

EP 5 On Digital Storytelling with Iman Rastegari & Siro B. Pina Cardona

Asuka: Welcome to the RIS Audio Interviews, a reflective interview series where we have critical and caring conversations with our community of researchers/ who work *with* international students. I'm your host, Asuka Ichikawa.

Alright, so we're moving along this series on storytelling for researchers, and in this episode we are delighted to welcome Iman Rastegari, a creative video consultant and the founder of Lights Up LLC, who provides tailored multimedia storytelling solutions for educational institutions.

I had an opportunity to meet with Iman about eight years ago, when he was co-directing the fellowship program at Harvard Graduate School of Education with Matt Weber, a program titled Visible, Open, Interactive Communication for Educators, or VOICE for short. The program was designed to provide professional development opportunities for educators to communicate their work to a wider audience through evolving media outlets and most of all by learning the essence of storytelling. In many ways, this program provided me the ground to grow my digital storytelling experiences and I'm very thankful for the learning that I was able to have through this program [00:01:00] with other fellows. And so, even though it'll be a concentrated version, in this podcast, I thought it would be amazing if our audience could also learn from your passion and craft in storytelling in the field of education.

So thank you so much for joining us today. Welcome, Iman.

Iman: Thank you so much for having me.

Asuka: I also wanted to mention that we're in a very unique recording setting today. I usually record in my room virtually, but, Iman being based in Boston, we decided to meet and record in continuation with the theme of collaboration with the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. So we're at one of the meeting rooms, and we also have a guest, Siro Pina Cardona, who is a doctoral student at Boston College in the Higher Education program and his research interests are physical and virtual mobility of international students. And he's a research assistant [00:02:00] with the Center for International Higher Education. So thank you also for joining the show.

Siro: Thank you for having me.

Asuka: Okay. So, to begin with, I hope it's all right that we kind of go back to, rewind the time eight years or so, to the origins of the VOICE program and how you carry that mission today.

Iman: Yeah, absolutely.

Matt and I met at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in our roles in the Communications and Marketing office.

I was a multimedia producer. He was the director of digital strategy and that was our full-time focus. But Matt and I were also really passionate about teaching and about empowering others to do the type of work that we did. And at first that took the form primarily of some seminars. We co-taught a seminar, called Shining on Camera, which is all about effectively [00:03:00] interviewing on camera. I designed and facilitated a seminar on video storytelling introducing folks who were new to the process of video production. Everything from the basics of visual storytelling all the way through creating and screening a finished short film in the space of five days.

We developed seminars around developing your digital brand and we also created a public storytelling project called Double Take, which ended up being a massive event at the school and layered a public storytelling event where folks go up on stage and share a story with the entire HGSE community, but also rolled in training through storytelling workshops and professional development experience through [00:04:00] in-studio storytelling, recording complete with live- coaching, where folks could fine tune their story under the lights with microphones and cameras, and learn about the experience of telling a story in that type of environment as well. So, all of these were things that we were just working on in our spare time in addition to our full-time work.

And the VOICE program ended up being a way for us to expand that and take that even further, to create a more structured program where we offered even more workshops and offered the students who went through the program the opportunity to actually get lots of hands-on, real -world experience, putting those skills into practice. And that, that focus on empowering others, enabling [00:05:00] others to tell their own stories more effectively and to do so using the various digital mediums, that are so important for professional life today, is something I continue in my work. Now I started my own company, I of course, I love creating video content myself, but I also still love teaching and still love storytelling coaching.

And over the last six months I've been working on developing this consulting part of the business as well, and all of it is focused on helping my clients tell their stories more effectively. Empowering their in-house teams to really distill their messaging and share it with their desired audience in a way that can effectively tell their own stories.

Asuka: Thank you so much for that, and just for some context to our audience, it's so unfortunate, but the VOICE program, I'm afraid does not sort of, [00:06:00] exist right now at HGSE, but, so I just wanted to sort of revive the origins of the program and what you did and how you carry that today as well.

Iman: Thanks.

Asuka: So yeah, thank you for the reflection. So yes, I guess related to that is, if you could tell us more about what exactly is storytelling and how does it sort of evolve when it becomes digital in times today?

Iman: Yeah. You know, I think storytelling is core to who we are as human beings.

You know, humans crave a good story and our brains are wired for it, and we look for it everywhere. And effective communication is about connecting messages to the audience. And storytelling is such a powerful tool to be able to do that.

Professional communicators have been harnessing the power of storytelling forever, [00:07:00] and I think this is because stories allow us to connect on a different deeper level. You know, we discover allies we didn't know that we had, we learn from each other's experiences, and it allows us to draw closer and more connected to each other.

And there's a quote from Theodore Roosevelt that I think about a lot, which is, nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care. What you say is important, but how you say it is also incredibly important. And grounding the content of what you're saying in your own values and why you care about it, is a remarkably compelling way to draw people in, to really get them to invest in what it is, you want to share.

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Iman: And for me, the first question that I ask when I'm [00:08:00] thinking about how I want to communicate something is thinking about who my audience is. How are they consuming whatever communication I'm trying to share. and knowing what their expectations are based on that platform. So for example, YouTube and TikTok are both online video platforms, but the audience expectations for each of them is different.

Same thing with, live streaming something on Netflix or going on a broadcast TV, daytime talk show, right? All of these are, they're all video, but they're all different and the expectations are different. And therefore, the way that we want to distill our message, package it, think about how we want to effectively share it, needs to evolve as well.

Asuka: Definitely. And I was wondering, if I could also hear your choice of a career as a storyteller, and how has it been working with [00:09:00] people, institutions, in the field of education?

Iman: Yeah, no, I appreciate that and thank you for exploring that question with me. You know, I love the work that I do, and I love helping others tell their stories. Ever since I was little, I found that when I consumed a type of storytelling or type of media that I really enjoyed, I felt compelled to try and create it myself.

I love to read and so I started writing my own stories and I listened to, like old time, dramatic radio stories. And so I started writing my own scripts and recording it myself and making my own sound effects. When I started reading comic books, I started drawing my own comics.

And same thing with video. As I was getting [00:10:00] more engaged with different types of video contents, I became really interested in figuring out how to do that myself. But every time I did that, I also really wanted to share that with others. I didn't wanna just keep it to myself. And I've always been really interested in the way that the medium impacts the way that you tell a story, and how different people can use a medium to tell their own stories.

And so I love creating my own work, telling my own stories, crafting my own content. But anytime I do too much of just creating my own, I feel like something is missing and that something is helping others do that as well. And so throughout my career, I've realized [00:11:00] that I always want to have this balance of creating my own content, potentially creating content for others, but also including an opportunity to teach and mentor and consult with others, to help empower them to, to do the same.

And I've found that even just when clients hire me to create something for them, I don't just come in and have them tell me what they want and then I execute it. For me, it's about creating a creative collaborative relationship where we are working together to figure out really what is the story that is best to be told here, taking them through a concept development process that unearths the real needs of the whatever that organization is and the message that needs to be shared, the story that needs to be told and figuring out the most effective way to do that, and then working with them [00:12:00] to, to bring that vision to life.

And I found that approach is not always what folks think they need, it's not always what they come to me looking for. But it's always really welcomed. And by the end of the process they're really excited and ultimately feel more invested in what we're creating together, and are more excited about sharing it, because they've really thought, we've thought through together, what is gonna make it the most effective. And everybody feels really excited to then share that with the world.

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Asuka: Thank you. I know this is like a broad question again, but, if we could kind of brainstorm what are the sort of key digital outlets that scholars and researchers can be aware of? How can we prepare ourselves, through the doctoral program, graduate program, or beyond?

Iman: Absolutely. I think the first step is [00:13:00] to look for aspirational examples. You know, everybody's research and focus is unique and their audience may be different from somebody else's. And so I hesitate to say, oh, here's a canonical right answer for this.

But instead, I would advise reflecting to yourself who are communicators that I look up to, who are communicators that I've seen be really effective at reaching an audience. Perhaps it's someone in my field. Maybe it's someone completely unrelated, but then start looking at it through a bit more of an analytical lens.

Start to peel back the layers of what is really effective about what they do. What medium are they using to reach their audience? How are you seeing them? Is your audience people like you? And [00:14:00] should you try and meet that audience the same way? In that on camera interviewing seminar, we would look at case studies both that Matt and I would bring. We would bring video clips of some effective communicators, and we would watch and pause and ask questions and see what was working well.

But the students would bring their own examples too, and we would look at these kinds of as role models to see, all right, what's working about this? Why is this person so effective at communicating? And yeah, just try and, and pull some lessons from that. Again, this is all just an acknowledgement of the fact that there isn't just one right way to communicate, and that context really matters, right?

The way that you present at an academic conference is very different from how you're going to present, in a general, let's say a news piece for the general public. And the level [00:15:00] of detail that you're gonna go into, the way that you frame things, how much you need to explain the core bedrock concepts that you and people in your field may take for granted.

All of that is gonna depend on that audience and that context and that medium. So looking for aspirational examples, I think is a great way to start and looking at them, not just on your own, but with others.

If there's somebody who you think does a really great job, for example, watch a video or listen to an interview with them, read their work and show it to somebody else and say, what's standing out to you about this? What are the takeaways you're pulling from it? And what about this person's style is working for you?

And perhaps what's not right? You can, you can learn from the things that don't work as well, too, but I think that's a great place to start.

One other specific resource that I think might be helpful specifically in the context of storytelling is [00:16:00] Marshall Ganz's Public Narrative Framework. Marshall Ganz is a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School, and a towering figure in the world of grassroots community organizing. And something that he teaches is how to use storytelling to inspire action in others, how to rally people to your cause and, he's distilled it down into this framework, Public Narrative, that starts with something called Story of Self. And Story of Self is about telling the origin story for your values. Coming back to this idea that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

A great way to tell somebody how much you care is to explain where that care started from. What was that? What was the origin? What was that inciting incident for you to care about a particular issue or to embody a particular value? [00:17:00] And a Story of Self is intended to be told in two minutes or less as part of a larger piece of communication that again, works to inspire people to action.

But I find it to be a really effective framework for getting started with storytelling because it's so concise and so efficient. It really pushes you to distill an episode from your life into something really tangible that's rooted in a very basic arc of a challenge, a choice, and an outcome. And that is grounded in your values and is told using details, especially sensory details. And using this framework as a starting place to tell your own story.

Think about, let's say you want to present your research, and you want to get into all of the intricacies of your findings, but starting [00:18:00] with what inspired you to want to research this in the first place. Sharing why you care at the beginning is a great way to get your audience really invested in what you have to share, because now they're in it with you.

You've turned them from a passive listener into someone who's actively invested in your story and your work, and is gonna want to hear more 'cause they now care about it because you care about it. And Public Narrative is just one of many story frameworks out there.

But I find that it's a particularly helpful one for, again, distilling something into a really concise form and it is easy enough to understand and get started with, whereas other storytelling frameworks can perhaps feel a little more intimidating.

Asuka: Thank you for this very practical and also very much personalized one form of storytelling.

And, I don't have to dive into this too, but I feel like in [00:19:00] today's world, I might just throw one question. How do you see like a massive sort of emergence of artificial intelligence and how do you see it affecting the storytelling? Maybe, this sounds a bit commercial, but like the market or the preferred flavors of audience, also the expectations of the audience, like what they seek. Not to sort of negate the practicality and great things that AI can do, but how do you see how we need to pay attention to this and harness the good side of it, but also like if there's anything that we need to be, noting in terms of how this may be already changing the landscape of this.

Iman: It absolutely is. I think there's, there's a lot that we could talk about in terms of the impact of AI on just all of our lives. But in particular on the field of digital storytelling. One thing that immediately came to [00:20:00] mind when you were asking this is that I think not all that long ago, a photograph or a video of something, of an event, of a moment was seen as proof that it happened.

And we could point to this as a record of something that really happened. And very quickly, public perception has shifted around that. Where now if something seems too good to be true, or, people are questioning, visual evidence in a way that I think at, at a level that we haven't seen before.

So many times I will see someone share something and in the comments you see, oh, this is AI, right? This can't be real. [00:21:00] And on one hand, that could be seen as something that's really scary that we are losing, a shared proof point or standard of truth, and all of us are doubting what we are seeing with our own eyes because of the chance that it can be manipulated.

On the other hand, the fact that there is often such a knee-jerk reaction of questioning what people are seeing. Ultimately, I think is going to lead to a stronger digital literacy where people are critically thinking about what they're seeing and how it might be being created to manipulate them or, at the very least, color their perception, and people thinking more critically about the media that they consume, I think overall is a good thing. The opportunity I think that this [00:22:00] creates is for authenticity to rise above everything else.

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Iman: And that's where thinking about how to share information in a way that feels more personal, more authentic, is going to help separate your work from everybody else.

If you're grounding something in your own personal experience, if you were telling a story as part of how you are sharing information that automatically sets it aside from 95% of what everybody else is seeing. Because as much as AI content is proliferating and taking over so many different channels, it's also homogenizing a lot of content, right?

How many times are people looking at writing or imagery and they're like, I know this is AI because it looks like everything else that I'm seeing. I want something that feels unique, that feels personally [00:23:00] crafted. That feels individual.

And that's where focusing on how can you make something feel more personal and more true to yourself, and using those tools of storytelling to do that will help to cut through that noise.

Asuka: Thank you so much, I think those are the main questions I had. We can, sort of pause here and open it up to, not to put a spotlight on you, but, if you had any questions, I can pass the mic to you or how do you feel about this?

Siro: I can go ahead.

Asuka: Okay.

Siro: Because I do have several questions. So well, thank you for this conversation. I thought I found it very, very interesting. As an international student, myself and early career researcher and with [00:24:00] some experience within the practice world, with multiple actors from international organizations, research centers within academia and with the NGO sector, I was thinking about, how when we are trying to tell a story that we find relevant, how will you recommend sharing, the story that might be, based on the research findings that we have or an idea that we have that we need funding for or we need the resources for.

But we need the help from multiple actors. We need the help from a government, we need the help from an NGO and we need the help from a research center. We know that in each one of the different actors' talks we [00:25:00] could see a different language within the same topic of which I am and hopefully they are also interested.

So from a storytelling perspective, how will I present my ideas, in a way that it's still original and relevant, but all of these different actors are able to understand it. That's something that I might find more easy or more comfortable to transmit and communicate my story with one actor at a time. But when we are talking to multi-actor projects, which somethings can be more complicated and complex, but can also lead to more impactful results, who would you recommend that either researchers, practitioners or anyone really talk or craft a story that resonates across different sectors?

Iman: That's a great [00:26:00] question. I think the first question I might ask in response is, do you need to come up with just one story to hit each of those audiences? You mentioned that you might feel more comfortable talking to each one of them individually and perhaps it's

worth considering can you actually do it that way? Can you create a story that is tailored for each of those audiences and share it with them more directly? If effective communication is about connecting message to audience, being clear about who your audience is, being really intentional about how you're crafting that message for that audience.

Yes, there are ways to generalize, but the more specific you can be, the more intentional you can be about connecting directly to the audience that you're trying to target, the more effectively you're gonna be able to reach that. And especially if they're looking for different things, then there is an inherent tension in [00:27:00] trying to do a one-size-fits-all approach.

Medium I think, matters here too. So for example, if you are trying to create a video that you would send to potential donors, right? In each of these, in each of these arenas, would it make sense to make different versions of the same video, but that are tweaked a little bit for each audience to really hit on the values that are most important to them.

What do you think? Does that feel doable or do you find that you're often in situations where you need to make one broad pitch that hits everybody at once?

Siro: It does feel doable as far as we see it in a way that will be mindful of the outcomes or the objectives that you have in mind.

And, what might be the best way to maneuver and utilize the resources that you have or want to have access to? [00:28:00] In some cases, if not most cases, that may be the most effective and impactful way of doing it. Yet still the, as my question was formulated, the immediate reaction, right? When it comes to proposing something and having a greater impact, we try to involve as many people as possible or as many relevant actors. Yet again, it's probably, it goes back to the storytelling. How do I communicate my story again in a way that I can allow myself the space to communicate that story individually rather than all together at once.

Yet, I would like to follow up. And although the starting points of a project might be communicated individually based on different actors, that doesn't mean that the end result, needs to also be communicated also to individual actors in a sense that the outcomes or the [00:29:00] product that ideally if the project moves forward, produces, can maybe more easily embed the interest and stories that connect everyone together.

Iman: Yeah, one of the things that I talk about with my clients a lot is the idea, and I'll frame this again in terms of video. There's often a temptation to invest a lot in making one video that does everything. But as I often advise my clients, if you try and have one video communicate everything, it ends up not really communicating anything.

It's much better to be really focused and targeted and clear about what single message are you trying to communicate, especially in a short-form video. Because you'll be much more effective at actually achieving what that [00:30:00] one goal is. And then you can always make additional videos that touch on each of the additional points that you want.

I think this question of audience can be similar where, and ultimately it comes down to really how different are these audiences in terms of what they're looking for and what they want to hear from you. For example, if there is one audience that's really invested in a specific quantitative metric that you're trying to achieve, trying to tell a really personal story about the qualitative impact that your work is going to have is not going to fulfill that need that they're looking for, and vice versa. And so being clear in your own mind about who is the audience, what are they looking for, what is the most effective way of reaching them?

And then working backward intentionally from that to craft a [00:31:00] message that will appeal to them is going to be really important. And then thinking about, all right, I have these, for example, three audiences that I need to reach. How different is what they're looking for? Is there something that all three of them would be really compelled by?

And then if you can only do the one message well then, then focus on what they all have in common. But starting with the audience, what is it you want to leave them with? What is it that you want to inspire them to do? And based on what they're taking away from whatever story you're telling them, starting with that and then working backwards to construct something that will meet each of those needs, I find to be the most effective approach.

Siro: Thank you. And if I may ask another question.

Iman: Of course.

Siro: ...Something that I'm living with after hearing this conversation is, is that the idea of authenticity, [00:32:00] which aligns well with the tailoring your message and, trying to be as impactful as possible. I feel that nowadays because of the times in which we are living, we are surrounded in a way where gaining people's attention and the stories that we are telling need to be politicized in a way that might not, doesn't really matter. It seems to not really matter as much the impact they have on people on society as far as we are getting, others to watch, other stories or to listen to our stories or pay attention to whatever we are saying. So I was wondering how, what can be alternatives to that?

At the end, a lot of, a lot of getting people's attention is about getting as many views as possible. Getting as much of, getting our story, out there as [00:33:00] broadly as possible, which is, seems to be associated with, whatever it takes, but is there ways to authentically do this without turning everything political and just engaging in this coercive sort of way of gaining people's attention?

Iman: Hmm, that's a great question. I think part of what you're speaking to is based on how you are sharing your content. Knowing that, for example, if you're placing it on, if you're trying to deliver it through a platform that reaches people algorithmically, knowing that political outrage is a huge driver of visibility, even being clear-eyed about that is important.

A lot of these platforms are designed to, stoke fear and anger. [00:34:00] And the more controversial your content, the higher the chance that more people will see it, because it drives engagement, which of course drives more clicks, not only to your content, but more

eyes on the advertising that goes along with it, which earns the platforms more money, and it turns into this vicious cycle.

And so it often can feel like the only way to get attention is by playing that game. And I appreciate how, how dispiriting that can feel. I also think that there's a real fatigue that is setting in, among the general public with this type of approach. People are actively seeking alternatives to this.

Ultimately thinking about who you're trying to reach, what you want that takeaway to be and what your metrics for success are will then help to guide your content [00:35:00] approach. You know, when I was at the Ed school and creating videos for them, there were definitely times where the goal was to just get the highest number of views possible.

And that was, that was the metric for success. But there were other times where as long as the video was seen by the right people, that mattered more. So I had a video that was considered very successful, and it got about 10 views, but the reason was because it went out to 10 high profile donors who were moved by the content and were inspired to donate to the school, and therefore it was a massive success.

And so knowing what your goal is, being really intentional about what you're trying to achieve. Pairing that with your understanding of your audience and the medium that will reach them in the most effective way. And then crafting content that both feels authentic to you and your own values, but also [00:36:00] is aligned with your overall goals. It can maximize your chances of success. The intention is the most important thing I think, in terms of crafting an effective story and an effective message.

Siro: Thank you. And I have another one. And it's around, within research and choosing a topic that you're interested in, it can either be a early career researchers or even like more established researchers who might be working in less, mediatic fields.

It sometimes feels that a lot of the research that we produce, it's, it never really gets a lot of attention. So that can also seem for many people despairing. Yet just 'cause it doesn't get a lot of attention doesn't mean that it's not important, [00:37:00] not relevant, or, at the present moment or even in the future, or that you don't even have to do it.

Because simply just by the fact that you wanna do it, you should just do it. And, because we have the, hopefully the academic freedom to do so, you in fact should probably do it. But at the same time, there's this underlying question of why will you do something if it doesn't have any, if no one is gonna read it.

So if you could give a recommendation to a researcher, whether it can be an early career or not, about that. It's thinking about a topic or, or is doing research in a field that doesn't get much of media attention and it's questioning whether he or she should pursue that path. simply because doesn't get that attention.

What recommendation would you [00:38:00] give, this person from a storytelling perspective and, to better disseminate the knowledge that it's producing or it's hoping to produce in the future?

Iman: Hmm. I think I would start by asking why do you feel like it's not breaking through right now? Is the work relevant to the people that you are trying to reach?

A lot of researchers that I've worked with over the years, they're, their priorities are not always aligned with the audience that they're trying to reach because the structure of academia, it doesn't always incentivize public facing communication. It can incentivize academic publishing in order [00:39:00] to meet your tenure-track obligations or you're trying to impress certain people within the academic structure and organization, right?

So I think it's the first question is like is what is incentivizing your work and the way that you're approaching communicating about it aligned with the specific audience that you're trying to reach. If ultimately your audience is other academics, then you're gonna approach that differently than if you're trying to make something that is packaged for the general public.

I think at the heart of why a lot of researchers do their work is because they not only find it really interesting, and it's not just they care about it, but they think that it can make a positive impact on the world. But in order for it to make a positive impact on the world, the world needs to know about it.

And so [00:40:00] recalibrating those incentives, or at least recalibrating the focus on reaching the people who your work can help the most will help you. I think then I start to identify, alright, what's, what's the most effective way to structure this story or to share the work? Putting yourself in the shoes of the audience that you would most like to reach.

What do they need to hear? Why is this going to be important to them? What is gonna make them care, even if you know that this is going to make a positive difference in their lives? You need to get them to listen to you first. So that may be framing it through a personal story to talk about what moved you to care about this work to help them care about it too.

Or maybe it's about thinking who your target audience is and what are the pain points that your work can help address, and starting with that as the frame. [00:41:00] There are lots of different approaches and I think it'll somewhat depend on the work and who you're trying to reach, and in particular why you've been struggling to reach them up until this point.

Being really clear-eyed about why hasn't this been working, why am I not breaking through? And then we can start working backwards to figure out what the right approach is.

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Iman: I experienced this with a client where, you know, they came to me with a lot of different ideas about what they wanted our video project to achieve. And when I asked them about who the audience was for this, they listed lots of different audiences.

And so as we were talking through, you know, okay, so what do we want this audience to take away from it? What kept coming up was, well, each of these audiences is gonna be interested in something different. [00:42:00] And what we ultimately kept circling around was if we try and make this one video, do all of these different things, effectively communicate all of these different messages to all of these different audiences -- it's not actually gonna be particularly effective at reaching any of them.

And a better approach is to prioritize. It's not that we can't share this video with multiple audiences, but being really clear about who our first priority in reaching is.

And in this particular case that ended up being students. So we're saying, okay, if we know that our audience is students, and in this particular case it's prospective students, students who we want to apply, well then everything follows from that. Yes. If we want the

Chancellor's office to watch this video too, that's great. If we want potential donors to watch this video, that's great. If we [00:43:00] want community partners to watch it, if we want faculty members to watch it. Advisors like all of these are important audiences to consider, but ultimately if our primary goal is reaching prospective students and inspiring them to apply, everything needs to follow from that.

We then brought this idea to the full group and we actually did like a proper concept development, like brainstorming conversation where I asked a series of really targeted questions to help folks distill the message and the goals of a project down into really clearly articulated ideas. And that's where we realized, this is, this is all about prospective students and the problem that we're trying to solve is that students don't know about this program and how awesome it is and how much it's gonna transform their lives and their academic experience if they apply. And so again, [00:44:00] from there, everything else followed.

We now had a really clearly articulated audience and goal. Then we could say, all right, so what is the message that we want to communicate to this specific audience? And then what is the best way to portray that? So for example, in this particular case it was talking about what the program was, but in a way that would inspire students to apply, then who's the best messenger for that?

Other students, right? Do they want to hear from faculty members? Not really. The best messengers are other students. It's their peers. And so that then guided, alright, who are we asking to be interviewed for this video? How are we gonna structure this? So, it'll best reach this audience. The original plan was to make, I wanna say it was a 6 to 8 minute video.[00:45:00]

Well, if our audience is prospective students, we know that that might not actually be the best format for them. Something much shorter form would be better. Well, there are multiple programs that we want to touch on. So what if, instead of making one video that talks about all these programs, what if we split it up?

So now we have subcategories within this audience of prospective students. We now have prospective students for each one of these programs. Let's make a video targeted to each one of them. And so now we can make four 90 second videos as opposed to one 6 minute video, right? And so you can see how identifying your audience, your goals, your message, what is the result that you're hoping to get from this project ends up guiding everything else.

Message, style, format, medium, distribution. All of these flow from that intention and ultimately, asking yourself these questions, it can be hard [00:46:00] 'cause you wanna do everything and you want to reach everybody. It's not that, a project made for one audience can't feel applicable or relevant to another, but being clear in your own mind about who your audience is, what is the story you want to tell, and will then guide you to figuring out the most effective way to actually tell it and connect it to your audience.

Siro: Yeah. Well, thank you. And I think that one of my first reactions was like, well, but this is obviously a lot of work and one of the topics that you guys touched was around the AI and

how this can, accelerate or help to a certain extent in the work of, digital media and, crafting better stories.

Now, I was wondering, how do you deploy. And how do you make usage, not just you as the facilitator or the coach, [00:47:00] but also how do you instruct or recommend others to make use of such technologies? Is it something that, do you bring in the training part or do you follow this human centered approach and, how fan are you of the, it's not AI that will replace our jobs, but it will be someone using AI that will be taking your job. Like how do you see all these narratives falling into your own practice and pedagogy?

Iman: Yeah, it's a great question. I want to just comment on something that you said at the start of this question, which was, this process takes a lot of work.

Yes it does, and it pushes you to sometimes make hard choices because you are choosing to leave things behind that are important. but learning, learning to prioritize [00:48:00] and cut the things that aren't serving your ultimate goal ends up making whatever you're creating more effective. But doing that work upfront also ends up saving you a lot of work down the line because something that I see, in other projects sometimes is if folks don't ask themselves these hard questions at the beginning, they start going through this process making something, realizing partway through that it's not working. And they aren't sure why, but it's because they didn't have that.

They didn't ask those clear intention questions upfront. They didn't think about the result, they didn't think about the audience. They didn't think about how they're going to connect their message effectively to that audience. And so either they create something that doesn't end up producing the results that they were hoping for, or they realize in the middle of the process that what they're doing isn't working, and then they have to scrap everything and start over, and [00:49:00] so you're gonna be asking yourself those questions no matter what. It's better to push yourself to make those hard decisions upfront so that way you have a clear vision for how you're approaching it. I just wanted to, to note that.

But to your question about AI. I personally, as I am, training, mentoring, guiding people in doing this work, don't tend to lean on AI tools at all. And it doesn't really come up in the conversations that I have all that much, except for when people have been told by others that it's something that they should use.

But more often than not, the people that I work with are being told that they should be using AI, but then turn to me and say, do I have to? Like, is this actually going to help me? Because they find that ultimately it's not particularly effective at the things that they're [00:50:00] trying to do. I would say that there are some areas where AI tools can save you time. For example, something that I think AI is pretty good at is transcribing audio into text. But that's not any sort of intelligent operation. It's not taking any work off your hands, right? It's automating a process for you, but it's not making any decisions for you. I think the next step that some people would say is, okay, well I'll have it transcribe all the audio for my recording and then I'll have it edit together a piece for me and then I'll see what it thinks.

But usually it's gonna make different decisions than you would have, and it ultimately doesn't have any reasoning capability, nor does it have a creative or artistic lens or vision, to execute on. And so a lot of times I find that if you lean [00:51:00] on the tools to take care of the creative aspects of your work, you end up being both disappointed by the result and having to redo it anyway.

But if anything, it can sometimes make the creative work harder because if you see a first draft that's done by somebody else. I think it's human nature to think, well, there must be a reason why it was done in this way. Let me try and tweak this or fix this, as opposed to scrapping it entirely and actually approaching it from scratch the way that you would've wanted to start it.

And with AI, it's creating a draft, but again, it's not bringing a human sensibility to it. And so, you can often fall into the trap of ascribing more creative intention or wisdom to the work that it's produced than it actually, than actually is warranted. And may find yourself going down a rabbit hole that [00:52:00] ends up wasting you more time. I don't know. Is that..?

Siro: Yeah, yeah.

Iman: But all that being said, I think if there are ways where you can use the tools to make your own workflow more effective, then that's great. Like I'm an early adopter of a lot of different types of technology. I think technology can be a really powerful tool.

But it's important to be intentional about it and to be clear-eyed about what the tool is capable of. And I think that part of the difficulty of the AI boom that we're in right now, and this may change in the near future, but right now -- there are a lot of really lofty promises being made about what the technology is capable of, that the reality of the technology does not actually live up to.

And so if we go based on hype and turn over [00:53:00] too much agency to a tool that can't really deliver on its -- on the promises that are being made, ultimately, either the work is going to suffer or your process is going to suffer 'cause it's gonna be really frustrating. So being aware of what the tool is actually capable of and figuring out if you'd like, how to implement it in a really deliberate way that enhances your process without it taking over what you are going to be best at delivering, I think is important.

Siro: Thank you.

Iman: Sure.

Asuka: Thank you so much, Iman and Siro. That was a really brilliant session that followed the conversation. Thank you so much for diving into that. If there's anything that you wanted to add to the podcast episode, I just wanted to... but if not, I think we already had really deep, reflective conversation on so many of the topics, so I think I just wanted to wrap it up.

So yes everyone, this session was with the guest, Iman Rastegari, Founder of Lights Up LLC and the guest audience, Siro Pina Cardona, a doctoral student at Boston College recorded at the Center for International Higher Education at BC. So thank you so much for tuning in, and thank you again to both of you for this fantastic conversation.

Iman: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Siro: Thank you.

References

Iman Rastegari's personal website: <https://www.imanrastegari.com/about>