

Janina Acevedo-Yates:

Thank you everyone so much for joining. I suggest that we actually start the session. So Stew, over to you.

Stewart Hickman:

Thank you, Janina. Before we officially get started, we want to hear a few words from our DRG center, Deputy Director Don Chisholm.

Don Chisholm:

My name is Don Chisholm. I'm one of the two deputies in the DRG center. I'm also the host for the new series of fireside chats we have that's collectively called the DRG Tipping Point. These chats focus on overlooked but surprisingly critical factors that can increase the quality and impact of our programming. This series started in February and will continue to June, and that takes place on the first Tuesday of each month. This month, we look at the power of storytelling. We'll talk about identifying and telling stories that number one, resonate deeply with others, and number two, show the impact of our programming.

Don Chisholm:

In the DRG center, we value our ability to tell our story, to capture the essence of working with local change makers who make a difference in our DRG world. We also realized that DRG story, with its complexity, with its layers, and it was its timeline, is sometimes a difficult one to understand. In this webinar, you'll learn there are ways to reach beyond the data. One commonality is focusing on the humanity, the universal, relatable human emotions and experiences in every story we tell. Focusing on the personal story helps us communicate with even greater impact about the difference our work makes in the world.

Don Chisholm:

So thanks for joining us today, and we look forward to a very interactive session. If you have any feedback from today's session, sessions that we've already had, or if you have any ideas about potential future sessions, please let us know. Thanks. And on to the show.

Stewart Hickman:

Hi, welcome everyone to the DRG Tipping Point, the surprisingly critical factors that transform DRG programming. This is our third virtual session of the Tipping Point series, and as Don said, it's all about the power of storytelling. And we're very happy that you're all able to attend, and we've got a great program for you. We're joined this morning today by Jessica Benton-Cooney. She's the Lead Communications and Outreach Specialist for the DRG center. We also have with us today, Marco Bollinger, who has photographed celebrities, including Beyonce and Obama. You may have heard of them. And he's directed projects for the UN Refugee Agency, and Time Warner. He's won several awards, including the IndieFEST Humanitarian Award, and PDN, Photo District News, Best Portrait of an Artist. And has produced award winning social issue documentaries.

Stewart Hickman:

So by the end of today's session, you'll be familiar with the objectives that you see on your screen. I'll give you a few minutes to have a look at those.

Stewart Hickman:

Okay. So images and stories impact our lives every day. And our experts today will help us understand how storytelling catches our attention and grabs our emotion, motivates us in our actions, and why it's important to the work that we do in international development. So to remind our listeners that a tipping point is a surprisingly critical factor that transforms or has the potential to transform DRG programming. And so I want to ask Jessica, how is storytelling a tipping point in terms of development work?

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

Thanks, Stew, for the question. And first, good morning everyone. I'm really excited to be here. This is my favorite topic, and I truly believe in the power of storytelling, because when it's really, truly done well, we can inspire our audience and tap into the innate need that everybody has to be a part of something that's bigger than themselves. And the point of DRG storytelling is to truly understand and communicate the achievements of the citizens in the countries that we're working in, which then generates support for our DRG programming.

Stewart Hickman:

That's fabulous. And can you give us a few examples of good stories, of what to look for in the USAID context?

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

Well, there's many ways to tell a story, but we have found at USAID that one of the most effective ways is to use what we call the s/hero narrative. And this is because research has always shown us that humans are inspired to care more about a topic when they can make an emotional connection with that issue. Essentially, it's using in a singular person's story that's going to pull at the emotional heartstrings, and this is what's going to move behavior and move attitude.

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

So essentially as you can see on your screen, the definition of a s/hero narrative, and we like to make sure that it includes men and women, this is the focus on an individual or community that faces an adversity and overcomes it, often with the help of a tool, or what we call helpers. And we're going to get into that in just a minute. But this could be the development intervention and our work. And just to kind of get the brainstorm and going here, I wanted to ask the room if they had any ideas of what DRG heroes are, and their work, and in their programming. And you can go ahead and chat it into the box if you'd like.

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

Human rights champions. Thank you, Barb. Program learning, Kevin Gash. Tracy, journalists. Journalists, whistleblowers. Tina, thank you. Alae, civil society organizations. Ajit, trafficking survivors. Tracy, government change makers. Innovators. The female entrepreneurs. Community women leaders. Civil society leaders. Local communities. Nelson Mandela. Empowered underrepresented groups.

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

Wow, you guys have a lot of ideas? Reform minded elected official. Human rights defenders.

Stewart Hickman:

So these are like groups of s/heroes, and there are any number of individuals in those categories.

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

Election observers. Women human rights defenders. Civil servants champions. Right. That's a great brainstorm. You guys know the answer to this already, that's wonderful. Politicians. Academics. All right, keep the brainstorm going in your head as we move into helpers. And helpers are people, resources, or tools that help move the story along. They basically echo the story of the hero and validate whatever we learn about them. They might not be the stars of the show, but they're really key instruments to making sure that the story keeps moving along. So I just want to ask you what you think that this could be. We could also do a brainstorm in the chatbox.

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

USAID. Implementers, exactly. Local partners, local organizations. community leaders, activists, civil society and political party leaders. They help themselves, the essence of self-reliance. Project stakeholders. Faith leaders, academic institutions, community based organizations, private sector. You guys are typing stuff fast I can't keep up. This is great. Human rights organizations. Technology. Local governments, evaluators. Technology, yes. Way to be innovative. All right, great. We're going to come back to them in just a second.

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

I'm now going to introduce a second method that I want everybody to be aware of before we go into our group exercise, and that is the Story Arc. There's many ways, again, of telling a story. As my middle school and high school teachers taught me, make sure that your story has a beginning, middle, and an end. So this is a little bit more of a complicated way of ensuring that we hit all of the points of our story.

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

And the purpose of the story arc is to make sure that our character moves from one situation to another. And we're going to have a rising action, either going up or going the other way. And we start with the introduction, of studying the character. And this is where we learn any key details about the character, what any background we might know about them, any challenges that they're facing. And then we go to the problem, or the rising action. And this is a series of events or smaller problems that the character has to overcome. This is where the helpers come in, and they're going to be validating the story of the s/hero, the issues and the context that they're facing.

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

And then we go to the climax, and this is the pinnacle of a story, where the character solves their own problem. And this is also where we have USAID programming come in. What's our support look like, what does the character do with our support?

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

And then the falling action. This is a series of events where the conflict starts to become resolved, because what the character does after they've received USAID support. What kind of resilience do they have? What kind of self-reliance, as we call it, USAID. And then we have the denouement, and this is obviously the conclusion of the story, and this is where we ask our audience what we want them to do or to be left with. What's that lasting impression of the story?

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

And we also can show the impact of USAID programming, both on that s/hero character, and then we zoom back a little bit, and we show maybe the impact locally that USAID has had within that topic area. And then even globally, if we have those. So kind of just want to make sure that our character follows that general arc throughout a written format or video format.

Stewart Hickman:

Okay, thanks, Jessica. That's a really helpful context, and two essential elements of the good story, the story arc and then the s/hero narrative. What we're going to do now, we're going to have an opportunity to explore these two methodologies a bit deeper, in smaller groups. So what's going to happen is our producers, Janina and Soojin are going to guide us into two breakout rooms, one of two breakout rooms, and then we'll have 15 minutes together as a small group to watch a video. We're going to reflect on that video and apply the two storytelling methodologies that that Jess just introduced us to. And so Janina, can you take us to our breakouts and explain?

Janina Acevedo-Yates:

Absolutely, Stew, thank you. In just a few moments, you will be automatically transitioned into a breakout room, or a smaller virtual room. Here you have advanced capabilities, so we request that you please refrain from clicking stop sharing at any time. A producer will be in each room to ensure that the technology is working properly, and the facilitator will also be in each room helping to guide the group's reflection. Furthermore, you'll receive a series of broadcast messages during your time in these small breakout rooms. That will help us all keep to time. We will now transition into breakouts.

Janina Acevedo-Yates:

Okay everyone. Welcome back to our main space. You are now back in plenary. If you have unmuted your microphone, please go ahead and re mute your microphone by clicking the microphone icon, and I would gladly now hand it over to Stew.

Stewart Hickman:

So thanks, Janina and Soojin, for arranging that system. So we're back from our two breakout rooms, and you can see [inaudible 00:14:22] on the screens in front of you, you see the conversations from breakout room one at the top, and then breakout room two at the bottom. And I think... Am I right, Janina that everyone can kind of see all the comments and can they scroll through?

Janina Acevedo-Yates:

That's correct, Stew. We do invite participants to please read through what your colleagues have written on the screen.

Stewart Hickman:

Okay. So you can, if you were in two, you might want to have a look at what we said in breakout room one, and likewise if you were with Janina and me in breakout room one, you can see how the people in breakout room two responded to those same two questions.

Stewart Hickman:

Let me just jump in with a few comments. I think on the s/hero narrative, and this video is such a great way of exemplifying the thing that Jess was talking about, where the focus is on an individual in there, and they carry with them the struggles of a whole group of people. But it really helps us to dive into a person's life, and begin to see the world from their perspective. And I think that's something that everyone kind of picked up on as they are watching the story of Tanya. We get to see a specific person in a specific setting, but we also get to see and revel in her success and overcoming her struggle. And indeed, leveraging her experience to then turn around and help other people, I think is what we saw there.

Stewart Hickman:

And on the story arc, this is interesting. We're asking about key details of the character. So we sort of learn about her, we learn about the issues that these people are facing, we learn about how this person is empowered. And there was a comment in, I think it was in room two, that we're all... The takeaway is that we're all humans, and should be treated with dignity and respect just by the fact that we're human and sharing the human experience.

Stewart Hickman:

Okay. So I think what we're going to do now is... Any other things that need to be clarified? Are we just going to transition to this next bit?

Stewart Hickman:

Okay. Thanks everyone. I hope that you enjoyed that experience, and being able to apply some of the things that we're learning as we go through. So we had an opportunity to look into what comprises a good story. And so now we want to figure out how to capture a good story, and what it means to do that. And fortunately we have with us today, as I said, Marco Bollinger, and he's joining us today for this portion of the session. And what we're really going to dive into is what he called Impact Storytelling. So Marco, can you tell us a little bit about your focus on creating a call to action?

Marco Bollinger:

Hey Stu. Yeah. Well first of all, thanks for having me. I guess you guys are all seeing this slide here. This was my answer to why the hell am I here, and why are you listening to me? And the rough answer is, I've been doing this a long time. I've shot a huge range of stories over my career. And so, I'm going to share a few things that are specific to my process, which obviously totally relate to everything that Jessica and Stu had been sharing here. And just a few more details on what it is that I focus on when I'm thinking through this kind of a story, and building a much larger project around it. So Impact Storytelling.

Janina Acevedo-Yates:

Marco. I'm so sorry if I must interrupt, can you please increase your microphone volume just a little bit? We want to make sure that we can capture your full story.

Marco Bollinger:

How's that? That's not maxed out, but let me know if you can hear me.

Janina Acevedo-Yates:

That sounds very good. Thank you.

Marco Bollinger:

Okay. All right. So Impact Storytelling. It's kind of self explanatory, but the way that I define this is to use stories to drive social actions. And one of the critical components to that is making these large scale issues, whether they're social or environmental, much more relatable through simple emotional stories. And one of the best tools, as we're talking about, is a hero. So one of the issues I think we all have to deal with is cutting through the noise. There's a lot of information out there. As documentarians, as storytellers, we always come up against it.

Marco Bollinger:

I'm showing this image because this is one of my photos that was able to do that. And the reason is, number one, that it's a little bit different, right? At the time that I was publishing this photograph, everything out there was very down, depressing refugee camp, and I was focusing on kids, and what really struck me was this resilience. And you give kids the space, the safe space, they really return to being kids. This is really important, given that as human beings, when an issue is too big for us, when there's too many faces and names and numbers, we actually shut down. Our emotional capacity diminishes as we attempt to understand something through logic.

Marco Bollinger:

So this is where storytelling can be really, really powerful, and why it's often best to focus on one hero character. This hero character is going to bring context, and help you connect to an issue without your logical mind, more through emotion. So, and slide. So here's an example of a hero story. I love this because this is a very simple story. The way that I heard it, I read an article about this woman, Maria Assi, who became kind of this hero that really led me on this four year journey to make this documentary.

Marco Bollinger:

And so this is the power of what you all have the capacity to do. You're on the ground, in often places that are connected to people on the ground. And this story had two photographs, and just an explanation of some of the work that Maria was doing. It was so inspiring to me, given the context of the Syrian refugee crisis and everything that I basically, long story short, packed up my cameras and went to Lebanon to go meet this woman. And talk to her, and find out what was going on. What I learned from her, and this is what's so important about heroes and their stories, they contextualize the situation, what is happening on the ground. For me, it was really the value of these child safe zones in Lebanon.

Marco Bollinger:

So what I want to move into now is kind of the idea of where you want to land your context through your hero story. For me, in Impact Storytelling, it's critical to have a call to action. You want to tell a great story, you want to entertain, you want to emotionally engage. But where, as Jessica said, do you want to leave your audience? And how, if they're motivated, can they get involved in some way? So one of the tools that I always use is some very simple fact. I think that this is really a powerful, powerful tool to set context. As I mentioned before, the more information you give that puts you in your logical brain, the less people will emotionally connect, and oftentimes remember less, act less. So for me, it was really this idea that 50% of refugees are children.

Marco Bollinger:

This fact slapped me in the face. At the time, several years ago, I wasn't even aware of this fact. It was embarrassing that I didn't know, and I realized if I didn't know, someone who's relatively engaged, there were probably a ton of other people who were missing this really powerful fact that gives a lot of context to the story I was going to tell.

Marco Bollinger:

The importance of a hero. We've been talking about this, Jessica mentioned this. I'm just putting this up as my little explanation of it, to bring it back up, because again, this is how you're going to cut through the noise, how you're going to engage your audience emotionally, and really importantly, how you're going to contextualize the story. I mean, we saw it with Tanya. There was almost no need to talk about the elements of the program she was in. All you had to understand was the context on the ground, what she faced, see how she grew into this empowered character, and you were pretty much sold on what the program was doing.

Marco Bollinger:

So moving on from this, and getting to your call to action, it goes back to, in my opinion, the definition of Impact Storytelling. What do you want people to do? And once you figure that out, you can work back to, what is the context you really want to highlight through your hero, to make the work, the situation, everything relatable.

Marco Bollinger:

So here's a few examples. This is a safe zone in Lebanon. I shot this photograph, and it's pretty uplifting, right? But what if I told you that all of these children are child laborers, and work eight hours a day in the potato fields? And this is one or two hours in a day they get to actually be kids. How does that change how you feel? And if I go a little bit further, and I mentioned that all of these child laborers are child laborers, because come winter in Lebanon, freezing, all the farming shuts down, they will freeze to death and starve if they don't work. Children are having to fend for themselves like adults in these situations. How does that change your feeling, given the photographs I'm showing to you? You've seen these uplifting photos, these are gorgeous children. If I tell you that this seven year old is parenting these other three and four year olds, how does that make you feel when you understand the context of this situation, and how does it make you feel when I tell you that this is the place they live and play?

Marco Bollinger:

This is another tool of storytelling, is don't stick with one emotion. Don't just tell people how bad it is. Lift them up, show them the hope, so you can bring them back down and show them the reality. So again, what if I told you how beautifully they sing in their refugee choir, and then talk to you about how brutal the environment is, where they work every day in the potato fields? What if I show you how beautiful and cute they are, and told you that every one of these children is facing the brutal possibility of early marriage and all of the awful things that come with early child marriage?

Marco Bollinger:

So that kind of gives you a little bit of context of where I come from, and how I bring context to images and stories through these individual humans, to make people care and feel emotionally connected to what they're seeing, what they're looking at. And you guys are going to get to see a couple, two minutes of one of my films that kind of shows you a little bit of how you can engage people through a story, and personify the issue and the action you want people to care about.

Janina Acevedo-Yates:

Thanks Marco. Similarly, as we did before, your screen will shift to a new browser, with the video prompted. Please click play, and then redirect back to this aid connect session upon finishing the video.

Khadija:

Janina Acevedo-Yates:

All right. I do invite you, as you have now finished the video, to come back into the AIDConnect room.

Marco Bollinger:

All right. Welcome back everyone. So... Oh yeah, we ready to go?

Marco Bollinger:

So just to wrap up, I was asked to share what were some of the results of this project, and I would never claim that this was a direct result of my work and my film, it was a collaborative effort with the organization that I worked with, and all of the hard work that they do to create these educational safe zones for child laborers. But the Norway Refugee Council funded a permanent school next to the agricultural field for child laborers, as a result of the collaborative work that we all did together. And the excellent, excellent work that this organization, Beyond Association, does with these kids. Two of the films from my refugee kids series screened at the Cannes International Film Festival, and that has led to a fairly wide viewership of the film. Which also led to me getting a grant last year to go back a couple of years later to the camp, and do a storytelling workshop with the girls from the film. And the film we've created from that premiered in Dubai last fall.

Marco Bollinger:

This is me with a couple of the girls at the new school. It's a really amazing place to visit, and an incredible place of hope for these kids. Again, I am completely sold on the power and need for safe spaces for kids, and the power of education. And that was the main call to action of this entire project. This aid organization, while everybody else was focused on emergency relief, food, shelter, water, medicine, they focused on providing places where kids could become kids again, which in my opinion and everything I've witnessed, was and is one of the most powerful ways to build community. The sounds of children coming back to this community, and parents having something to look forward to, and these education centers and banding together as a community to build a better future for their kids, was one of the most therapeutic and healing things I've ever seen in a refugee camp.

Marco Bollinger:

So that's about it. Thank you so much. I'm obviously... I love the work that you all do. So if I can ever help or answer questions or brainstorm, please don't feel shy about reaching out.

Stewart Hickman:

Thanks Marco. That's fabulous. What a very powerful and impactful presentation about Impact Storytelling. And I'm sure that we are left with feelings and images from what you shared with us that will call us to action. So now what do we do with these good stories? Just in the few minutes that we

have left, Jessica, can you kind of give us a sense of... Because part of our call to action is to watch for, scan our environment and watch for these stories, and then what do we do?

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

Exactly. Now that we all speak the same language of what a s/hero narrative is, and what makes a good s/hero of character, I encourage everyone to scan their work environment, their program, their mission, talk to their partners and identify those characters that they think would make great stories. And then engage, very simply. With the time I've left, I've done a podcast on this, so I can send it out as a resource actually afterwards, more details about blogging. But work with your mission doc, or work with your local DRG officer, or write to me. I'm always happy to help edit and finesse and brainstorm anything to do with storytelling, in terms of what goes into [inaudible 00:35:45] blog, and how to get your interview with your character. At AID, right now we have, as you can see on your screen, we have two main platforms, Exposure and Medium, and it depends on what you're trying to highlight in your blog.

Jessica Benton-Cooney:

The Exposure is more like a photo essay, so it has 25 to 30 really strong photos, and very light on text. So it's about 500 words. And then we have the USAID Medium blog. And this is one of my favorites, because it's tied with your Twitter accounts, which tends to get more likes and metrics. And it's about 900 words. But again, I can help you write those. And I will be sending out more resources as a follow up. I know that we don't have time to answer all your questions, but I think we have one minute, if anybody has something pressing.

Marco Bollinger:

I saw one question that was interesting in the chat here, about is it important to have the negative and the positive in a story, not just the positive. And I would say, yes. I think that the negative completely will create dynamism between the potential positive, or the ray of light or hope or whatnot. So 100%. Typically, story arcs either start a little dark, get positive and come back dark, or they start bright and come down into the darkness and come back up. You probably want to decide what is better for your arc, in terms of what you're trying to get people to do. My stories, I wanted to start with hope and end with hope, and I realized that actually I was doing a disservice to the situation and these kids by allowing people to feel like, "Oh, things are okay," if it ends hopeful. So I really felt like I needed to come back to the uncertainty or the difficulty, but that would be my answer to that question.

Stewart Hickman:

Yeah. It looks like we are going to need to wrap up. You'll see that the screen will shift, and we'll be taken to our final screen for you to provide any feedback that you might have on today's discussion. Want to give a special thanks to you and our guests today, Jess and Marco, who shared their expertise and insights on this power of storytelling. Please feel free to access any of the resources provided during today's meeting, as they're currently located in the links to download and file share pods. And on behalf of the USA ID DRG center, thank you for attending today's session. We look forward to seeing you at our next DRG Tipping Point session, on May the fifth. Topic's going to be social and behavior change, so have a great day. Thank you, everyone. Stay safe.