

Claire Stevenson Memorial Lecture

Carers NSW AGM November 2006

Thank you for that introduction.

And thank you as well to Carers New South Wales for inviting me here and for giving me the opportunity to put together some thoughts I've been developing for a while now, thoughts about telling stories.

And I'd like to add another thanks, to my mother, who's here today. Without her, I wouldn't be here at all. But the reason I'm saying thank you to her now is that, many years ago, she took me to meet Claire Stevenson and I still remember that meeting very well.

This talk today is a bit of a ramble about storytelling throughout history – from the stone age to the digital age. And I've realised that I've lived, and done most of my writing through a very exciting period when the technology of writing changed dramatically, and so I'm also going to go on a bit about what some of those changes have done for me. So it's a bit global/historical, a bit personal/unreliable.

And I have to admit that whenever I plan something like this, I always think I'm going to have more time than I actually do, so I want start out by apologising for the poor quality of some of the images in this presentation and a further apology to all the people whose copyright I've infringed by using their images without permission.

No one knows how long storytelling has been going on, but 15 thousand to 25 thousand years ago, when early people painted these caves in France and at around the same time, or possibly even earlier, ancestors of Indigenous Australians painted these images in the Kimberleys and although no one really know why they were painted, I bet they were associated with storytelling. I bet that when people went into these places, they didn't just look at the pictures, they told stories about them.

For most of human history, storytellers told their stories to relatively small groups of people who gathered around them.

This is the Stage 1 of storytelling

A story teller spoke to a group of people who were within earshot. There was a direct relationship between the author and the audience.

The story didn't exist in any form outside the memory of the storyteller and the individual and collective memories of the audience.

We don't really know what sort of stories they told, but the evidence suggests they were the big epics like The Iliad and The Odyssey, and the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and so on.

These and other similar stories were about the big, ongoing battles between good and evil, epic stories about the corruptibility of men and women, and about the power of sex as a motivator for great and terrible deeds. Not that they went on much about sex, not like we do today, but it was there in the background.

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All of these stories were written orally. In other words, they were made up and remembered and recited, and almost always, they were in verse. Being in verse probably makes a long story easier to remember.

And they were very long stories, told over many nights. And what is really interesting is that they were often not simple linear stories.

The Odyssey, for example, starts in the middle with Odysseus a captive of the beautiful nymph, Calypso. With help from Athena, he gets away, gets washed off his raft by Poseidon, washes up on another country where he is looked after by Nausicaa and as a response to her hospitality, he tells the story of all his adventures so far. Then, with his story told up to the middle, he goes on to find his way home and kill off all the suitors who'd been hanging around his wife, Penelope for the last dozen years.

It's good stuff, isn't it.

Big stories were made up of smaller stories, which could be told in a single sitting, and the whole epic was made up of a mosaic or tapestry of all the smaller stories.

And this is how storytelling went on for thousands and thousands of years. This is most of human history.

Until the development of a new technology

Writing

I'm not talking about the early character writing in China or Egyptian hieroglyphics or cuneiform because these were not ever used to record great stories. It took the invention of writing in ink and a convenient script or alphabet which happened in China and Europe a couple of thousand years ago. In Ancient Greece, when Plato and Socrates were still alive, this new media was a cause for worry. Plato wasn't impressed. He said that it would corrupt the minds of the youth.

Plato said that writing would do two bad things. It would lead to people losing their ability to remember. And he was right. In Plato's day, people could remember long, long poems, tens of thousands of lines, after only a few hearings, and get them word perfect. Within a couple of generations, that ability was lost forever.

He also predicted that it was dangerous to write things down because a future audience would misunderstand the words of the writer. In traditional storytelling, the storyteller is there to monitor the response of the audience, to add explanation or caution if necessary.

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This is one of those points of major change in the history of the world because from this point on, there was a break between the author and the audience.

This is Stage 2 of storytelling.

We have a storyteller separate from the story, which now exists in a written form which can survive even if everyone who is familiar with the story dies. And the story now existed in a recoverable form to be read by an audience well beyond the voice of the storyteller, in other parts of the world, other cultures and other times.

And I know I'm concentrating on storytelling, but the really dramatic shift that occurred with writing was that from this point on, history was no longer what people could remember. History could exist in a permanent, or fairly permanent form. Knowledge could exist in a form with could be transmitted beyond mere word of mouth.

But for a long time, writing was laborious and copying took the same amount of time as the writing down of the original text. So generally, the only things to be written down were important documents, things about property and money, and especially debts, and of course anything to do with religion and royalty.

I've always hoped that one day they'd dig up a scroll and find all the jokes they used to tell back in those ancient times. The Book of Jokes as far as I'm concerned is one of the sadly missing books of the Bible.

Now we rush through a bit of history, passing over the invention of paper, of printing, moveable type and up to the invention of the printing press, about a thousand years ago in China and roughly five hundred years ago in Europe and then we have printing houses and we have books.

And now we had publishers and this takes us to Stage 3 of storytelling

From this point on, this space between the author and the audience gets more crowded because in between are middlemen, the people who owned the presses, the people who were starting to make the decisions about which stories were printed and which were not.

Books are a very important part of this history. Books were portable, they were relatively cheap, and suddenly all sorts of people could have them and this added to a push for increasing literacy and that added to the demand for books and so the audience for stories grew dramatically. Books lead to the creation of the modern novel and audiences grew and grew and grew.

Around this time, there was another important development. Because of concerns about the growing monopolies of the publishers, King Charles the Second of England introduced the Licensing Act in 1662 and then the Statute of Anne was passed by the British Parliament in 1710 which established roughly the system of copyright which allowed authors to licence their works to a publisher. And, in some cases, get very, very rich.

But there was still this group of middlemen between the author and the audience.

We skate now lightly over some more history, the invention of photography, the invention of sound recording, put those two together and you get the motion picture and a split second later you get the motion picture industry with production studios, cinemas, distributors and suddenly we're in stage 4 of storytelling and by now the audience is huge but there are more and more people between the author and the audience.

Add colour, add television and we're up to the 1970s with audiences in the hundreds of millions and we have broadcasters and networks and even more people between the author and the audience, more people with the power to say No.

This is something a lot of writers, a lot of storytellers complain about. They feel that the major broadcasters are only interested in a fairly narrow range of stories and so there are a lot of other kinds of stories which never get told. Whether those stories would be popular or not is something that never gets tested because they don't get made in the first place.

There are two things I've jumped over in this history and so we should just pause for a moment and go back. Up until now I've been giving you a quick run over the history of verbal storytelling, but alongside telling stories in words is a long tradition of non verbal storytelling.

And I don't just mean using pictures in their various forms because usually these were just an illustration of a part of a story.

For thousands and thousands of years, people have told stories in music and dance, stories like those told by indigenous Australians about events in their daily lives and about the animals in the world around them.

And more recently, about three and a half thousand years ago, in the Tang Dynasty in China, shadow puppets were invented to stage the great stories of the day. This tradition spread through Asia and many of you will be familiar with the shadow puppets of Bali. Usually these were used to tell familiar stories, instalments of the great sagas about archetypal characters and it was the combination of these images and music which created a rich and emotional form of theatre.

And there's one more ingredient.

We often forget that we had animation before we had photography and the cinema. In fact, if you Google animation history, all main references are to animation after the invention of film.

But this is a zoetrope, an early nineteenth century invention, a cylinder with slits in the side and if you made the cylinder spin and looked through the slits, you would see moving images on the far wall of the drum.

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Paper strips could be placed inside the drum, typically showing a repeated and continuous movement, like running or jumping.

It did take the invention of cinema before animation really took off and joined storytelling but in fact, animation started before cinema.

In fact, it was animation that attracted my attention and led me to think about being a storyteller.

Now we get to the personal bit.

When I was twelve, I won a competition in the Sunday Junior Telegraph. You had to write a letter saying what you'd like to be when you grew up and the newspaper would give you a go at it and I thought if I said I wanted to be an animator and I'd like to visit the Disney studios, they'd take me to Hollywood. What I got was a quick tour of the Telegraph artists studio which was a considerable disappointment but probably an important lesson in growing up.

At the end of High School, I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I looked through the subjects available at Sydney University and saw that if I did Architecture, the course would include art. As a hormone enhanced teenager, I thought this meant nudes. What we actually got was plaster casts of feet. But I did meet people like Grahame Bond who went on to become famous as Auntie Jack on television, and I worked with Graham on the first Architecture Reviews.

And that's what led me to writing.

I started writing in pencil in exercise books. I used an HB pencil because it was easy to rub out. There are some habits you acquire as an architect that you never lose – you like to be neat.

I decided I should learn to type, and I bought an Olivetti Valentine. I bought it because it was designed by Italian Ettore Sottsass, and it was a classic of modern design.

When I bought my first computer and I stayed with Olivetti. This machine was IBM compatible, ran an 8086 chip at the astonishing rate of 8 megahertz. It had two 5 1/4 inch floppy drives, one for the program and one for the data, so this machine had the B drive which is missing from all modern PCs. And by the way, I started work on Microsoft Word 1.1.

Olivetti stopped making PCs and I'm now working on a Dell and the developments in modern computing have allowed me to do more than just write and deliver scripts. For example, in a telemovie which went into production at the end of last year, I wanted to make use of animation.

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The telemovie is called Stepfather of the Bride and by coincidence, it was on the ABC a couple of weeks ago.

The mention of animation in a telemovie made people nervous. Animation is expensive. I wanted to show that the sort of animation I had in mind could be simple and so I did this, in PowerPoint.

This is a story about a wedding. Here is the bride, here is the groom, here is the bride's mother, here is the bride's father, here is the bride's father's third wife, here is the bride's mother's second husband, this is me, by the way, I'm the stepfather of the bride. This is the groom's mother, this is the groom's father, this is the groom's father's girlfriend, this is the groom's mother's girlfriend, here are the bridesmaids, and their boyfriends. This is the best man. He hasn't got a girlfriend. But he is very keen on the bride. It was going to be a wonderful wedding.

I'm not an animator. But what I wanted to show was that the animation I was planning for inclusion in the telemovie needn't be complicated or expensive.

I wanted to use animation to tell backstory and to do it in a way that was amusing too, if I could. Here's another example. I did two of these to show the producers and the ABC that it wasn't going to be too hard.

Just so we're clear, this is Sophie and Skye, mother and daughter. This is me, I'm Daniel, and this is Jack. We're father and Son. Jack and Lachlan are best mates. Sophie and I are husband and wife, second time round for both of us. Skye and Lachlan are the bride and groom to be and Skye and Jack are step sister and step brother as a result of Skye's mother, Sophie, getting married to me. I hope this makes things clearer.

I feel that from my HB pencil nearly thirty years ago, to my current computer (which is actually three years old now and I'm about to upgrade) but I feel I've lived and worked through a period of computer and internet development which has brought us up to Stage 5 in the history of storytelling.

This is Stage 5 in the history of storytelling and this is where most writers in developed countries are today.

Writers can use the tools of new media to help them present their ideas.

There are already forms of software which allow writers who can't draw to give a visual treatment to their story. You can create a storyboard.

It takes a while to put a complete storyboard together, but if you persist with it, it can help you to communicate your idea better.

These programs are going to get better and better.

Part of me is very excited by this. As a writer I could use this software and almost make a complete film, all on my own.

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But I do have a couple of reservations about this.

For example, I've played with some simpler, script reading programs. Programs like Word and Final Draft and others will read your script for you, but, not without teething problems at this stage.

If a line of dialogue was something like – Good morning, Col.

Final Draft would read this as – Good morning Colonel.

But for me, the greatest reservation about doing it all myself is that I love working with actors. One of the great joys of writing for performance is seeing what extra dimension a really good actor can bring to a character and I wouldn't want to miss out on that. And, I love working with directors, and cinematographers, and designers. I think, at heart, I'm a collaborator.

But, back to the wonderful world of new technology.

I love what you can find on the Internet. For example, if you're not sure how to spell Tegucigalpa, (why would you might want to spell Tegucigalpa is not important here) but you can have a go at spelling it in a Google search and Google will ask you, did you mean... and give you the correct spelling. I love that.

Plus I can get all the world's great newspapers, Doonesbury, and a whole lot more including, of course, Wikipedia and just about any other encyclopaedia or reference source you want.

It's the best library I've never owned.

But there's one more important aspect to all this.

Stage 5 in the history of storytelling allows us to cut out all the middle people, make content and send it directly to our audience.

There's a word for his, naturally, it wouldn't be long before someone came up with a word for it, and it's disintermediation and I love that word.

You can make a program and get it out there to be seen by an audience and you don't need a broadcaster or publisher or even a web page, because there are all sorts of sites where you can up load your material and they'll host it for you, sites like YouTube and MySpace and MetaCafe

and many others. They all do much the same thing, take your content and make money out of it.

True, some of them give a bit back with say a once a week offer of a prize for the person whose video gets the most votes, but they're still got a pretty good business plan. They get huge amounts of content at next to no cost.

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On a site like currenttv.com, they'll not only pay for viewer voted material, they take it off the net and broadcast it over the current cable tv network in America, that's Al Gore's tv network, and you can even get help on line, support on how to make, shoot and edit your video and that's free.

You can also get feedback from the people who watch what you've made. This is almost like a full circle, right back to Stage 1 of storytelling, direct contact with your audience, except that your audience now is anyone anywhere in the world who has Internet access. I covered all this because I wanted to emphasise what a remarkable world we're living in.

Before I go on I should pause to mention that I haven't covered mobile telephony and all the services you can now get through your mobile, even though there are now film festivals for movies shot entirely on mobile phones as well as mobisodes, little drama serials made for distribution over G3 mobile phones, and nor have I covered text messaging which is more than just another way of communicating. And nor have I covered iPods or podcasting, even though there's an awful lot of this from a lot of sources, but we're looking at similar sorts of material, broadcast or distributed in different ways. So I'm going to jump over this and ask the question I've been leading to.

What has all this technology and creativity and opportunity done for storytelling in the digital age?

Well, for one thing, there's an awful lot of it.

YouTube gets more than sixty thousand new videos uploaded every day so with My Space and MetaCafe and all the others, that's hundreds of thousands of new bits of material being added into this vast and expanding thing we call the Internet.

However, there's an awful lot of it that you wouldn't classify as storytelling.

A lot of it is Hey, look at this, like funny things pets do, or kids on skateboards, or traffic accidents and a whole lot of pervy stuff for people who want to catch glimpses of women's underwear, and I'm not going to show you any of this, I've just got this boring little thing of fish in a tank and it's even in black and white. This is the kind of thing people film and put onto the Internet for others to see. I'm sorry I haven't got the technology to show you this in motion, but honestly, that's all it was, a couple of fish in a tank.

There's a great deal of material from people who record themselves in their bedroom, talking at you, giving you an opinion on something.

Or they're teenage boys showing you what happens if you drops some Mentos into a bottle of diet coke.

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As I said, this is not storytelling. This is Me too. This is someone who wants to join in, who wants to say, look, I've got something on YouTube. I've done it, I've put something out there. In a way, it's kind of a modern graffiti.

And this mirrors what's happening in other media as well. Many people have noticed the explosion of opinion pieces in our newspapers, complete with photographs of the journalist. In some newspapers, these photos are getting larger and they're now in colour. There's a reason for this. It is all content, it fills up space. And as a commentator pointed out recently, it makes good sense economically because fact is expensive, opinion is cheap.

Here's another conclusion.

Stories are getting shorter.

There's a market for very short stories.

People have been making short films for a long time, but a little while ago, television discovered an appetite for what came to be called, interstitials. These were little programs inserted into the spaces left over by other programs which weren't quite long enough to fill up the space in the schedule. SBS has been running these for a while, for example, they showed Marion and Geoff, a very well written series, shot entirely single camera inside a car with Rob Brydon fretting over the fact that his wife Marion had run off with his best friend Geoff.

People say that this is happening, stories are getting shorter, because our attention span is getting shorter.

I'm not sure that this is true, but there are some things you can argue with.

Back at the beginning of all this, the tribe gathering around the storyteller would have been pretty disappointed if the story only lasted a couple of minutes.

And it's true that in Shakespeare's day, plays could last for three or four hours and quite a lot of the audience was happy to stand through the whole performance.

However, there are a couple of things that have happened to storytelling in the past twenty of fifty years.

We're exposed to a lot more of it. With movies and television alone, we see a lot more drama and comedy than anyone in history before us. I'll explain how this affects us.

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Some time in the 1960s, the Elizabethan Theatre Company toured country Australia with a musical called Salad Days. In the NSW town of Nyngan, it was hugely popular, so popular that the local newspaper, the Nyngan Clarion, got one of its reporters to write a glowing double page spread review in which he raved about the singing and the dancing and the acting. This review was so good that the Elizabeth Theatre decided that whenever they toured again, they would go to Nyngan, and two years later they went back there with a very different play, Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night. The reviewer wrote his second review, and he wrote, Long Day's Journey Into Night, by Eugene O'Neill, is probably a good play, but it could have done with some singing.

And I overheard a conversation after a performance by the Bell Shakespeare Company. I can't remember which of Shakespeare's plays it was, it doesn't matter, but I overheard someone say, "It was good, but not a patch on The Lion King."

In other words, the more exposed you are to more stories and dramas and productions, the more you learn about storytelling and the more critical you become. And this can lead to some impatience if you feel that something isn't measuring up to your expectations.

I've noticed that I've become a lot more impatient than I used to be. And not just with television. I often find with a novel I'm reading that I start turning the pages and saying, come on, get on with it.

In relation to stories delivered over the Internet, there's been a technological reason for keeping them short and that has to do with how long you have to wait around for the download. As more people connect to broadband and as broadband speeds increase, much longer pieces will be available. In fact, in CalTech university a couple of years ago, a new method of file transfer has been trialled in which a full length movie could be downloaded in under three seconds. OK, that's in laboratory conditions, but it is the direction we're headed in.

And despite my lack of success with Tripping Over, you can now download episodes of comedies and dramas and there's evidence that people are watching these programs on their iPods and other devices, on their way to work and so on.

Broadcasters want things to happen quickly to grab the attention of the audience as soon as possible and definitely before the first commercial break.

This is particularly true of television. I think movies can unfold more slowly. Once someone has paid for their ticket, generally they don't walk out in the first fifteen or twenty minutes. So you can have a movie like The Departed

where it takes more than half the movie before the two main protagonists are set against each other. You kind of know it's coming, well, you do if you've read reviews that tell you the story, but it takes a while to get there.

In some ways, the sci fi movie, Alien is a better example, because for the first forty minutes, almost nothing happens. But it's a case of nothing happening with a huge amount of expectation that something is going to happen.

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So there's been an explosion of storytelling, stories seem to be getting shorter, the pace of storytelling has increased, but has this been good for us.

Here we are way back in the beginning with our original storyteller, and the only resources they had available

A brain and a mouth

But today's storyteller has a computer with a vast array of software

With access to the Internet

A mobile phone

Which as well as being a global communicating device can deliver music, news and entertainment

And is probably a still camera as well as a movie camera

And there's probably also an iPod or some other device for listening to and watching podcasts and vodcasts and

There's also a TV with a DVD hard drive and

A well ordered collection of movie and television classics

Not to forget books and magazines and newspapers and reference manuals

And the question is

With all these resources in addition to the human brain, has storytelling got any better?

I don't think there's a case to say that it has. We've got quantity but I don't think you could say we have an improvement in quality.

I read someone commenting on the state of journalism who said that computers have allowed journalists to produce in bulk, but only with a loss of quality. And many people have commented that today's computer generated newspapers have more typos and errors in them than there used

to be in the days when printing was done with moveable type and hot metal.

I don't think you can argue that William Shakespeare, sitting at his desk with his array of quill pens was handicapped by not having a computer and access to the Internet.

Jane Austin seemed to be able to write enduring and entertaining novels sitting at a table in the family living room, writing in longhand.

On the other hand, nor did Bill or Jane have anyone to tell them that unless they could capture the 18 to 35 audience, their plays wouldn't go on and their books wouldn't be published.

And it's not just the storytellers who have all these resources at their fingertips, so does the audience and so there's a lot more competition for attention.

This is particularly true for the very audience, the 18 to 35 year olds that the commercial stations are trying so hard to capture. These people are watching less and less television. They're spending their time on the net, on their mobile, with their iPod, and possibly doing all these things at the same time.

In this environment, the commercial television networks are worried. They can see their audiences getting smaller and smaller. They know that even more competition is on the way. So they're nervous. And the levels of locally made, Australian drama are falling.

In this environment, we need the ABC more than ever.

In the areas of information, of news and current affairs, we need a reliable, independent source and only the ABC can do that.

I'm not ignoring SBS, but although SBS is a government broadcaster, it is much smaller, it's funding is smaller and it does have to rely on advertising to make up its finances.

I've heard people say that the Internet will provide all the diversity of opinion that we'll need. But some recent studies have shown that in an age when there is more information around than ever before, people are not better informed. There's a lot of misinformation on the Internet, some deliberate, some just ignorant.

These are from a few of the reputable blog sites, one from the New York Times, one from the Sydney Morning Herald, one from the BBC, but what is worrying is a recent US court decision which ruled that a newspaper does not have to take responsibility for checking the truth of blogs posted on their websites. In other words, they can publish on the Internet, items they wouldn't be allowed to publish in their newspapers.

So when you need to know what the truth is, we need to know there's an ABC with the funds and resources to research stories properly.

And in my area, storytelling, we need the ABC to bring us the stories that the commercial stations won't.

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I don't just mean Mother and Son. Although it's true that it was turned down by all the commercial channels before the ABC said yes. And it wasn't easy getting Mother and Son up on the ABC. They were nervous about a series about a middle aged man living with his ageing mother. In fact, I only just learnt recently, that even after two series of Mother and Son had been to air and had been successful, a senior executive at the ABC wanted to cut the program off and do something else because he thought its success wouldn't last.

Kath and Kim is a similar story. The commercial stations might like to get their hands on Kath and Kim now, but they wouldn't make the series back in the beginning. And it nearly didn't get started on the ABC.

And there are important stories about us and our recent history, stories like Blue Murder and Answered by Fire to name just two.

Just as it takes proper resources to research the facts behind a news story, it takes a good budget, a good amount of money and commitment to tell serious (and funny) real stories about us and the world around us.

This is not an attack on commercial television. There are solid commercial reasons that push commercial broadcasting into chasing an audience with sensational, often sleazy stories with are designed to appeal to an appetite for the shocking and titillating.

Probably the most extreme example of this was the intention up until a couple of days ago to broadcast an interview with O J Simpson, launching his book in which he told how he would have murdered his wife, if he had done it. I was pleased to see that some kind of ethics, or at least a sensitivity to public pressure, led Rupert Murdoch to cancel all that.

This is a plea for more support for public broadcasting.

Without appropriate support, we won't see stories about ordinary people, leading ordinary lives, without any sensationalism or titillation, people who are just wrestling with the sorts of problems that any of us could face in our daily lives.

Only today I was in a meeting with some people from mental health agencies talking about ways to get a more sympathetic and informed portrayal of people with mental health issues on the screen. Not in the sensational way that anything to do with mental health is portrayed most of the time, but in a more everyday sort of way to reflect the experience of a very large number of Australians who live with or near someone with a mental illness.

Most people with a mental condition are not violent. And they're loved and embraced by their families, even when they are sometimes very difficult.

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Television could do with a bit more of that.

Thank you.

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