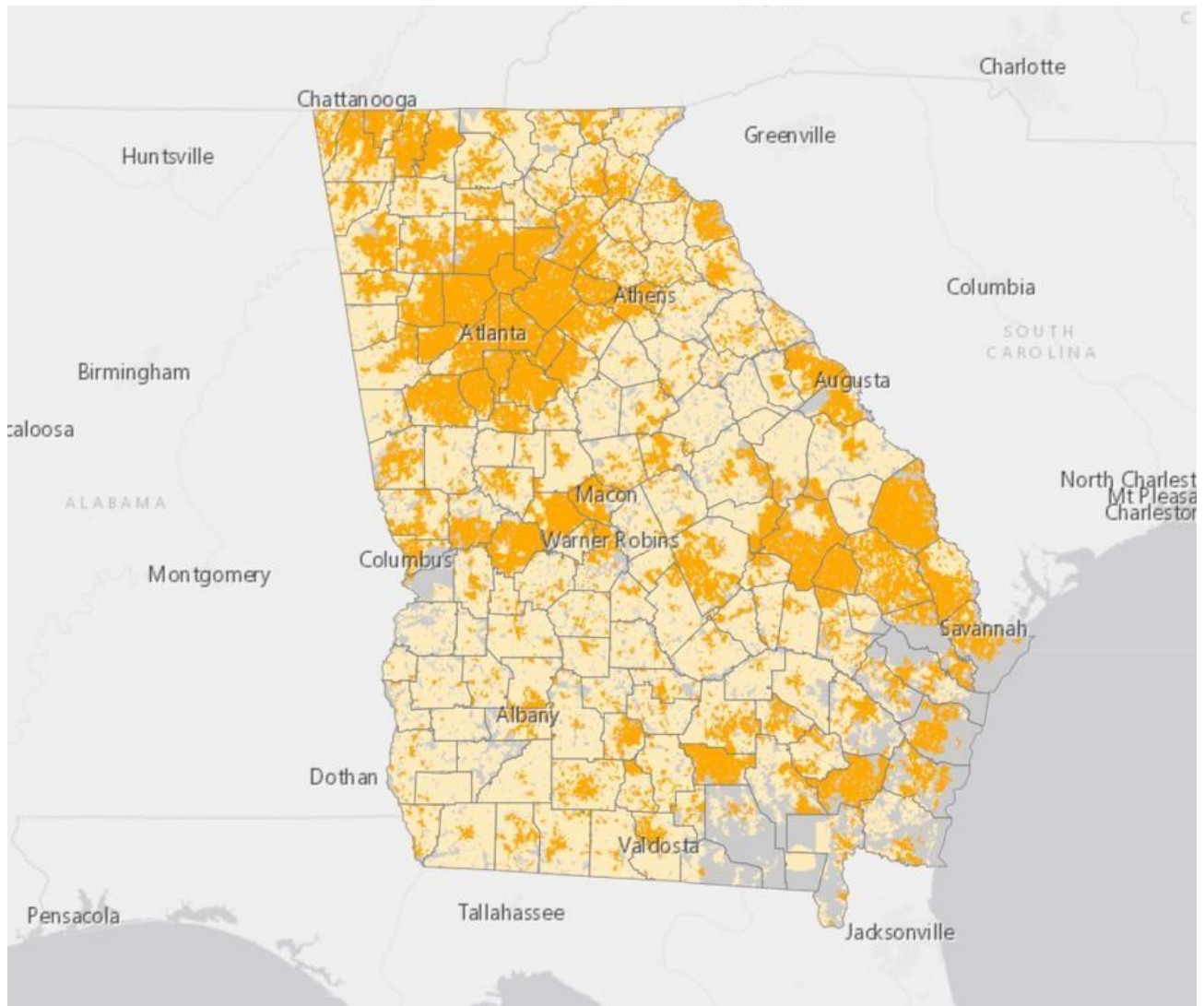


Figure 2.11: State of Georgia Broadband Map

Source: <https://cviog.uga.edu/news/spotlights/052322-broadband.html>

Writer: Roy Perry ~ “The map, created by UGA for the state of Georgia Broadband Initiative, became the national gold standard for accurately identifying populations in Georgia unserved by high-speed internet. Unlike maps produced by the Federal Communications Commission, which consider a census block served if only one address has broadband access, the UGA map identified unserved and underserved locations down to the address.”

Figure 2.11 depicts the need to increase and secure grants, especially in remote rural areas within the State of Georgia. “In February, Gov. Brian Kemp announced \$408 million worth of grant awards to fund 49 broadband projects for communities, households, and businesses across Georgia” (Parry 2022). States nationwide are beginning to see a higher demand and the necessity of providing high-speed technology; availability is fundamental to a citizen’s role in participatory planning.

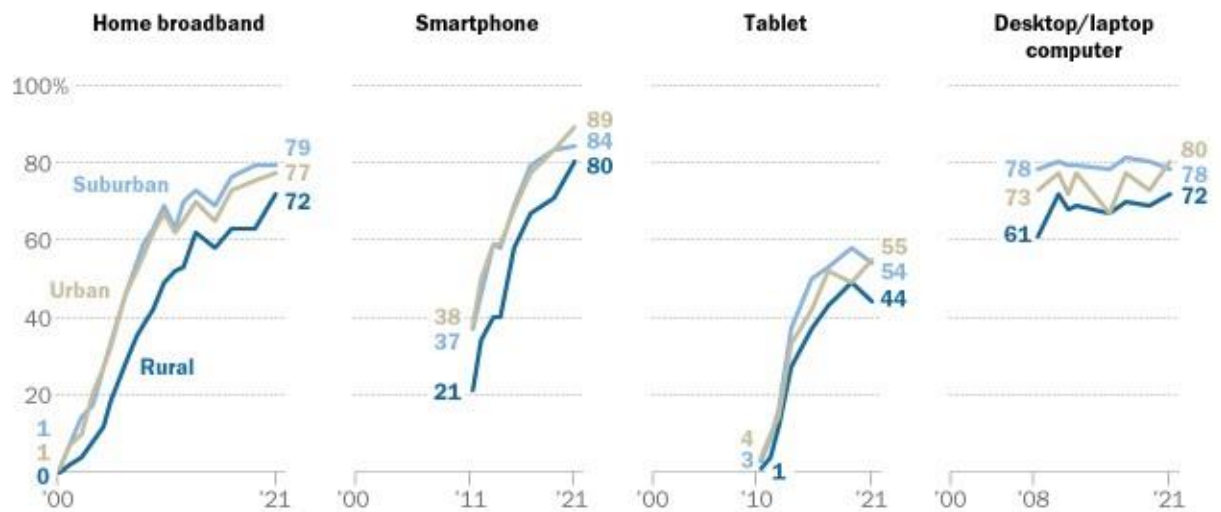
Georgia was selected as the case state to show the need and consideration for what should be done and why. Georgia has a huge state gap between rural and urban area accessibility, and this research provides the importance of connectivity and lessening a gap in the heavy fluctuation of availability. The broadband map included is the first of its kind in the United States. While Parry (2022) mentions that by the end of 2022, 4.9 million Georgia locations will be considered serviced with high-speed internet access, but state officials still need to account for the remaining locations. Nonetheless, technology has made identifying these “dead zones” possible. By matching locations serviced by any state’s internet service providers, the nation can utilize geographic information data sets to provide underserved areas and minimize federal, state, and local inequities.

A way to tackle community challenges, which may be the most effective, is by using powerful tools such as new age media storytelling. Innovation and the deployment of such an influential tool can also assist in helping planners evaluate assets that are often difficult to measure, like local culture and aesthetics. The days of telling communities to comply are no longer, as such large-scale modifications’ effectiveness has proven unsuccessful. Whether these two means are incorporated into daily planning and policy efforts, frequent and combined use of storytelling and new age media have shown to

contain the power to facilitate a stronger, more robust society. “Planners tell stories about communities that can reflect citizen’s concerns about the future and advocate for particular development decisions” (Lowery et al. 2020, 2). This imparts aids in establishing a broader meaning to communities by way of experience.

Despite growth, rural Americans have consistently lower levels of technology ownership than urbanites and lower broadband adoption than suburbanites

% of U.S. adults who say they have or own the following



Source: Survey conducted Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2.12: Technology Ownership in American Households 2021, Pew Research Center

Setting new state and local broadband planning policies is crucial. Investing in these rural communities throughout the United States requires continuous support and attention. According to a recent report by the Federal Communications Commission, 22.3 percent of Americans in rural areas and 27.7 percent of Americans in Tribal lands

lack coverage from fixed terrestrial 25/3 Mbps broadband, compared to only 1.5 percent of Americans in urban areas. This fundamental component of high-speed internet, central for diverse industries - including widespread use of storytelling - is a modern-day necessity that must be acted on. As you can see from Figure 2.13, the GIS Map of Broadband Sites paints a realistic view of the challenges many United States households face regarding modern high-speed internet access. In a digital age, and to successfully implement strategies as the research suggests, Americans must be able to connect. Initiatives must be made to eliminate those barriers to make it possible.

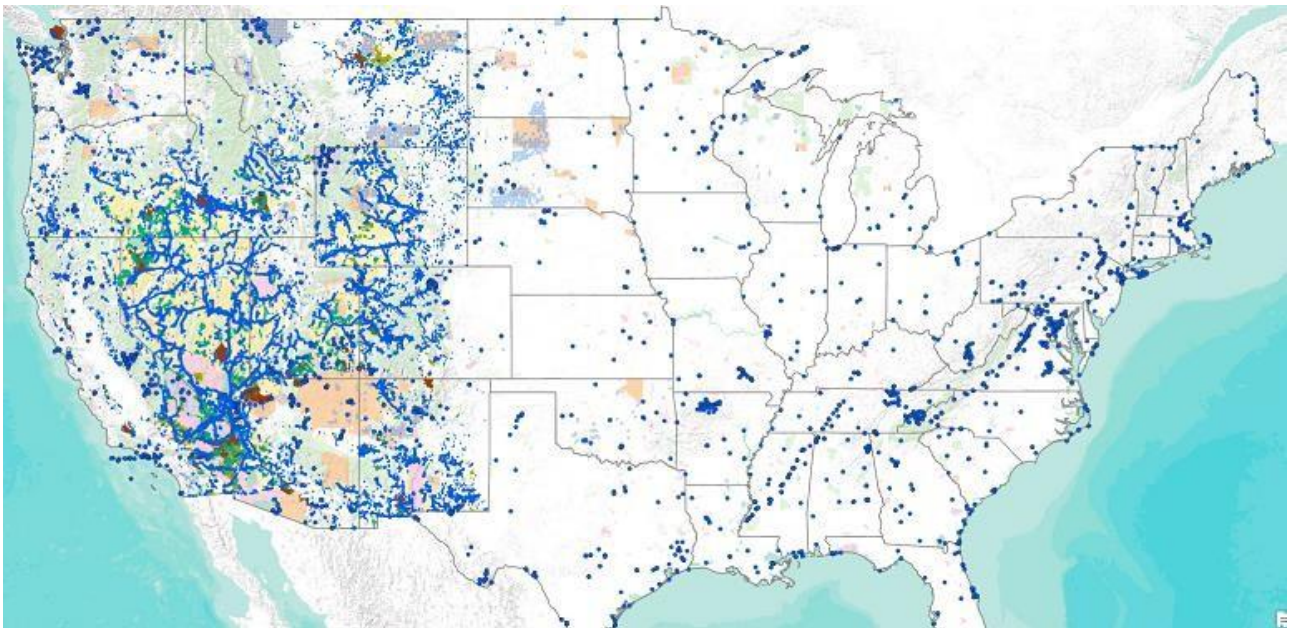


Figure 2.13: GIS Map of Broadband Sites across the United States on Public Land,

Screenshot by Joel Harrington, BLM.

Source: <https://www.doi.gov/broadband>

Ultimately, there is still work to be done. Time and money need to be invested. But regardless, storytelling still benefits in many ways even without given technologies in

place. It is worth noting that, on the one hand, local government can personally reach out to citizens to create and develop stories where their ideas and input are otherwise hindered due to the disconnect, lack of digital skillset, and citizen disinterest to engage. Though more time and resources are needed, storytelling can be dispersed on government platforms and shared for broader audience input with an optimistic approach to increasing motivation for those who may be unable to engage continuously. On the other hand, it is reassuring to know that projects are continuing to harness needs in which internet access becomes more widespread and scattered throughout all parts of the states for society's benefit. Identifying assets, like storytelling as a tool, can help bridge the gap for millions of Americans who still lack broadband services. Citizens' participation in government services can then remain accessible in a communicative sense.

Innovation in Technological Change

Innovation can be viewed as how society perceives an idea, practice, product, or object as new, whereas this newness begins with consumers' awareness of the innovation. While traditional forms of policy planning are more often relied upon in rural communities, digital methods should be particularly sought after, especially when the nature of technology in society is ubiquitous. "Technology is transforming innovation at its core, and the speed of change involves evolution, effect, and what is ahead" (Schrage, 2019). Technology which supports the everyday experiences "of and in physical space" is paramount and, therefore, research which builds relationships with local citizens to be able to work in their 'everyday' is also essential" (Manuel et al. 2017, 2). Figure 2.14 is a timeline of social media technology, showing the speed at which technology continues to evolve, and depicts the creation of multiple platforms along the way.

There are several components related to the study of innovation; however, for the sake of research, the focus here will be on measuring innovation through the community's use of technology itself.



Figure 2.14: History of Social Media Timeline

Source: <https://infographicsmania.com/social-media-a-history/>

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose

Research has shown that while stories have been told by communities in a traditional format for a long time, local government now has the ability to capture and create stories through media means. Such a method can help drive planning efforts and increase rural engagement. Citizen engagement is crucial to the capacity of having interactivity between local government and its citizens. Local government deals with complex and technical issues; engaging citizens and stakeholders in governmental topics can take time. In using a tool like storytelling, local governments can communicate their messages more clearly in a relatable and meaningful way to the people they serve. The nature of this type of communication setting can allow for better outcomes and greater transparency and trust within a community setting.

New age media storytelling provides more than the mere publication of messages. Modeled with technology, communities can become better unified. Using a new age media storytelling tool will better define policies, leading to more effectiveness and meeting development needs. In some cases, governments have been trying to address the technology basics and encouraging people's will to plan efforts in rural areas. However, there are still many challenges with the accessibility of government services and the ways in which governments are meeting desired expectations within their rural communities are lacking. Reflecting on the wants and requests of today's citizens matches the

demands of community anticipations. It enables better access to local government, whereas rural residents are willing to participate in a planning agenda. This section comprises the methodology of the study, “Methodology” being the research approach, design, methods and implementation of a study” (Ravitch and Carl 2016).

This study examines the impacts of combining storytelling in local government as an effective way to involve citizens. It presents a concept of applying storytelling to promote citizen engagement in local government development. The research consists of a survey sample of Georgia State Officials as well as the addition of an organization known for its effectiveness in storytelling use. The intended audiences are local governments and academics who seek to understand the opportunities storytelling can offer and the challenges in its utilization with new age media. “Stories do not reveal one single discoverable truth because truth is a matter of degree and perspective. In this respect, it is using the telling of a story as a research tool rest on a premise that is starkly different to that of a conventional scientific method” (McCall et al. 2019, 2). The literature has shown that stories can be all-encompassing, and the methodology section is comprised of additional surveys and interviews to elevate that determination. This chapter will define the methodological approach which includes the research design, data collection methods and instruments, analysis, implications, and final conclusion of the work.

Research Design

Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that qualitative research is a method that is used to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena. Qualitative techniques allow researchers to share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how

people structure and give meaning to their daily lives. Researchers using qualitative techniques examine how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others” (Berg 2007, 7). This research examined the roles and responsibilities of rural local government in the State of Georgia, following how implementing effective strategies, like storytelling, can increase participation for active response in rural community planning. This qualitative study has conducted a comprehensive review, whereas storytelling is a tried-and-tested method in several other avenues of topics. Andrews et al. (2011) explains storytelling has been used as an information medium in education of all types, including in dentistry, general medicine, law, and business. Qualitative research is a way to understand phenomena. This research focused on the relevancy of technology in recent years and worked to steer in the direction of storytelling and new age media as applicable to today using multi-search terminology.

The study also consists of an online self-completion survey for every State of Georgia County Official. A set of survey questions was asked, establishing whether a new process, product, or community innovation had been introduced. The questions were tailored toward each official’s particular use of technology and storytelling of their county and designed to generate data worthy of answering questions tailored to a participation aspect. Our survey set out to find specificities in the data and help local governments become better thought leaders in how their decisions can affect citizen engagement and sentiment within themselves as local officials. In providing additional insight into officials’ use of technology and its connection to those within their given communities, questions were as follows:

Survey Questions:

1. *From the two hypothetical examples below, choose the example you feel your local community would best respond to:*

Park A: On the corner of Oak and Pine Street, a new community park has opened for public use. The community is free to use the space from 8 am-7 pm. There will be areas for games such as basketball, tennis, and pickleball. In addition, there will be trails for walking, bike paths, and ample seating. Thank you, and we hope you enjoy this new addition.

Park B: After much time and effort, we are pleased to hear that Linda and Bill Jones celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary Saturday at the recently opened park on Oak and Pine Street. The couple was thrilled to hold an event at the wonderful outdoor space, which just so happens to be built in the very same spot as their first date. The park makes a great location for gatherings because of its open area, ample parking, and portico for events. There are multiple courts for basketball, tennis, and pickleball. Also, many trails have been manicured around the park's perimeter for safe biking and strolls. We hope this community continues to utilize the new park as a place for gathering and fun. Come out and enjoy this great addition to the community, which is open from 8 am – 7 pm.

2. *From the previous question, which park example do you find most relatable in how your government displays notices to the public?*

Park A

Park B

3. *What is the population size of your county?*

less than 10,000

10,000-20,000

20,000-30,000

30,000-100,000

100,000-500,000

500,000 or greater

4. *Are you knowledgeable about the types of social media your county government utilizes to better inform your local community?*

None at all

A little

A moderate amount

A lot

A great deal

5. *How much does feedback from social media impact your decision-making in county development?*

None at all

A little

A moderate amount

A lot

A great deal

6. *Since the development of your county government's social media usage, do you feel there has been an overall increase in participation from your community?*

Yes

No

Unsure

N/A

7. Do you feel the county government's role in social media has made a positive impact on your community?

Yes

No

Unsure

N/A

8. Do you feel social media has positively impacted the overall processes of county development since its implementation?

Yes

No

9. How frequently do you utilize social media within your personal life?

Never

Once a week

2-3 times a week

4-6 times a week

Daily

10. How often would you say you actively participate in your government's use of social media?

Never

Once a week

2-3 times a week

4-6 times a week

Daily

This survey design helped to determine how storytelling is currently being used in rural communities and how further involvement in storytelling could engage more people in these local areas. While demographics were collected based on the population size of the participant's perspective county, the research did not think it necessary to include additional participant demographics when the survey was sent based on perceptions related to the official's communities.

Lastly, semi-structured telephone interviews were completed with two individuals carrying separate representative roles within a storytelling organization. The interviewees consisted of a communications associate and a director of community engagement who have elevated levels of involvement in using stories and how stories work to actively involve community members across a state. Administering the two interviews allowed for complex questions with a tailored agenda, but they also provided the freedom to jump into other specific insights of the interviewee. This process within the study was to further add data and context to address the research questions while hoping to elaborate on storytelling use in action within communities. While these interviewees reside in the state of West Virginia, this interview was a great sample case of the possibilities of stories themselves and how they can be used universally within government practice.

Definition of key terms:

Local government - refers to the elected officials and administrative officers responsible for managing the affairs of a particular geographic region, such as a city, county, or municipality. Local governments provide essential services to their communities, including public safety, sanitation, infrastructure maintenance, and social services. Local

government officials are elected by the citizens they serve in their region and are held accountable by the public for their actions and decisions.

Rural community participation – refers to the active involvement of individuals and groups within a given community in decisions that affect the community's well-being. This participation aims to ensure that local residents have a voice in shaping their communities and that their needs and desires are included in all realms of the decision-making process. Local community participation enhances the sense of ownership, accountability, and resilience of local development initiatives, all while building trust, social capital, and collective action in the communities.

Data Collection: Sample and Methods

Three main data collection methods were used in the study: comprehensive literature review, in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams, and an online self-completion survey, administered using Qualtrics XM (Experience Management) software program.

The temporal scope of the literature review for the combined areas of storytelling and new age media spans from 2000 to the present day, including over 20 years of published research. Studies within the United States were of focus, rather than a global search, in hopes of excluding differences within the construct in how storytelling and media are used abroad. Scholarly databases were carefully examined, aimed to synthesize knowledge in the field of new age media storytelling and articulate missing links with theory and methodology in rural planning and development. Deep consideration was given to the academic planning discipline domain in which the subject matter falls, even though storytelling is found as a subject matter in many other disciplines. Search terms

were identified using articles defined by designated words and performed across an interdisciplinary high-quality journal database. Other grey literature sources such as Google Scholar and datasets were also used to find examples of similarities and barriers between tools of new age media and storytelling. This integrative review provides a conceptual contribution to the planning field while supporting further research in the area of new age media storytelling, hoping to prove further that more research is needed to remain current and relevant moving forward.

In addition, surveys were conducted to identify key themes and synergies between communities and planning officials. Lastly, interviews gave additional insight into how other entities like the organization are tackling storytelling within their communities and relaying lessons learned on their successes. Interviews were used to explore additional ways organizations have included technology to engage citizens. The semi-structured interview approach provided a more flexible and conversational interviewing style while still allowing for structured data collection.

Procedures and Instruments

The literature review is primarily based on an advanced electronic search of journal articles and books focused on a selective search of keywords or groupings of words: (a) storytelling; (b) new age media; (c) technology and rural communities; and (d) participatory action research and activism using The University of Georgia's library search engine. The search engine allowed access to EBSCO, ERIC, Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, JSTOR Journals, and the UGA GIL-Find Catalog. Peer-review articles in English were conducted, again with a primary focus on the United States. The research was limited to the past 20 years, as technology was more

active worldwide, and various social media platforms began taking shape. The early 2000s was a period that reflected increased usage of digital tools, whereas storytelling came to light. The initial search produced a total of 238 articles, with a much broader focus on storytelling and technology. After reading the abstracts of each piece and reviewing titles and keywords, this research was further reduced to a final forty-one peer-reviewed articles using high-order screening procedures at the evaluation stage. The initial downsizing concentrated on studies that focused solely on storytelling and new age media technology. The search was further narrowed down to only studies that conspicuously had the word “storytelling” or “local communities” on the title, abstract, or within keywords, and this pooled out 117 articles. The articles were decided upon by meeting the following criteria: (a) they focused primarily on community participation using digital storytelling and various forms of technology (b) they described a project that sought to engage local areas. Finally, the remaining 41 articles were thoroughly read, analyzed, and summarized.

The aim was to be as inclusive as possible, whereas studies reviewed were in the context of communities and their entirety using storytelling in some form as an enabler of change, participation, or support. In addition, this research conducted supplementary searches in the reference lists of published reviews, books, and articles to locate relevant research that may have been overlooked in the library’s database. An examination of 41 studies reveals a remarkable growth in research output in the advanced modern-day, as technology and a new age media concept has secured their place in literature.

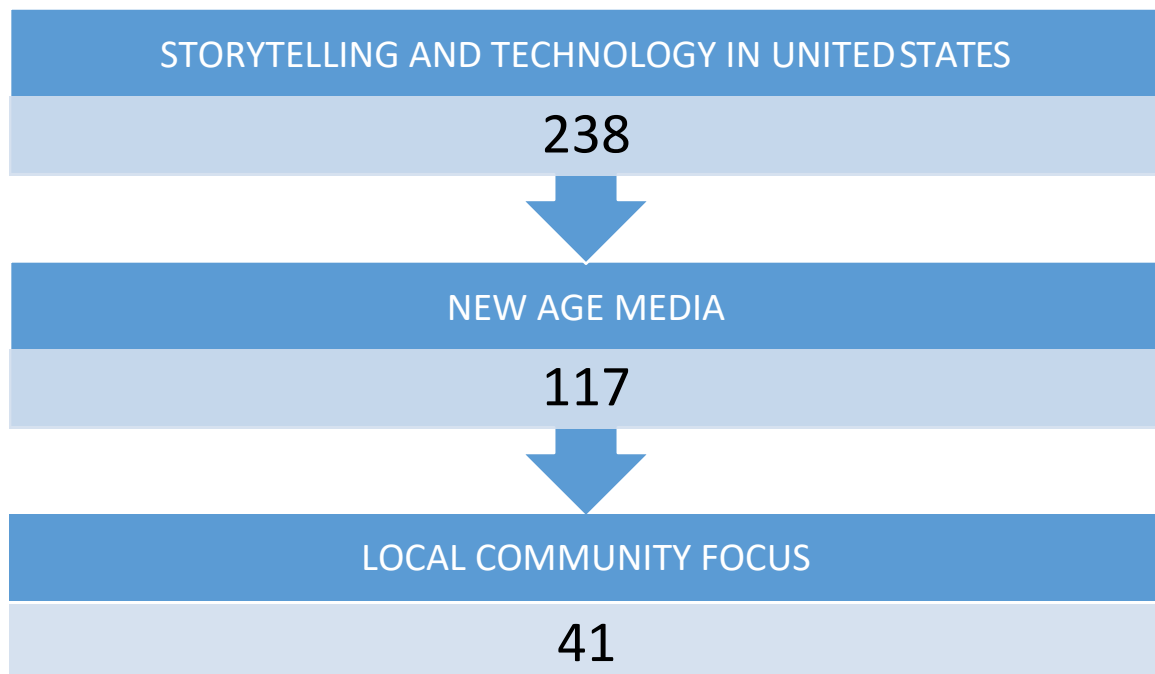


Figure 3.1: Flowchart of the Literature Review Process – Jill Thompson

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two participants from an organization called, The Hub. The semi-structured interview is considered one of the most popular methods in qualitative research that seeks “to discover, explain, and generate ideas/theories about the phenomenon under investigation; (and) to understand and explain social patterns (the “How” questions)” (Hesse-Biber and Leavey 2006, 49). “Semi-structured interviews, as the name infers, follow a baseline of standard questions as a guide but allow for follow-up questions that enable the researcher to delve into a topic and probe multiple insights from study participants” (Ravitch and Carl 2016). With a focus on technology as part of this research, Microsoft Teams software was used to conduct and transcribe the interviews. Due to the distance between participants and the researcher, the internet made the interview possible by additional data for the research. In-person interviews were not feasible, but they were made possible with technology.

“With the rise of technology over the last few decades, communication over distance has become much easier and convenient with almost no end in sight” (Sullivan 2012, 54).

The Hub was a highlight within the research, as this particular organization works within their home state of West Virginia alongside community members to develop positive change within surrounding communities and advocate the changes these communities want to see. This specific area of research was to communicate with others on how people are utilizing storytelling more in their day-to-day and assist in finding elements within how this specific organization operated, hoping to determine how their processes could be transferrable. An initial draft of my questions to the organization, The Hub, can be found in Appendix A. The questions were reiterated through each of the two interviews conducted.

Interviews provided data and context to help further address the research objectives and questions. The perspectives of individuals already a part of an organization which has had much success in the storytelling component were of relevance. The discussions were to build upon themes already discovered throughout the research and identify additional matters that the literature review would benefit from having captured. This research believed that semi-structured interviews were a powerful addition in adding to a baseline of questions the researcher hoped to address. It also allowed for additional conversation flexibility - an authentic storytelling component.

Survey Participant Selection and Data Sources

This research has several aims, one of which is to extract enough information to inform the research and enhance the information received by its viewer. The other is facilitating an experience of knowledge and reflection on the survey participants.

Because state officials are often supreme in representing their select counties, particularly in rural communities, each Georgia State Commissioner of Georgia's 159 counties was selected to pinpoint crucial decision-makers regarding rural planning.

I used the state of Georgia as a select study area, with the understanding that this type of survey could be utilized in any state. However, also with a realization that the data obtained could vary significantly due to opportunities select states are afforded. Due to Georgia holding the second-largest number of counties in the United States at 159, other than the State of Texas with 254, I thought Georgia would be a great state for a case study. The State of Georgia is known for its rural communities and solid bucolic lifestyle throughout many areas. The degree to which the data fluctuates across the United States has the potential to diverge in technology usage; however, this survey can assist in portraying whether the storytelling component is a dominating factor in results. Below are the 159 counties ranked by population size in descending order from 1,054,286 to 1,574. Each county represents a unique mix of communities, with an array of services provided within their local government. The majority of the communities are characterized by having a mayor/council government structure which represent various elected districts.

Counties Surveyed and Population Size

Rank	County	Population
1	Fulton County	1,054,286
2	Gwinnett County	948,505
3	Cobb County	762,500

4	DeKalb County	758,634
5	Chatham County	294,815
6	Clayton County	294,335
7	Cherokee County	262,155
8	Forsyth County	245,754
9	Henry County	236,615
10	Richmond County	205,772
11	Muscogee County	204,366
12	Hall County	201,703
13	Paulding County	165,688
14	Houston County	161,177
15	Bibb County	156,711
16	Columbia County	154,274
17	Coweta County	144,928
18	Douglas County	143,520
19	Clarke County	128,195
20	Carroll County	118,402
21	Fayette County	117,828
22	Lowndes County	117,437
23	Newton County	111,262
24	Bartow County	107,868

25	Whitfield County	103,076
26	Floyd County	98,210
27	Walton County	95,453
28	Rockdale County	92,983
29	Dougherty County	86,825
30	Glynn County	84,373
31	Barrow County	82,138
32	Bulloch County	79,635
33	Jackson County	73,839
34	Troup County	69,483
35	Walker County	67,772
36	Catoosa County	67,579
37	Spalding County	66,722
38	Liberty County	64,334
39	Effingham County	63,448
40	Gordon County	57,274
41	Camden County	54,256
42	Laurens County	49,202
43	Colquitt County	45,800
44	Habersham County	45,767
45	Thomas County	45,669

46	Baldwin County	43,876
47	Bryan County	43,278
48	Coffee County	43,048
49	Polk County	42,692
50	Tift County	41,148
51	Oconee County	41,006
52	Murray County	39,853
53	Ware County	36,084
54	Harris County	34,316
55	Lumpkin County	33,188
56	Pickens County	32,814
57	Lee County	32,547
58	Gilmer County	31,047
59	Wayne County	30,118
60	Madison County	29,906
61	Sumter County	29,690
62	Haralson County	29,685
63	Decatur County	29,020
64	Jones County	28,297
65	White County	27,886
66	Monroe County	27,825

67	Peach County	27,822
68	Upson County	27,424
69	Toombs County	26,956
70	Stephens County	26,641
71	Dawson County	26,202
72	Grady County	26,076
73	Hart County	25,808
74	Fannin County	25,198
75	Butts County	24,950
76	Chattooga County	24,898
77	Burke County	24,231
78	Union County	24,183
79	Franklin County	23,256
80	Tattnall County	23,211
81	Emanuel County	22,739
82	Mitchell County	21,940
83	Putnam County	21,870
84	McDuffie County	21,727
85	Worth County	20,824
86	Meriwether County	20,659
87	Crisp County	20,524

88	Dodge County	20,089
89	Washington County	20,052
90	Morgan County	19,694
91	Pierce County	19,644
92	Elbert County	19,453
93	Pike County	18,754
94	Appling County	18,509
95	Lamar County	18,482
96	Greene County	18,461
97	Berrien County	18,195
98	Brantley County	18,072
99	Banks County	18,061
100	Ben Hill County	17,237
101	Cook County	17,188
102	Rabun County	16,731
103	Long County	16,398
104	Dade County	16,313
105	Brooks County	16,254
106	Jefferson County	15,708
107	Oglethorpe County	14,779
108	Jeff Davis County	14,753

109	Jasper County	14,478
110	Screven County	14,028
111	Telfair County	12,860
112	Bleckley County	12,562
113	Charlton County	12,416
114	Macon County	12,330
115	Towns County	12,300
116	Crawford County	12,159
117	Dooly County	11,546
118	Heard County	11,440
119	McIntosh County	11,291
120	Bacon County	11,163
121	Candler County	10,885
122	Early County	10,813
123	Evans County	10,761
124	Pulaski County	10,001
125	Lanier County	9,874
126	Wilkes County	9,643
127	Irwin County	9,615
128	Chattahoochee County	9,533
129	Johnson County	9,272

130	Seminole County	9,108
131	Terrell County	9,102
132	Wilkinson County	8,931
133	Turner County	8,856
134	Wilcox County	8,841
135	Montgomery County	8,701
136	Jenkins County	8,693
137	Hancock County	8,652
138	Atkinson County	8,269
139	Twiggs County	8,034
140	Taylor County	7,857
141	Lincoln County	7,686
142	Wheeler County	7,568
143	Marion County	7,563
144	Clinch County	6,737
145	Randolph County	6,503
146	Treutlen County	6,410
147	Miller County	5,984
148	Talbot County	5,837
149	Calhoun County	5,668
150	Stewart County	5,347

151	Warren County	5,218
152	Schley County	4,622
153	Echols County	3,691
154	Baker County	2,928
155	Glascock County	2,903
156	Clay County	2,883
157	Webster County	2,372
158	Quitman County	2,249
159	Taliaferro County	1,574

Figure 3.2: 159 Georgia Counties Sorted by Population from Largest to Smallest. Data Obtained from the 2021 American Community Survey. United States Census Bureau. 5-Year Estimates. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Office. Web. 20 February 2023. <http://www.census.gov/>.

Source: https://www.georgia-demographics.com/counties_by_population

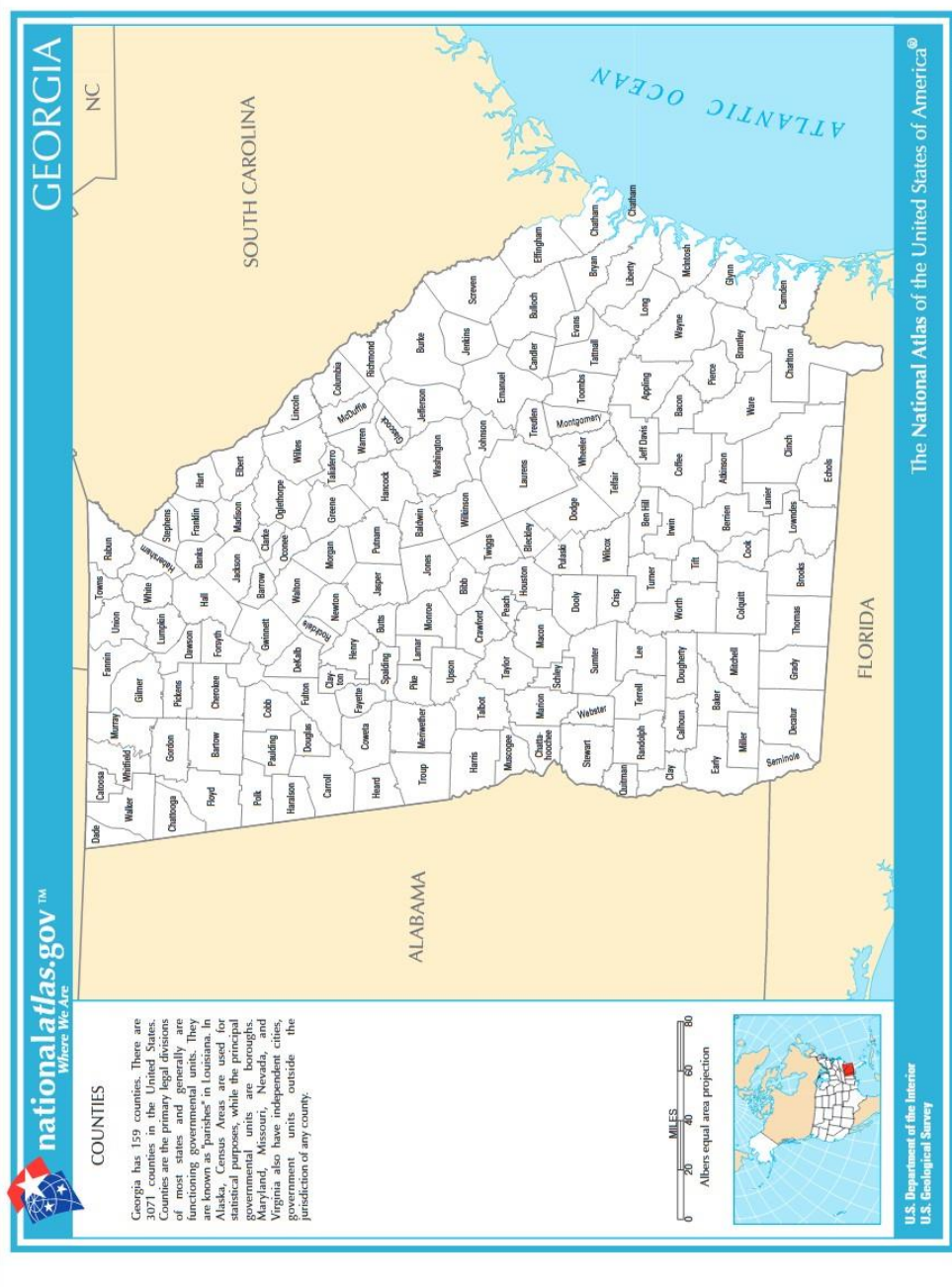


Figure 3.3: State of Georgia National Placement

Source: <https://gisgeography.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Georgia-Map-County.pdf>

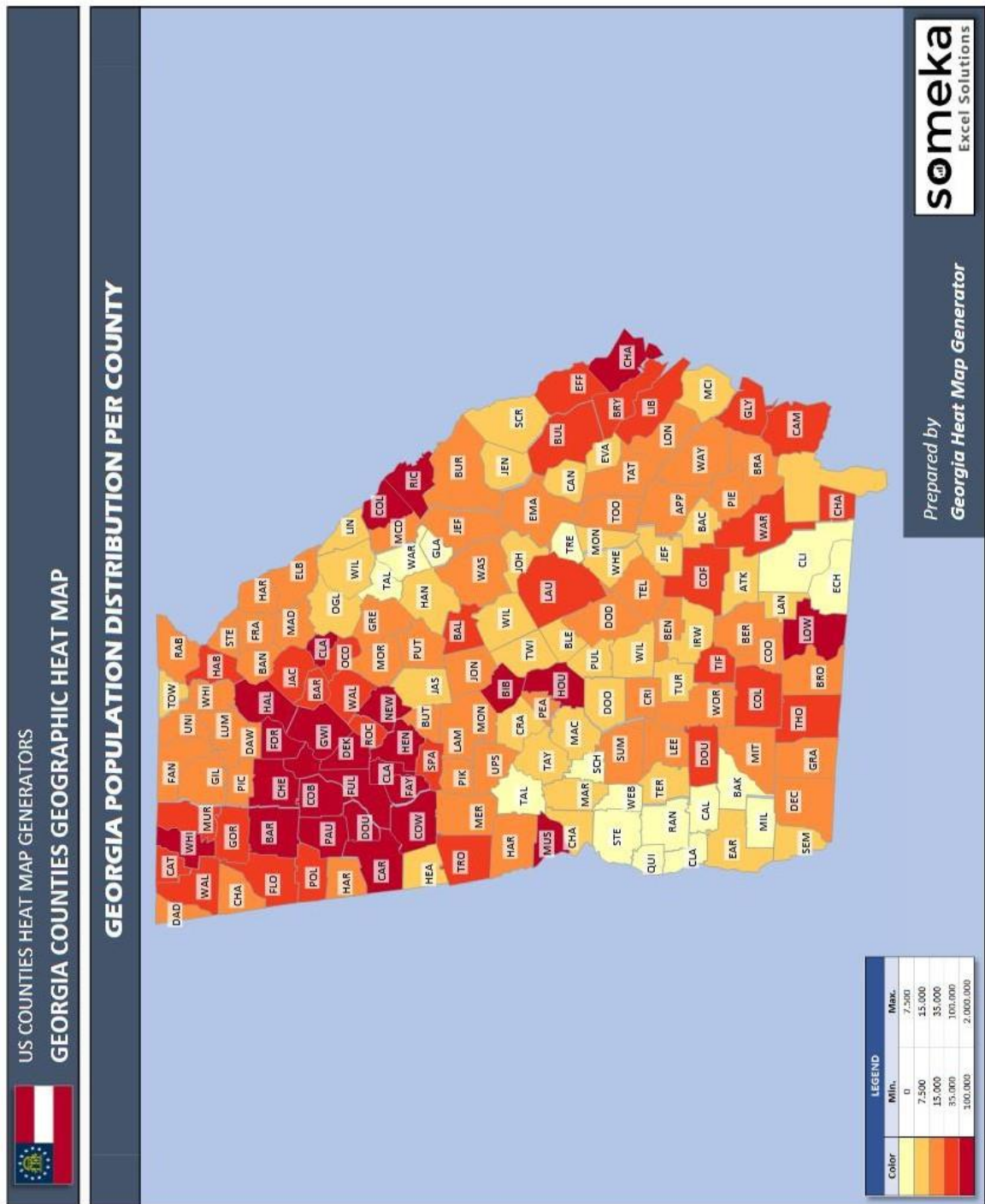


Figure 3.4: Georgia Counties Geographic Heat Map Based on Population

Source: https://www.someka.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Georgia_Population-Map_County.pdf

Case Study: Overview

Several case studies were also observed using stories to drive increased awareness and illuminate ideas consistent with the research. “Case studies have been used in varied investigations, particularly in sociological studies, but increasingly, in instruction” (Stake 1995). With a systematic approach, case study research can prove to be a successful application to research and an informative element of the chosen qualitative research methodologies. “Case study methods are often applied when analyzing complex processes” (Creswell and Poth 2017). This type of method understands the motivations behind seeking change and involves the analysis of a case or cases of contemporary real-life events. The rationale for the select case study reviews rests on the premise that storytelling may have value as a qualitative research method used in the context of local planning with heavy rural community impact.

My method of data collection for the case studies was two-fold a) I conducted two interviews with individuals who engaged in similar type cases within rural communities b) I reviewed two theoretical concept cases focusing on similarities in theory and practice. From there, I mined the information received to determine the motivation for participation and other successful strategies to engage and increase community interaction.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND LIMITATIONS

Data Analysis

Whether qualitative or quantitative, data collection is a vital component in any area of research. This chapter sets out the findings of a qualitative study on how storytelling can play a critical role in communities both through local government's use and with the general public. Qualitative data analysis is "the intentional, systematic scrutiny of data at various stages and moments throughout the research process" (Ravitch and Carl 2016, 217). The goal of this data collection process aims to gather significant information that can be used for analysis, research, or decision-making purposes moving forward. After researching various data, raw research was analyzed and interpreted to give meaning and validity to the study. In this case, data analysis involves transcription of a verbal interview, categorizing and summarizing survey data, and verifying the data to ensure reliability. Lastly, this study's analysis includes delivering and reporting those results.

To answer the proposed research questions through this qualitative research analysis, common themes were sought in the literature, interviews, and through textual data. The subject matter was derived using an inductive process of thematic analysis of the research data. Survey data was also analyzed using coding through Qualtrics XM software to determine themes throughout survey responses. "Data analysis is iterative and recursive; data analysis begins as soon as the first datum is collected and continues throughout the study" (Ravitch and Carl 2016). There are often challenges with qualitative analysis, in

which the identification of patterns in data and the presentation of them needs to be offered in a practical and understood framework. However, this research has allowed for easily identifiable topics based on analysis of the responses.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, an hour each in length, were also conducted in the research process. Using Microsoft Teams, a cloud-based team collaboration software, a baseline of standard questions were asked of two leaders of a West Virginia community development project called, The Hub. Conference service software allowed for transcription of those being interviewed and offered recording services for the length of the interview. Teams made virtual communication possible. Each interview was recorded only after given verbal consent from each interviewee.

This study discovered the Hub while investigating rural community case studies of those currently utilizing storytelling to drive community participation. While storytelling is mainly possible through grants for this non-profit organization, The Hub was a remarkable success story in how storytelling increases participation efforts of inclusivity throughout a state. To convey the most precise experiences from storytelling and how organizations utilized such a tool, a number of direct finds are illustrated through verbatim quotes and repeated words of importance.

"We believe when West Virginians leverage the opportunities and tools they need to make positive change, they create a transformational impact in their communities."

- Executive Director, The Hub

Survey

The sampling survey included local government, which initially consisted of a formulated data set of 814 county officials throughout the state of Georgia, the total number of those most recently included in the Association County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG) contact list. These officials, represented by the state, included: mayors, chairs, vice-chairs, councilors, and commissioners. The list was compiled with the assistance of the ACCG for accuracy and further verification. Data was then grouped in a spreadsheet by commissioner title, name, position held, their perspective county, phone, email, and local county address. All emails were verified, confirming their active status after distribution, which gave a final number of 733 emails for the sample size in participation. Qualtrics XM survey tool was used to anonymously disperse survey links to every elected state official. Qualtrics XM is a cloud-based software platform that helped in analyzing respondents' feedback. Although the researcher was aware of those survey participants through the initial housing of the data, a link was provided in the initial distribution of the surveys, which allowed for those who completed the survey to remain anonymous. The initial survey analysis included the inaccuracy of incomplete survey participants in the report. This means that while participants may have answered survey questions, those same participants did not answer all of the questions provided or could have skipped questions altogether. Regardless, these results were still worth sharing, as a few more participants answered the initial questions about their communities' preference for park A or park B. Results of those findings are shown in Figure 4.2 from the survey's first question, consisting of a hypothetical example of which park 115 county officials felt their local community would best respond to.

#	Field	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Park A: On the corner of Oak and Pine Street, a new community park has opened for public use. The community is free to use the space from the hours of 8 am-7 pm. There will be areas for games such as: basketball, tennis, and pickleball. In addition, there will be trails for walking, bike paths, and ample seating. Thank you and hope you enjoy this new addition.	0.98	0.05	0.00	63
2	Park B: After much time and effort we are pleased to hear that Linda and Bill Jones celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary Saturday at the recently opened park on Oak and Pine Street. The couple was thrilled to hold an event at the wonderful outdoor space, which just so happened to be built in the very same spot as their first date. The park makes a great location for gatherings because of its open areas, ample parking, and portico for events. There are multiple courts for basketball, tennis, and pickleball. Also, many trails have been manicured around the park's perimeter for biking and strolls. We hope the community continues to utilize this new park as a place for gathering and fun. Come out and enjoy this great addition to the community, which is open from 8 am-7 pm.	0.97	0.06	0.00	52

Table 4.2: Survey Results from Adoption of New Age Media Within the State of Georgia - Using Qualtrics XM - Jill Thompson

Incomplete data were eliminated in the final overall analysis after the survey's closing by working with information exported through .csv format and eliminating <100% data progress completion from Excel. Any incomplete question was denoted as <100% completion of a survey in its entirety down a column with a subheading labeled, unfinished. Each value within the responses was then separated by its own column and row and contained choice text to easily decipher the data. The analysis found that 5 surveys fell under the incomplete category, and the researcher determined to delete these responses for accuracy in the final results. The remaining 110 survey participants were then analyzed for completion at 100%, which completed the survey representing their selective county. All the individual research participants did hold an official county title elected by their states.

County Official's Assumption of Park Preference of Their Communities

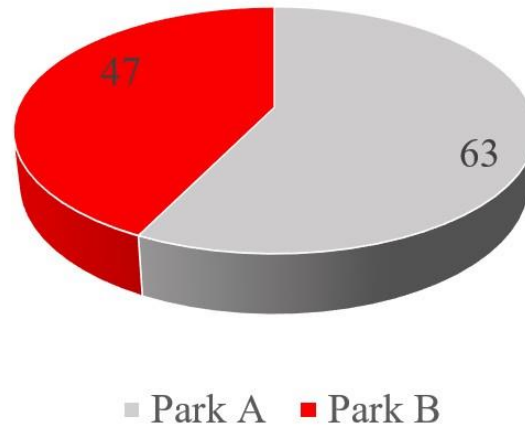


Figure 4.3: County Official's Assumption of Park Preference - Complete Survey

Participants - Excel - Jill Thompson

After deducing the participants as incomplete, it was found that 63 out of 110 participants selected the answer of Park A. The remaining 47 participants chose Park B. These findings are exceptional to note for two reasons 1) the heavier storytelling component received close to immediate satisfaction from those participants taking the survey and mimicked what those individuals felt best represented their communities, *and* 2) a new concept for local government with the use of storytelling had close to half of the survey participants accepting a storytelling component as a factor to what they felt was best or represented their community. This better-than-average effect is statistically substantial evidence of storytelling's impact on local government. "Standard" 0.05 level is often linked to Sir R. A. Fisher. Wherein "the value for which $P=0.05$, or 1 in 20, is 1.96 or nearly 2. It is convenient to consider this point as a limit in judging whether a

deviation should be considered significant. Deviations exceeding twice the standard deviation are thus formally regarded as significant” (Anderson 2013). The present study complements this idea that storytelling has a nearly “above average” ability rather than below-median ability based on the most representative exemplar. The storytelling results showed great significance with a standard deviation between 0.05-0.06, resulting in a favorable statistical variation. Storytelling appears to be a promising choice in displaying interest and desire for the study’s research objective.

Further analysis showed that while Park A did have a slight lead in favorability, Park B seemed more suitable to those communities with a smaller population size of less than 30,000. This is remarkably interesting, as the personal details of storytelling often favor local settings. Again, particularly appealing to the research, as this type of component is being validated as a great tool in local community participation and engagement.

Park A: On the corner of Oak and Pine Street, a new community park has opened for public use. The community is free to use the space from the hours of 8 am-7 pm. There will be areas for games such as: basketball, tennis, and pickleball. In addition, there will be trails for walking, bike paths, and ample seating. Thank you and hope you enjoy this new addition.

Park B: After much time and effort we are pleased to hear that Linda and Bill Jones celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary Saturday at the recently opened park on Oak and Pine Street. The couple was thrilled to hold an event at the wonderful outdoor space, which just so happened to be built in the very same spot as their first date. The park makes a great location for gatherings because of its open areas, ample parking, and portico for events. There are multiple courts for basketball, tennis, and pickleball. Also, many trails have been manicured around the park's perimeter for biking and strolls. We hope the community continues to utilize this new park as a place for gathering and fun. Come out and enjoy this great addition to the community, which is open from 8 am-7 pm.

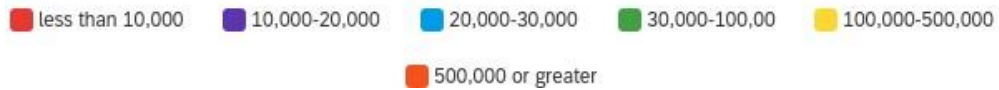
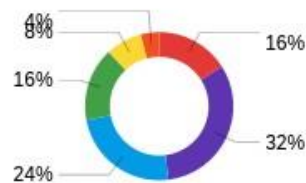
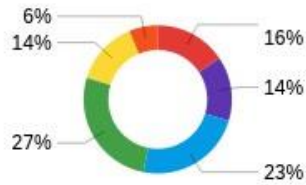


Figure 4.4: Preference of Park A or B Based on County Population Size - Qualtrics XM -

- Jill Thompson

While empirical research suggests that statistical procedures eliminate interferences of collected data, the probability of a factual finding should not solely rely on the statistical significance of a single discovery or interpretation. However, the response rates in the storytelling component hold true to the research question that storytelling is highly preferred and displays great performance in preference from those within local community settings.

How Much Does Feedback From Social Media Impact Your Decision-Making in County Development?

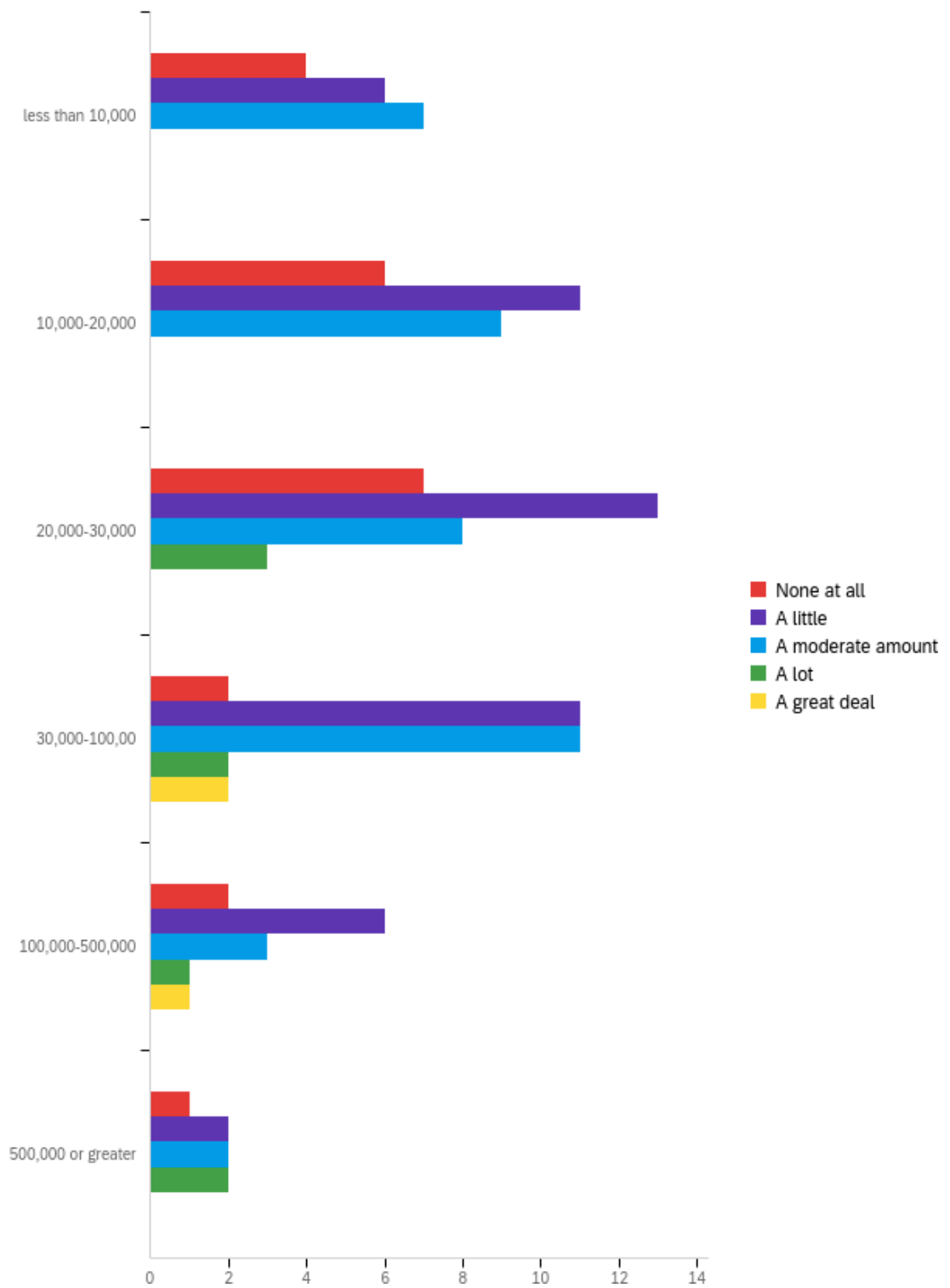


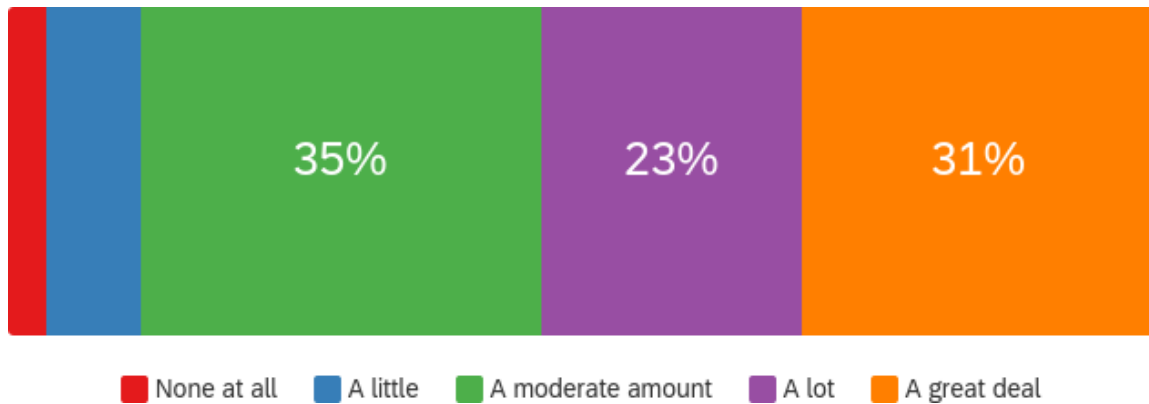
Figure 4.5: Social Media Impact on Decision-Making - Qualtrics XM - Jill Thompson

Figure 4.5 is fascinating, as it depicts feedback and input used by officials of community members. The object was to examine the local government's opinion as to whether or not they feel their government is successfully using a community response in relation to decision-making. While the question did not specify the platform's specific use of government-related services, nor did it ask if various platforms were part of the official's office use, it gives a general idea on how decisions are included by its citizens in a county's decision-making. It also displays the belief that local government has seemingly embraced technology platforms into their processes in some capacity. Whereas rural areas seem more prone to not including social media activity as much as their city counterparts, this study continues to validate new age media impact as a two-way communication tool with the general public.

Are you knowledgeable in the various types of social media that your county government utilizes to better inform your local community?

Red = 3% (4 responses)
 Blue = 8% (10 responses)
 Green = 35% (43 responses)
 Purple = 23% (28 responses)
 Orange = 31% (38 responses)

Based on all survey participants.



Field	less than 10,000	10,000-20,000	20,000-30,000	30,000-100,00	100,000-500,000	500,000 or greater	Total
None at all	25.00% 1	75.00% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	4
A little	10.00% 1	40.00% 4	30.00% 3	10.00% 1	10.00% 1	0.00% 0	10
A moderate amount	13.95% 6	18.60% 8	34.88% 15	23.26% 10	6.98% 3	2.33% 1	43
A lot	14.29% 4	17.86% 5	28.57% 8	17.86% 5	14.29% 4	7.14% 2	28
A great deal	15.79% 6	15.79% 6	13.16% 5	31.58% 12	13.16% 5	10.53% 4	38

Figure 4.6: Knowledge of County Government’s Social Media Use - Qualtrics XM - Jill Thompson

Awareness of ubiquitous elements in technology’s offerings allow governments to find ways to improve. Without knowledge of what types of platforms any given local government is administering, participation is hindered due to lack of resource awareness and being able to actively engage in the present day.

Has There Been an Overall Increase in Community Participation Since Your County Government's Social Media Use?



Figure 4.7: Social Media and Community Participation Survey Results - Qualtrics

XM - Jill Thompson

Figure 4.7 above may be one of the most important examples of the survey results. It depicts community participation within government processes, and the data suggests that

technology platforms have aided that participatory component. Government is one of the biggest statistical producers, which means it could also be one of the most significant influences and means of change. When thinking of ways storytelling and new age media can connect the government and its citizens, the records show possibilities to connect versus divide are conceivable. This enhanced way government can communicate with its citizens provides more accessible avenues for the receiving and disbursement of information and access to the government's vital services. Local areas can emerge more robust than ever, and hold steady together with neighboring urban areas. This study's suggested tools as a game-changer of participation can radicalize and alter government-citizen relationships.

Has the County Government's Role in Social Media Made a Postive Impact Within Your Community?



Figure 4.8: Social Media Impact Within Communities - Qualtrics XM - Jill Thompson

Participating officials were found to differ in impact regarding social media’s effects within their smaller communities; however, all counties who participated in the survey showed that social media has had positive impacts. Larger counties reported to have had

as much as an 85% implied impact using social media. That is a profound example of social media's positive impact on local government (Figure 4.8).

Do You Feel Social Media Has Had a Positive Impact on the Overall Processes of County Development Since its Implementation?

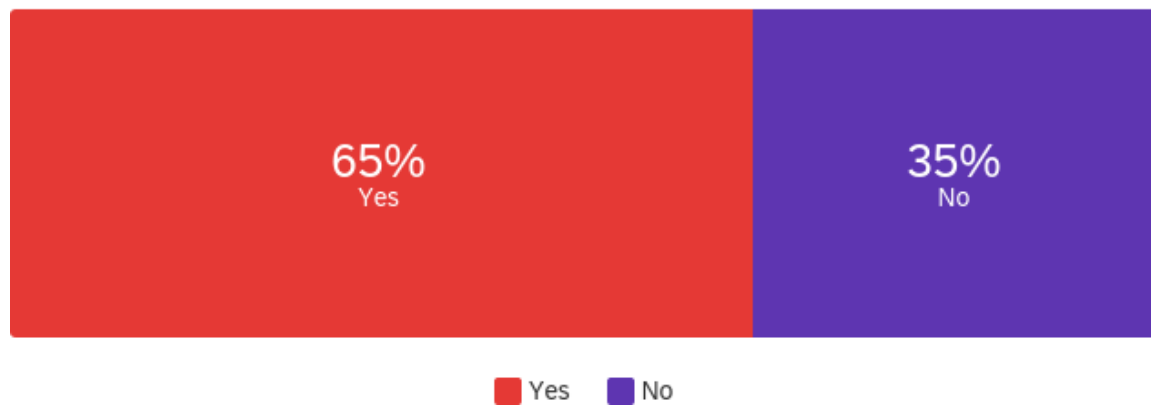


Figure 4.9: Social Media Impact on County Development Processes - Qualtrics XM - Jill Thompson

Figure 4.9 suggests not only has social media had a positive impact on various communities, but the respondents believe the influence social media has had also plays a tremendous part in county development. While the respondents act as sole representatives of their counties in this study, the findings share some truth in the positive presence of technology within government practices. The above results between Figure 4.8 and Figure 4.9 indicate a clear argument for including technology platforms in some capacity from government agencies to positively impact governmental processes. Embracing technology does hold some validity to creating a positive government presence. Exploring alternative platforms, with the addition of storytelling, may counterbalance any adverse effects of state agencies while targeting citizen input for more extensive audience participation.

Overall, the above findings confirm that the majority of participating officials believe that social media plays a part in the county government process, with the vast majority agreeing that technology makes for a more positive environment and awareness of its users. Social media in this survey is indicated as a two-way communication tool with its citizens. Think of the power of the results if storytelling was harnessed in conjunction with what is already being utilized.

Case Study: Social Media for Development

This case study highlighted the development of digital technologies, such as social media, and guidelines associated with their use in local government. I found the select case study relevant as technology is used to develop civic engagement, whereas storytelling is used to increase participatory results. Roengtam (2021) introduces social media as a tool that might boost the government's capacity for engagement. It has been mentioned in much of the study's research that "social media is found to be an effective tool for improving citizens' trust in government through transparency" (Krah and Mertens 2020, 206).

Three significant findings stemmed from the case study research 1) social media can build interactive features that increase citizen collaboration with their government, 2) citizens are encouraged to listen to public demands based on social media tools used by their local governments, and 3) social media influences citizens and allows for an increase in both public engagement and trust. "The adoption of social media uses brought collaborative nature between government and citizens" (Roengtam 2021). Social media was seen as a gap eliminator between those within society and their government. The government benefitted from social media use with a noticeable uptick in

participation and collaboration, strengthening public relations. “The importance of citizen engagement, understood as the participation of citizens in political and social issues is considered essential for democracy” (Roengtam 2021).

The challenge with this case study was providing the technology needed to manage the social interaction among community members. There were also adequate skills in computer literacy required to interpret local government social media initiatives. Furthermore, many critics presented their concerns to the case, in that social media use was inadequate in local intervention because of the number of social media platforms available and more than likely used simultaneously within given societies. In addition, knowledge and understanding of political activities needed to be present for accuracy in a citizen’s stance. Oftentimes, citizens cannot analyze and defend opinions due to their ignorance of a democratic process. “Nonetheless, with the growth of social media, “traditional” media still play an essential role in raising the social media visibility of an organization” (Roengtam 2021). The study also expressed the caution in avoiding benefitting individuals using social media for personal gain in technology’s use.

Study results signified social media as a tool used for development in operating systems in which the application provided increased efficiency of local government organizations. “Social media refers to the activities, practices, and behaviours among people involved and gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using various media” (Roengtam 2021). Ample opportunities can be archived in social media use. The case study’s theoretical review mentioned that social media is used as a tool for community-based partnerships that could facilitate and engage the local public. In addition, social media could be viewed as a new extensive engagement mechanism

allowing for increased participation in the 21st century. Social media could provide alternative public spaces and e-government services, making for a broader means of engagement and efficiency. “Indeed, Web 2.0 and social media are now considered part of participative citizens to the government in providing public service and information” (Roengtam 2021, 3).

The case study identified methods using qualitative research. Three municipalities were of focus using interviews, focus groups, content analysis of before and after social media use in local government, and interpretation of data with theories and concepts. A proposal of a SOUP model will follow, which presents development of a specific model following data collection: sharing, openness, uniqueness, and partnership.

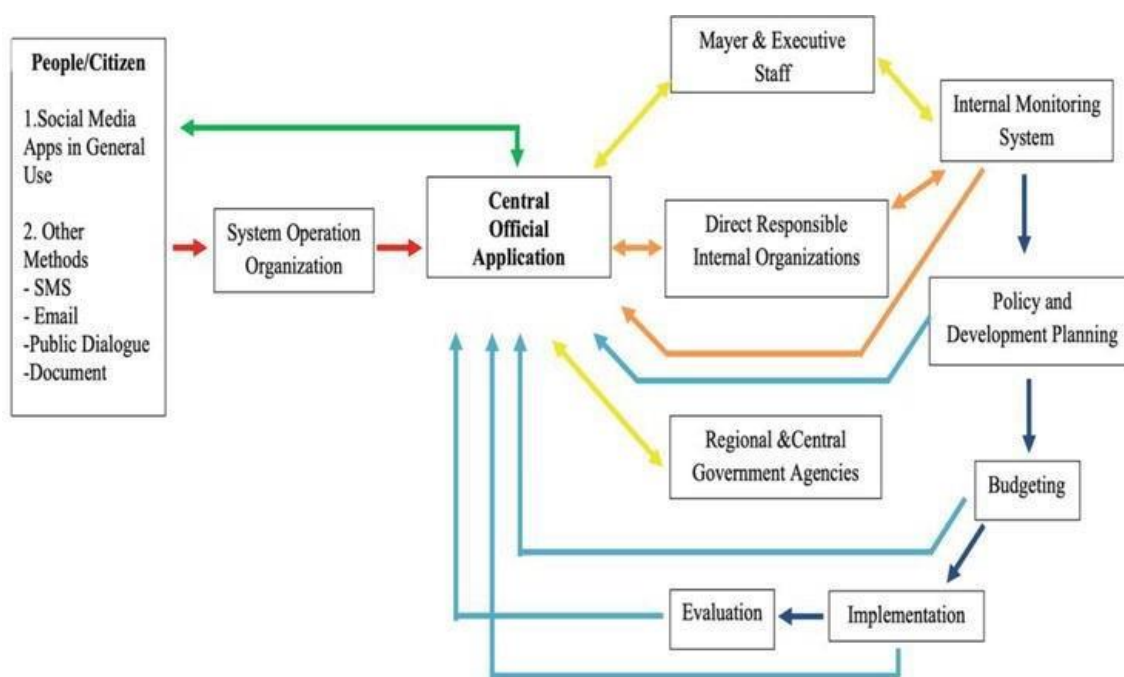


Figure 4.10: Development Model for Using Social Media to Promote Civic Responsibility and Local Governance (SOUP Model).

Source: <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/77327>

The SOUP model illustrates how social media allows for a closer connection between people and municipalities. Everyday citizens are provided the same information as their local government. Plus, people are able to witness information transparency, holding officials accountable at every stage in the administrative process. “This operation will result in making the municipality and the people can be closer to each other. It will contribute to building partnership, which is one of the critical features of local governance” (Roengtam 2021, 7).

The model presented in the case study shows how social media can increase local government efficiency by providing an avenue to promote civic engagement. With the models, multiple social media applications can be presented; the study does not dictate the use of a single platform such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, etcetera. “The data analysis showed that the SOUP has some qualifications that enable municipalities to increase their capacity for action in the promotion of the participation of citizens” (Roengtam 2021, 10). “Referring to the people who own the story, they will know that what they proposed was met with some degree of response from the municipality” (Roengtam 2021, 11).

The performance from the proposed SOUP model is still needed for improvements and to become more utilized in the information it receives from its citizens. Laws and regulations must be heavily addressed for how the model also deters from common bureaucratic practice. However, if an internal management system is efficiently established, the SOUP model could become a regulatory tool for the use of social media.

Summary of Findings

While findings show that technology engages in planning, more is needed to know about the decisions made to represent rural communities. There also needs to be comparative tools to show the difference in the degree of citizen engagement from how stories are told and from which stories are selected. In addition, clear direction needs to address those platforms made public and how such interaction are recorded and deciphered within public-planning agendas.

Research findings indicate substantial gaps and areas for improvement in the local government currently uses social media and its impact on its citizens. However, we know through this research that storytelling makes a difference in people's lives, and many rural areas use storytelling alone as a means to connect. "Rural communities have used storytelling to convey the value of assets that are often overlooked in provincial development discourse, as well as intangible resources like a cultural heritage that are difficult to measure quantitatively" (Lowery et al. 2020, 6).

"Research indicates that citizens who engage online with government agencies and utilize their website content demonstrate higher rates of civic engagement and interactive participation in community affairs, than do citizens who are not accessing government via online channels" (Kang and Gearhart, 2010). It is important to make changes to serve citizens in a way that provides a storytelling opportunity and then gathers current data to make more informed decisions. Additionally, qualitative performance measures should be denoted, as the overall result could assist in displaying effective measures in new age media performance and transparency.

The problem with today's agenda focuses little on participation in the process, partly because they do not know how or have the means to be participatory. Policymakers tend to interpret scenarios into what they feel is best or based on their narratives, hoping they make the best judgments for the greater good. This ineffective authoritative manner fails to acknowledge principal issues and can be dangerous in overlooking crucial scenarios. Local residents are central to articulating the strategies government should implement if participation in the goal the local government defines are to be met.

Many other state officials could benefit from this study. The findings prove that communities which take the initiative to become involved, and those counties committed to promoting time and resources using the right tools, can benefit from a facet of areas within the planning of rural regions. This analysis found technological innovation, along with storytelling, changed the overall effectiveness and goodwill of those regarding planning within their communities. The analysis also concluded that a combination approach enhances the feelings of involvement. Appropriately applied, technology can lead to significant development with steadfast growth in areas, all while creating a balanced atmosphere. Technology can be used in lieu of dated awareness methods, developing and disseminating compelling narratives that articulate the needs of rural community planning and its members. This, in turn, can garner widespread support within the community consisting of both citizens and policymakers.

While various aspects often define a relationship between people and place, this research helps validate that one of the most valuable tools in establishing place is within community storytelling. Validity, in a general sense, is based on the execution of what is

being proposed and presented. From the qualitative research approach addressed in this study, I can affirm that the findings are all credible.

An analysis of search results for storytelling, new age media, and community participation lacked on using the powerful tool of storytelling in the planning process of local government. Among references of all identified papers, storytelling was used for communication efforts and is actively promoted along with media use; however, there needs to be more conceptualization of storytelling in rural planning and offer existence on a large scale within academics. Thus, it appears only necessary to research storytelling further in the planning field and help define markers for which storytelling influences others in a participatory manner. In addition, little was captured regarding demographics within the survey dispersed to county officials. The research, in hindsight, could have benefitted from more inclusive data in knowing the ages of those county officials being surveyed among other factors such as gender identity, race, and education background. It was determined after the fact that more robust personal information could have kept the participants unanimous while adding to the weight of why those participants may have chosen the answer they selected. For example, the question of how often they participated in personal social media use could be heavily weighted on generational differences.

Limitations

As with any study, the findings through the various methods and data collection must be overseen with sensitivity to the study's objectives. Though the survey and interviews covered some ground base on accessibility, trends, and approach, increasing participation in the planning process is likely to improve with the successful implementation of local

government by utilizing aspects of storytelling with varying degrees of technology assistance. Furthermore, there is no clear indication that local governments would use tools given to them if provided. In addition, there is no reference to which platforms counties are currently using, making it hard to account for the impacts of each or what platform proves or may not prove to be the most advantageous. Different social media channels can be used to achieve various purposes; Counties must be familiar with their audience to know which social media platforms can reach their citizens and drive traffic, amplifying increased participation to their government sites. The one size fits all should never be considered when known diversity exists.

Suppose communities were given the proper researched tool to participate. In that case, an additional challenge with the planning issue is the dissemination of technology use, a crucial component in allocating resources for social media management and usage of storytelling to non-expert audiences. Meanwhile, it is still being determined whether those counties that use social media had policies in place during its infancy stages or if the use of social media within their perspective communities formulated gradually over time. Nor do we know if a survey for citizen input was received in each of the counties' implementation of their social media strategies, further limiting our knowledge of addressing citizens in the importance of which communities should be included in overall governmental processes of transparency and understanding. Also, if the research method aims to increase the capacity to be more successful and increase participation in rural planning, then the stories told must be expressed in a way that is easy to comprehend and creates a passion for the end user. Those in communities' willingness to participate is amplified. The nature of learning with stories is made achievable through creative ways

in which technology can improve alienated terminology, along with transparency in all government practices. Increased participation can be made possible by encompassing additional imagery, diverse languages, music, etcetera, to capture a wider audience.

The preparation of this paper is based on the number of selected publications of relevant terms. Thus, beyond the survey, there could have been more field data analyzed or actual technological innovation established for this research. In addition, although surveys were dispersed across the entire state of Georgia to county officials and in-depth interviews were used to gain insight of an organization that deals strictly with storytelling at the forefront, there is still an element of bias in the overall findings toward whether or not storytelling benefits society based on someone else's dealings in its portrayal. In addition, it is only assumed that every survey participant answered the survey question truthfully, and those who claimed social media has aided in their communities have implemented the initiatives successfully. Also, the study relies on self-reported data, which should make note that it is possible that the survey respondents may have over-emphasized the benefits of their own counties' effectiveness in utilizing social media and under-emphasized the positive effect it has had on its citizens. It is likely that community members could have a unique perspective on the local government's use of storytelling and technology use, whereas the overall impact of its benefits (or lack thereof) would have provided a different type of report.

Also, dispersing the survey to a single state within the United States limits the study size and variation across the nation. The scope of the study size is defined in this capacity, as further research could explore the potential barriers, obstacles, or successes

from technology and storytelling use within various community sizes throughout the country.

Much of the survey data was relatively concise, with little room for increased understanding of the local government's personal experience with storytelling. A thorough look into local governments' new age media use would help provide an account of current practices and further understanding of their impacts; it would also help elaborate on the challenges and risks that local governments may face when adopting modern practices. The survey of the study relied on self-reported data of those research participants. Self-reported surveys also run the risks of incompleteness or participants opting out before the process even begins.

Lastly, while interviews focused on individuals with ample experience in the storytelling realm, interviewees were positively influenced by mostly success stories. Due to the progressive impacts of their organization, these interviewees also developed biases toward their work. Additionally, the two interviewees, deeply knowledgeable in their processes, did not work directly with local governments on deliveries of storytelling. Most of the stories they told presented themselves through external organizations and were harbored through the use of grants. In this respect, the interviews did not provide an in-depth look at citizens and their individual experiences through local government engagement and interaction. Instead, findings provided only important records of the organization's work and those citizens they have impacted. Also, additional interviews could have been obtained to understand the key impacts storytelling has had on people's lives beyond the role of The Hub.

CHAPTER 5

FUTURE RESEARCH

Suggestions for Future Research

Technology is also ever-evolving, and the pace of innovation is not just accelerating ever so slightly but exponentially. It is crucial to highlight the importance of relevance and remaining up to date with current trends and best practices to facilitate communities toward a path to a robust and successful planning future. The problem may arise in whether or not people themselves can compete with technology's speed in advancement. For now, improving tools like storytelling that work to increase the participation factor of local government organizations can harness the momentum to remain current. Below in Figure 5.1, a practical but concrete development model in innovative planning is addressed. Storytelling in the proposed depiction ultimately enables municipalities to further enhance community well-being by delivering services to residents. This collaborative engagement uses both community and technology in different ways, hoping people and technology-based mechanisms complement one another.

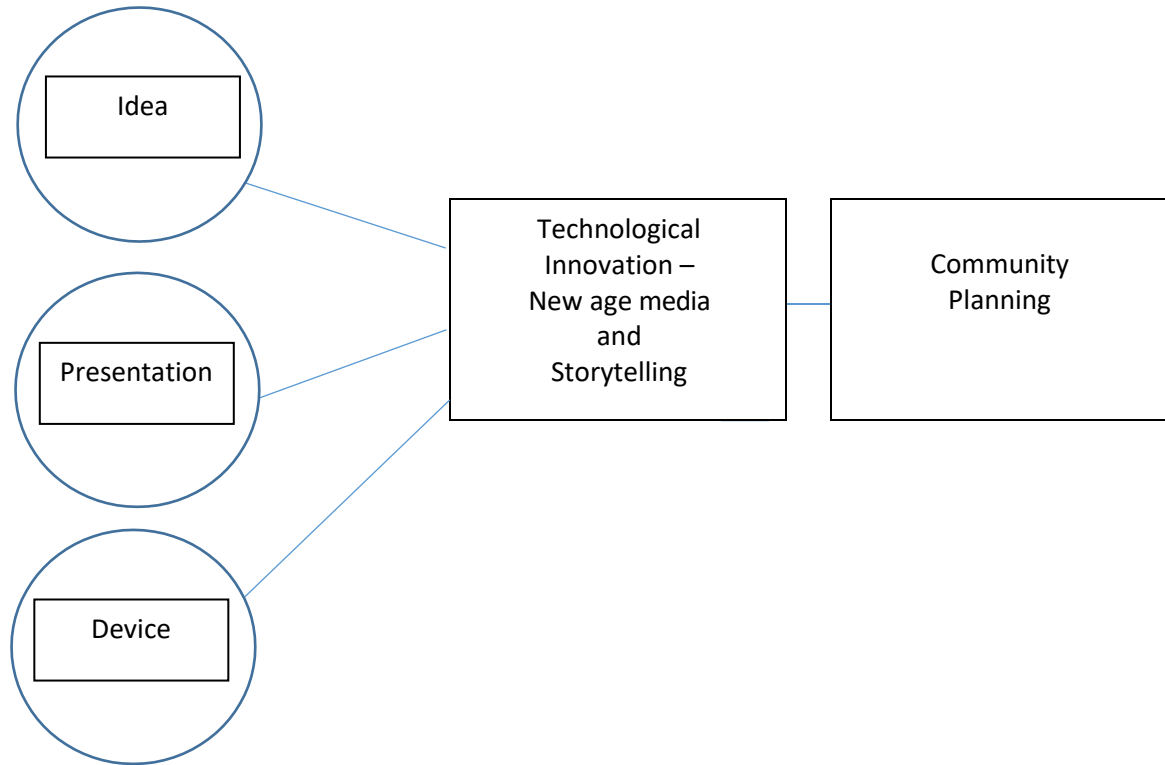


Figure 5.1: Research Model (An Alternative Model Developed That Calls for New Ways of Linking Knowledge and Action for Rural Planning Processes)

The design for the proposed research model suggests the following:

- **Proposition 1:** The new idea of technological innovation and storytelling impacts community planning.
- **Proposition 2:** The method of how technological innovation and storytelling and how it is applied impacts community planning.
- **Proposition 3:** The device and form of technological innovation and storytelling impacts community planning.

These propositions are important to consider. First, new age media can work with storytelling tools to provide local activism and strengthen a network effect, encouraging others in local communities to get involved. Secondly, the overall process of the combined tools of new age media storytelling provides an improved space within communities of both local government and citizens. Citizens need government capacities, and governments need their citizens for any successful implementation. Traditional and new forms of dialog are addressed when considering storytelling in local engagement. Face-to-face interaction and bridging the distance gap in those who want to participate deserve attention and reflection as a political possibility in everyday local government.

Future research into the monitoring of participation in planning is needed to build on the findings measuring the influence technological innovation and storytelling have on the participation involvement amongst rural communities. “Potential research would use the storytelling approach as an alternative to, or to complement other more conventional qualitative research methods, to investigate public perceptions of the issues at stake, and to potentially develop a storytelling intervention to improve understanding and behaviors” (McCall et al. 2019, 3). A more comprehensive understanding of the disconnect between storytelling and technology use within local government may provide a more accurate overview of factors hindering its usefulness and ways of driving its adoption.

Storytelling has proven to be highly effective, but this tool is still just one component in the entire system of how local government can assist in further representing its people. While storytelling may not be the primary vehicle toward complete community success,

we know from this study that it is a sure avenue to help motivate and engage others and facilitate the much-needed interaction between government and citizens. Trust-based relationships ensure that policies and the parties' needs are met, ultimately steering impact.

The study's literature review identified gaps in our current knowledge of the combination approach to storytelling within local government. There is extremely little on how storytelling is used to increase participation efforts in local policies. However, the present study found that storytelling is intermixed within our everyday and local government is using media in ways that can amplify their storytelling focus in hopes of driving success within rural areas. This research concentrated more on American policies, but there is evidence of how others use storytelling abroad. Engaging in the study of other regions of the world may yield more insight into the challenges America faces than what the current research discovered.

A larger-scale representation of all states and their local representatives could provide information to the researcher on the factors contributing and hindering the use of new age media storytelling. This could further assist in addressing barriers currently in the way of adopting various storytelling elements. Lastly, it is recommended that an in-depth case study be developed, including storytelling's use within all government, local and national, to raise awareness of storytelling's potential and how to implement future initiatives tailored to its understanding. Pilot studies could be implemented and evaluated to guide local governments in new age media best practices, adding community knowledge to those practices that are already in existence.

In exercise, storytelling as a tool can harness the power of new age media to include heavy engagement within rural communities and make information more accessible through a digital platform. It is worth mentioning that these tools do not eliminate the bucolic settings of rural areas but instead help them continue toward the path of pleasantry knowing communities' voices have been included within the future planning of rural lifestyles.

Conclusion

Like any delightful story, the search for how communities approach issues in which local governments tend to catalyze their planning perspective within rural areas and work in the direction of transformation, will come with being able to bridge together knowledge and action of their communities in a transdisciplinary manner. "The inputs that the listeners contribute make the difference between a story that merely transmits information and one that successfully catalyzes change" (Denning 2002, 4). I believe that as a society, we all want to work to a common goal, and stories have given us the blessing of an opportunity. We, as humans, are social beings. We need and desire that sense of human connection too much to give that up.

Now that American citizens have more digital services and ways to connect than ever before, we humans must know how to make the most of our storytelling experiences. The research outlined the value of incorporating a participatory storytelling method into rural planning through a new age media process. It introduced it as the unique communicative approach facilitating community success. The study displays that local government has an advantage in generating understanding and sharing real-life experiences by officials using this research tool in a local government context. The

research includes interviewed individuals who gave insights into the effective implementation of a storytelling process and how specific organizations have worked to increase citizen engagement in public service delivery. The research has highlighted an additional need for storytelling amongst local government interactions and also brought awareness to the potential benefits new age media storytelling can have on improving rural connections.

While much has been discovered with new age media storytelling locally, the findings confirmed that the current approaches to rural development require work. If accountability can be proved helpful in areas outside of school, digital stories shared through experiences within the medical field, and the business sector on board with stories used as a tool for consumer opinions and user-generated content – why not consider stories within the planning of communities? It seems quite apparent that past or present stories fuel our world. While the influence one can have, differs, everyone has power to be effective. It should be reminded that while trust is the root of all mobilization, many other elements should be considered crucial in ensuring digital stories are optimized for its audiences. “People of all ages and abilities make Digital Stories, and many have testified how rewarding the experience is for when their story is shared with friends and family or posted on the web, they find they have discovered a new voice” (Meadows).

Though it takes financial backing, access, and community gathering for the participation needed, rural advocates must champion support to include themselves in local policy. These audiences are not just to be few but a population of different

characters whose success in their communities depends on their demand for the authenticity of local government.

Due to the digital preferences of our current state, assertive communication and collaboration between local government and citizens begins with understanding how to satisfy government priorities alongside resident expectations. With any topic of discussion, communities must view participatory planning as a positive experience.

“Strategies like appreciative inquiry can encourage organizations and communities to recount stories of success that build on what stakeholder’s value” (Lowery et al. 2020, 2).

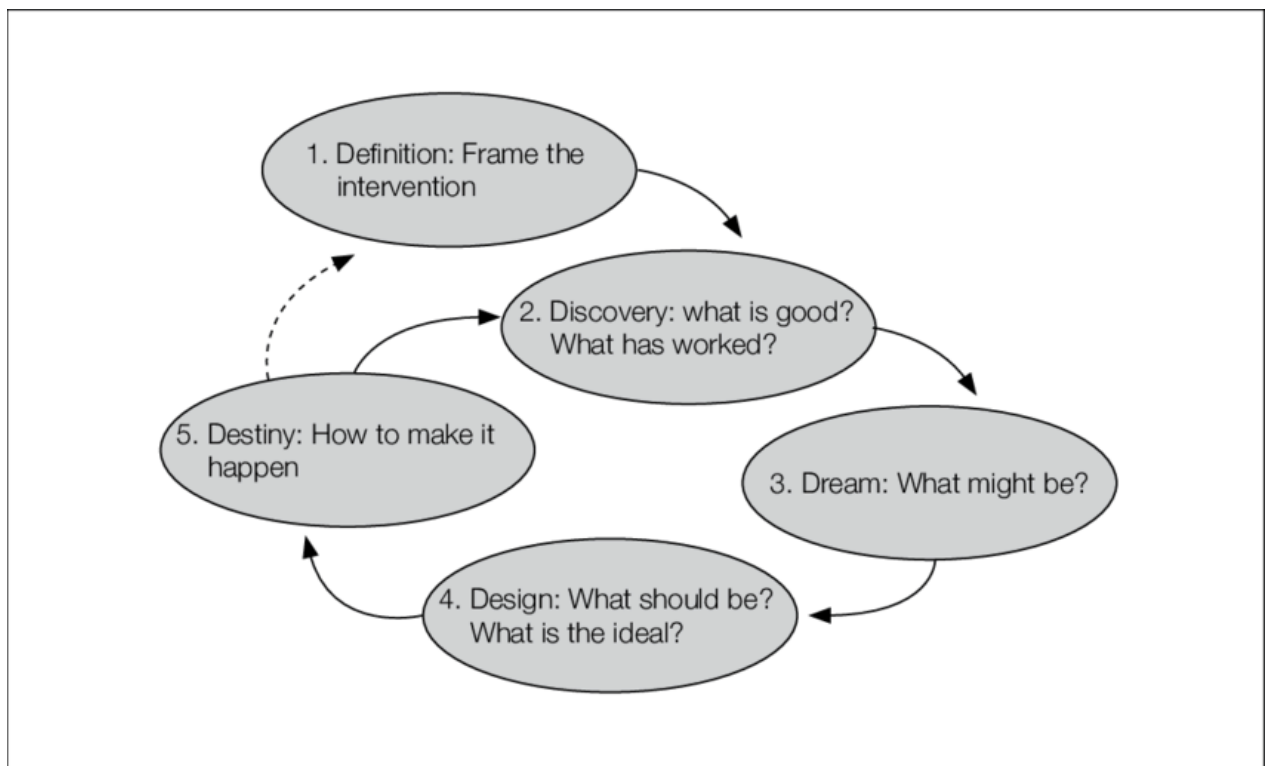


Figure 5.2: The Appreciative Inquiry '5-D' Model

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-appreciative-inquiry-5-D-model-see-Cooperrider-et-al-2003-Watkins-and-Mohr_fig1_320677939

This research further proves the need to remain current and poses the risk of relying on traditional, more dated community planning methods. “None of this is to suggest that citizen participation is the magic solution to our pressing social and economic problems. Rather, it is to argue that citizens can and should contribute to the search for the solutions to these problems” (Fischer 2000, 2). Storytelling is a possibility in tackling the traditional approaches often seen as a detriment to social policy and community engagement in today’s yearning for a connected society. Social media channels now have endless possibilities to provide direct citizens with opportunities. Dedicated citizen engagement platforms can be utilized to encourage ongoing support of community members. Storytelling components within policies, initiatives, and trust within local government can be stimulated with technology use and allow for the much-needed continuous interaction of public members. To maximize positive impressions, various media can be used with stories that help elevate topics of discussion and facilitate ongoing dialogue.

However, it must be remembered that rural storytelling has the potential to hold biases, and it is possible that within narratives negative influence can occur. In policy, this can include biases related to local issues that may have similar perspectives shared through the use of storytelling within rural communities. It is always important to be aware of and address any biases that may exist in order to ensure a more inclusive and diverse representation of the community’s experiences and perspectives.

Focusing on community engagement leads to the successful development of areas, whereas the process no longer benefits just stakeholders, but the entire community sees themselves as an active piece in playing a part. In fact, “community engagement ranges

from creating change in local policies and service provisions that not only enrich everyday lives and livability of communities but help shape and envision a community's future, bringing with it not only wider societal change but global impacts" (Hussey). Embarking on the journey for any proactive planning process requires a considerable investment of both time and resources; however, I hope this research provided enough data to show active community participation is possible and rural development widely successful if the correct tools are applied.

Further research should explore how to continually utilize technology and storytelling for communal benefit, with close attention to relevancy. Research is needed to document successes and failures experienced within the communities that work to combine these tools and share such triumphs and challenges with all community members as part of the implementation. "The nature of learning from storytelling differs from that derived from more conventional scientific information, for example, from statistical data. As in deductive reasoning, scientific information provides abstract truths that can be applied to a specific case. In contrast, narrative information follows inductive reasoning, which often involves depicting an individual experience from which an inference to a general or even a collective truth can be made" (McCall et al. 2019, 3). I hope this research and approach to planning within rural communities will serve as a model for communities and other scholars helping to engage others on the path to building mutual experiences in participatory government-citizen relationships.

This research has shown that technological innovation has affected various aspects of participation and can deliver a successful strategy method for rural communities if

storytelling is also encompassed within local community planning. The study results present some implications for local governments in which citizens can address prominent issues and feel more connected with such a creation as “digital districts.” The research not only implores local governments to be more active but also encourages them to invest resources in new age media storytelling to promote community engagement. Many local governments are already investing in technology; however, the purposes of their utilization do not constantly tailor to a community’s participation needs. Thus, this paper provides a crucial role in analyzing the impact of technological innovation on building long-lasting, thriving communities where participation is encouraged and adds value to an overall society. Further research should work to examine any existing planning biases within rural development and officials’ relationship with the general public in hopes that the given tools work to expose unfairness with a torrent of productive information.

While technology has been discussed in ways society utilizes its ability today, further research should continue to follow trends and technology platforms. What the world finds relevant and valuable today may not continue to be the most beneficial or effective in the near term. Changes in technology and even how to best tell stories will inevitably expand over time. Local governments should stay abreast of what their citizens want most to digitally prioritize the stories they tell and must see a digital intermediary as a way to optimistically enhance their communities by creating their own platform spaces maintaining rural neutrality. Furthermore, giving local governments the freedom to develop and sustain their storytelling platforms can offer up user interest and maintain relatability.

Finally, this research expresses the need to document both successes and failures of rural areas, while highlighting best practices for storytelling and developing transferrable lessons to other undervalued sites in which spaces become recognizable and prosperous like their urban neighbors. Making informed decisions starts with the data. What do the people want, and how can local governments provide? I hope the findings in this study can be utilized for further development of storytelling in academic research to help ensure society they can benefit from the services local governments provides. It is important to add that while local governments need to provide aide during technological change, communities should also assist in that support.

Through this investigation is has been indicated that new age media does have a place in local government, and if used effectively, the potential benefits are significant. A good community plan from a local government is not made through text and a conundrum...instead, it is built with community scaffolding. The trust of its citizens, a sense of local community, and ensuring government services target the needs of those elected to do so. With the continuous rise in technology's offerings, opportunity and enormous responsibility will continue to transpire. As a nation, we must ask ourselves, "How do we best master such advancements where it does not become our demise?" This research helps to define a flourishing community in which one comes together. One need at a time; one story at a time!

Tad Williams, the author of the Otherland fantasy series, suggests:

“After all, is it not the way we humans shape the universe, shape time itself? Do we not take the raw stuff of chaos and impose a beginning, middle, and end on it, like the simplest and most profound of folktales, to reflect the shapes of our own tiny lives? And if the physicists are right, that the physical world changes as it is observed, and we are its only known observers, then might we not be bending the entire chaotic universe, the eternal, ever-active Now, to fit that familiar form? If so, the universe, from the finest quantum dust to the widest vacuum spaces, does indeed have a shape. It begins ‘Once upon a time . . .’” (Williams, Sea, 598)

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APPENDIX A: THE HUB INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Can you give a brief introduction of yourself and your background experience?
- What is your role within the organization?
- How do you think your role intersects with the role of storytelling?
- How long have you been with The Hub?
- Can you briefly describe the idea of storytelling and what you feel it means to these communities?
- What is your involvement with the story creation?
- How does The Hub appear more visible, reaching out and gathering community members for input?
- What external factors have made storytelling a challenge?
- Is there anyone else you would recommend I speak with within the organization for additional input?
- Is there any additional information you would like to provide or anything you would like to elaborate on from our conversation?