

A MATTER OF DESIGN

MAKING SOCIETY THROUGH
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 5TH STS ITALIA CONFERENCE 2014

EDITED BY
CLAUDIO COLETTA
SARA COLOMBO
PAOLO MAGAUDDA
ALVISE MATTOZZI
LAURA LUCIA PAROLIN
LUCIA RAMPINO

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Proceedings of the 5th STS Italia Conference***

*Edited by Claudio Coletta, Sara Colombo, Paolo Magaudda, Alvise
Mattozzi, Laura Lucia Parolin and Lucia Rampino*

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*Contact: STS Italia, Via Carducci 32, 20123, Milano.
Email: stsitalia.org@gmail.com*

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Design Narratives and Social Narratives for Community Empowerment

Valentina ANZOISE ^a, Francesca PIREDDA ^{*b} and Simona VENDITTI ^b
^a Ca' Foscari University; ^b Politecnico di Milano

Considering Design as a set of practices that impact on the environment in which we lead our everyday activities, we assume that enacted narratives grounded on transmedia practices (formats based on audiovisual contents about communities and keeping with their surroundings) are able to support innovations stemming from local communities, as they constitute the most basic form of social life (Czarniawska, 2004). By presenting the case study of Plug Social TV, through which we experienced audio-visual languages and products in a collaborative process, we wish to discuss participatory design practices and storytelling both as opportunities for identity building and community engagement, and tools that can lead, support and amplify active communities' initiatives. By analysing the preliminary outcomes of this project, there can be identified two critical poles: on one hand, the design issue of having a strong communicative narrative structure within a participatory process; on the other hand, the lack of patterns recognition into a total fictional world, as a social issue. Our assumption is that the interdisciplinary work of designers, filmmakers and social scientists can build a setting enabling the inclusion of different kind of 'usable knowledges' (Fareri, 2009), facilitating interactions, enhancing reflexivity and generating feedback loops. Starting from the same case study, the paper presents a critical perspective on practices oriented to social innovation and on the use of storytelling in the design field and the of visual and narrative approach in social research.

Keywords: Narratives; social innovation; participatory practices; audiovisual language

Introduction

Enacted narratives are actions which are discursively constructed and undertaken, and can be considered as practices able to support innovations

* Corresponding author: **Francesca Piredda** | e-mail: francesca.piredda@polimi.it

stemming from local communities, since they constitute the most basic form of social life (Czarniawska, 2004). With the notion of *enacted narratives* we refer to the particular narratives ‘embodied’ and put into play by people, which instantiate (fully or partially) the narrative structures that narrators and listeners from the same narrative community share and can recognize as cultural facts. Tales and myths are among the highest expressions of narrative structures that circulate within a narrative community and that its members begin listening as infants and continue listening, and then telling, throughout their lives. E.g. probably most of European people know the tale of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, and have - somehow - *enacted* this narrative structure in their childhood (i.e. transgressing rules given by adults, etc.)

From the design point of view, a sustainable innovation process is a ‘social process of learning’ (Manzini, 2003). Different languages and formats can provide support to pursue this aim, e.g. in the realm of scenario building, visualizations of possible solutions and brief narratives describing the deepest motivations for people engagement are always needed (Carroll, 1995). Indeed, the social benefit of narratives can be then identified into the ability to create imaginary worlds that can be considered as reflective layers of reality, from which the narrative structure is transferred to the current context, generating actions which are driven by individual and/or collective narrative logics (Lane, 2005).

Narratives and communities

Narratives – primarily because of their sense-making function and as privileged ‘access’ to understand how individuals structure the unknown and social change occurs – constitute powerful resources for ‘designed’ or intentional action. Moreover, they help to explain the relationships between events in a process and encode all kinds of data that are relevant for a wide range of phenomena as they are among the ‘most widely used forms of organizing human experience’ (Bruner, 1991, p. 9).

Therefore, narrative accounts are constructs that serve to ‘enable and constrain further action and further accounting, regardless of who produces them’ (Pentland, 1999, p. 721). They are especially relevant because people do not simply tell stories, but they also enact them: being not just a form of representing but also of constituting reality (Bruner, 1991). Moreover, stories provide legitimacy and accountability for people’s actions as they respond to a *narrative logic* that allows individuals to make sense out of what is happening around them and to proactively plan and act even upon

arising challenges and uncertainties. Nonetheless, although narratives do not just reflect process but also shape them, they have not equal possibilities to drive changes: dominant discourses are inscribed in societal institutions, in text and discourses, behaviours and material culture, giving them enormous material advantages, whereby alternative discourses tend to remain marginalized (Witkin, 2010). Indeed, each group's narrative privileges some voices and silences others: they are exercises of power.

Selective silencing is an unavoidable feature of narrative: finding the silent voices and revealing the sources of power in a narrative constitute one purpose of deconstruction. Moreover, the loose link between intentional states and subsequent action is the reason why narrative accounts cannot provide causal explanations, although we can come to know the reasons and the interpretations given by individuals for things happening.

The elements sketched above lead us to the importance of detecting (and supporting) narratives (either dominant or emerging) as they are the basis of the construction and reproduction of communities and collective imaginaries, i.e. a narrative community consists of – a group of people – no matter if they have ever physically met each other, whose communion is based on the sharing and understanding of a set of narratives (and narrative structures). Just a limited number is at hands to produce the stories its members share, but they are the focal pivots upon which the identities of the group are constructed, actions are fostered and events are interpreted.

Therefore, the role of communication design in building and fostering capabilities that support the understanding and construction of narrative communities, is crucial.

Audiovisual storytelling and design for social innovation

Quoting Carl DiSalvo (2009) we might say that communication design has a crucial role in the construction of publics: because of rhetorical strategies for opening up meanings and adapting them, the communication designer can find the proper forms for re-shaping the artefacts and events produced by users and communities, both tracing the conditions and the consequences of an issue.

As designers and scholars with specific expertise in audio-visual storytelling and transmedia strategies, we are experimenting the contribution of communication within co-design process together with an

approach aimed at enabling social dialogue and the build up of shared visions using the transformative power of stories.

We have been exploring envisioning and storytelling as design acts towards a community-centred communication (Piredda, 2008; Galbiati, Piredda, Mattana and Bertolotti, 2010). Referring to the term *empowerment* as the process of enabling local communities to increase their active participation in social life, developing projects for the community itself and building a more liveable neighbourhood, we can describe audiovisual storytelling as a tool for people empowerment.

The idea that storytelling can play a role in the realm of design for social innovation is the main topic under discussion within the scientific community of design at the international level being promoted by IMAGIS research team - Politecnico di Milano, Design Academy Eindhoven and MAD Faculty/LUCA within the DESIS Philosophy Talks' series on Storytelling and Design for Social Innovation (www.desis-philosophytalks.org): in Dublin (November 2013), in Eindhoven (February and October 2014), in Milan (May 2014). In these contexts we have been discussing the topic of storytelling, what we can learn from taking a philosophical perspective, focusing on the role of storytelling in the practice of design for social innovation as enabling the opening up of underexplored ranges of meanings in contemporary society. Looking at the manifold ways design is using storytelling techniques within its practices, the analysis of some examples coming from designers themselves highlights the variety of styles and forms emerging both from the professional and research realms, having stories at every single stage of the design process for collecting testimonials, creating empathy or experiencing user's points of view embedding, performing or enacting their stories, providing people with further tools for telling stories, envisioning possible solutions or speculating about the future (forecasting).

For example, in the realm of scenario building, visualizations of possible solutions and brief narratives describing the deepest motivations for people engagement are always needed (Carroll, 1995). Quoting Nik Baerten's video-statement for the DESIS Philosophy Talk Storytelling #3, 'On the one hand [stories] can be considered tools to establish a common ground for discussion; secondly, they're tools in order to gain insight into people's perspectives; and last but not least, they're tools to engage or move people.

[...] Stories could play a role bridging the existing situation, the world as it is and the world that could be, allowing people and designers as well to render tangible how they experience one and how they would like to experience the other, with hopes and fears, establishing a sense of distance.

[...] Stories enable us to establish kaleidoscopic views on how the situation could be in the future, establishing pathways of change and engaging people to use their imagination’.

Furthermore, the DESIS in the Mirror project (Bertolotti, Mendoza e Piredda, 2013) by IMAGIS - Politecnico di Milano and DESIS Network, focuses on audiovisual storytelling in particular, discussing why video is such a powerful communication tool, how social innovation projects are communicated through video and what could be improved encouraging the cross-fertilization of filmmaking and design practices. ‘Documentation and audiovisual contents are a privileged way to capture transformations’, says Andres Burbano Valdez (DESI Colombia); ‘It is a very powerful way of communicating complex ideas to people’, as Mugendi K. M’Rithaa (CPUT DESIS Lab, Cape Town) underlines. Then, according to François Jégou (DESI Network - STS) audiovisual storytelling is able ‘to inspire all social innovators, designers, architects, urban planners, politicians in changing the way they invent new solutions or new policies’.

Participatory video is a social interaction process, which uses audiovisual tools to enable dialogue within a community. By directly giving people the management and the control of the expressive tool, they can discuss themes and methods on how to face issues affecting the community itself.

In this field, different experiences share the use of documentaries in a social-anthropological context, but they differ from a methodological point of view since they use different and multidisciplinary techniques and approaches, often merging them together.

Participatory video is a process born to support fieldwork (Collizzolli, 2010). Nevertheless, three main elements are common and peculiar: it is a scriptless video process (audiovisual language is a key element of expression, without any definition of the subject beforehand); it is directed by a group of grassroots people; it moves forward in iterative cycles of shooting-reviewing, activating mechanisms of internal dialogue and self-awareness. Moreover, participatory video process generates both horizontal feedbacks with communities sharing similar problems all over the world and vertical feedbacks linking decision makers and the community itself.

Self-documentation and self-narration, within participatory video processes, represent a way for people to express themselves and make them able to spread their experiences as small but meaningful stories (Collizzolli, 2010). ‘As a mediation tool, the power of video was used to help resolve conflicts, achieve consensus and find a common ground for collective action. Video [...] demonstrates how powerful images can be used in documenting

realities, [...] using those realities to bring about significant changes' (White, 2003). Participatory video could enter the early stages of the design process developing an audio-visual text that claims to fit into a mainstream. Story making and video-making as participatory processes need a strategy to become scalable. They have then a cathartic role for the community itself, facilitating interaction and enabling self-expression, but, in order to pursue and widespread beyond the effective surroundings, narrative worlds have to be unfold in transmedia storytelling. It is all about opening up and expanding a storyworld across media platforms and engaging the audience within the transmedia practices as open systems of participation (Gambarato, 2013).

Since video *per se* is not enough, we are experimenting Social TV as a platform to foster feedback process between stakeholders, helping people to become free not only to arrange their daily life with innovative sustainable solutions, but also to nurture their projects step by step. Our hypothesis is that such a platform could then give them voice, make them able to share values and promote the evolution of ongoing initiatives.

Case study: Plug Social TV

Plug Social TV is an ongoing project whose aim is to experience audio-visual languages and products in a collaborative process, using participatory design practices and social media. The Social TV includes different formats, such as web-series, short documentaries and talk shows, whose plots and characters are based on real people and stories of a specific community located in a suburban area of Milan, Italy.

The word 'Social', related to this project, has a double meaning: on one hand it refers to Social Media as tools for supporting community building and co-operation, since Plug is based on digital channels and Social Media, using Facebook as the main platform. On the other hand, 'Social TV' is intended as a Community Television since it refers to a specific community showing contents of local interest.

The context in which the project takes place is that of a former industrial area which has been redeveloped thanks to some urban renewals, and that hosts a branch of Politecnico di Milano.

In recent years, a heterogeneous mix of inhabitants has populated this area: former workers of local factories, first and second generations of foreign citizens and the new community of out-of-town students. This cultural mixture has amplified the gap between the former industrial

character focusing on the past and the new international and academic identity looking into the future.

Furthermore, the introduction of such a huge educational structure into a neighbourhood portrayed by industrial ruins and with a suburban identity, has deeply modified not only the territorial configuration, but also the relationships between citizens and their local district and between permanent inhabitants and temporary city-users.

In this context, it is necessary to set up processes that are able to reflect the new complex identity of the neighbourhood, crossing cultural and generational boundaries, facilitating community relationships and driving reciprocal exchange dynamics.

The main goal of the project 'Plug Social TV' is creating a platform for dialogue and interaction which makes use of community-based narratives to express the several identities of the territory and their perception, in order to support the relationship among the neighbourhood inhabitants and the students. The model of a participatory communication strategy has the aim of offering forms and channels of expression for social groups, sharing common interests and practices.

Second aim is building a 'narrative transmedia landscape' using digital technologies and new media in order to engage people on a common narrative about their local area.

Finally, the definition of a model of partnerships with associations of citizens and local institutions is able to systematically drive citizens' actions in the direction of a more participatory local administration.

Within the process we involved the neighbourhood associations who are connected to city municipality, creating a scalable model, in order to give voice to community's needs, helping the inhabitants to understand and address issues affecting them and driving their interests for more efficient decision-making operations. We included the establishment of partnerships with local service providers and retailers considering them as stakeholders that can have an impact on the collaborative process of regeneration and empowerment of local identity and community participation.

Process

Activities started in October 2013 with a one-day workshop in which team-works of students and citizens worked collaboratively in order to explore the neighbourhood in which our University is located, thus creating a first connection and occasion of meeting.

A group of active citizens and two classes of students from the Master Degree course in Communication and Interior Design participated. As designers and researchers, we facilitated the workshop and we established partnerships with some citizens' associations who promoted the event among other inhabitants and supported workshops' facilitation.

The whole process counted three main phases: exploration of the local context, concept and creation of the story world across digital media, video production and feedbacks.

Aim of the first phase was to explore the local area and investigate the perception that citizens have of their neighbourhood, asking them to share needs and expectations. The nine mixed groups, composed by students and citizens, went out in the neighbourhood and collected audiovisual material (pictures, videos, interviews, tales from the inhabitants), they identified a narrative environment and developed a community-based storytelling idea.

The work went on in the following months: students expanded their short stories and created nine documentaries based on the material they had collected during the workshop. They presented the documentaries to the community in December, with an exhibition at the public library. During the exhibition, students and citizens met again and started discussing about the visual re-elaboration of the local area: citizens were able to see themselves interviewed, as well as the people belonging to their community of reference, they recognized their own voices and opinions in the interviews and they were able to give feedbacks telling their impressions and feelings.

The nine documentaries can be considered as mid-term results, which are able to maintain the connection between the two communities and to activate a self-recognition process through which individuals and groups can see themselves as the main characters of a common story.

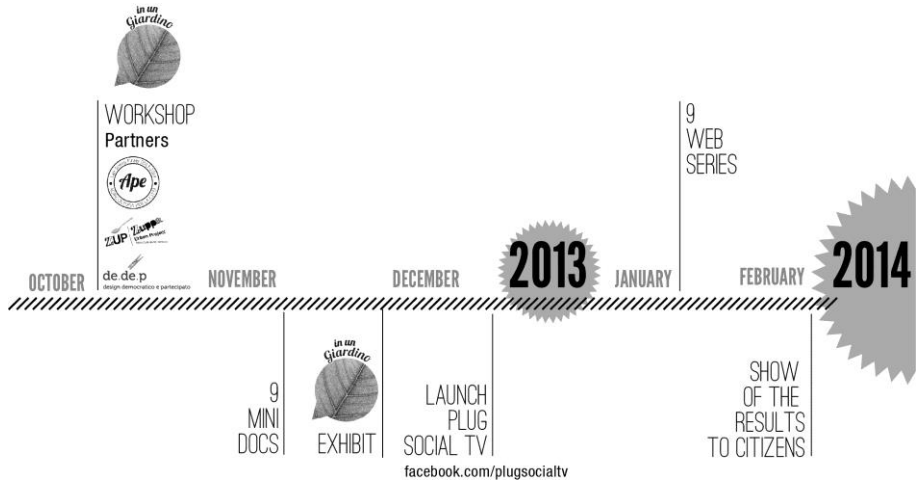


Figure 1 Plug Social TV: Timeline of activities and outputs

In order to maintain this dynamic feedback loop, students were asked to set up the online community, creating the virtual identity for the web-TV channel. They realized a brand for the web-TV, with a logo and a name (Plug) and created the profiles on different Social Networks. Facebook has been chosen as the main platform, but the system involves accounts also on YouTube and Twitter plus an official landing page.

The use of Social Media as tools and methods for sharing and discussing information as well as a way to distribute and spread contents of local interest, have already been proved successful (Lachapelle, 2011).

The use of Social Networks helped us to involve citizens into the activities, keeping them updated with news and information, giving them a place – either virtual and physical - where people of the neighbourhood can discuss, thus creating a basis for further participation and engagement.

In the second phase, students focused on the definition of the story universe (characters, actions, environments, relationships, etc.) and its distribution across several channels (online/offline) according to a transmedia strategy.

The narrative elements that have been collected from the neighbourhood are, in this second phase, re-elaborated and rearranged in order to build fictional audio-visual artefacts whose plots are based on reality. These fictional products are identified as formats that can be distributed on Social Media channels and that have a transmedia structure.

For the production phase, students developed nine web-series, which have different genre, language, tone of voice, media structure and degrees of engagement and they produced the web-series promos.

Here, we want to focus on two of the productions realized.

The first one, entitled 'Das de man' (a dialect form for 'Give each other a hand') has real people of the neighbourhood as main characters and shows stories that are directly connected to their personal experiences. Locations are real and plots of the seven episodes are based on specific themes that are identified by citizens in a co-design activity.

Each episode is produced using UGC (User-Generated Contents): citizens are taught how to use cameras and tools for video-production through online tutorials and specific workshops, so that they are able to express themselves using audio-visual languages.

This format can be considered as a hybrid between documentary and fiction in which the citizens involved can be divided in two main groups: those who have a story to tell about the neighbourhood but that are not familiar with new technologies, social networks and audio-visual productions and those who want to represent creatively their own point of view. The former group is given voice through the transformation of its stories into fiction, and the latter can find a channel for its self-expression.

Despite the non-professional form of the final product, a strong sense of belonging to a specific community of interests is activated by the recognition of real characters, locations and stories.

On the other pole we have a format ('Civico X' - 'House number X') that tells the story of an imaginary character, Mr. X, whose personal background is strongly connected to the history of the neighbourhood.

By using an imaginary story, this web-series wants to address some real community issues: the relationship between foreign and native citizens, the generation gap between young and old people, the lack of public green areas and other general themes as safety and mobility.

This is the case where it is more evident the use of transmedia in order to fill the gap between reality and fiction: some of the products that appear in the episodes are, thanks to partnerships with local retailers, produced and put into the local market. Moreover, some of the characters have their own personal profile on social networks and they actively interact with the Social TV main platform, adding details and elements to their story.

The two formats described above can be recognized as two critical poles: on one hand, the most participatory format involved citizens into the whole creation process, from the script to the production of the episodes, missing

the goal of a strong communicative narrative structure. Based on personal experiences and having a first person point of view, this format doesn't share a dramatic arc in which a character struggles and finally triumphs over adversity. Moreover, as far as a design issue is concerned, the format production process presents a lack of professional competences and produces audiovisual outputs characterized by an aesthetics that announces their bottom-up nature and reclaims a meta-narration of the process itself, which has to be enhanced (design issue).

On the other hand, there is a total fictional format, which could present a lack of patterns recognition. As far as the social issue is concerned, the format is able to speak to a wider audience rather than the citizens of the neighbourhood: the format is telling a mystery tale and is referring to universal values such as love and the fight against evil power. Even though the plot is based on historical facts and on the environmental issues affecting a specific urban area, you don't have to be a citizen of that area to understand the story: it both fascinates the public and engages people in being proactive, joining the local community, empathizing with citizens and sharing similar experiences (social issue).

Discussion

Considering Plug Social TV as a case study, Communication Design has the role of setting up the conditions so that reflective dynamics can be activated and collaborations among groups of territorial actors developed.

Therefore, our mission is to orient the communication system towards the construction of a narrative community, starting from the identification of common interests and the setting up of collaborative communication activities. The oral storytelling, together with its conceptual and visual elaboration, the collaborative production of audiovisual artefacts - both from the creative and technical point of view, the collective viewing in public spaces of the neighbourhood, the distribution through Social Networks and other web channels - which expands sharing possibilities and feedback opportunities, all represent different occasions in which social conversation can be built and carried on. Groups of citizens are both audiences and storytellers, they are, together with the designers, the main characters of narrative acts that require the selection of themes and topics to be dramatized, goals and audiences to refer to and expressive forms to be coherent with.

In this context, web-series are more than just entertaining products: they deal with hyperlocal topics enacting universal themes and values, which are discussed within the community of interests and practices that have been reinforced through the practice itself of the production of audiovisual artefacts. More than that, thanks to the narrative form, the community is now able to shape its mission and goals, building networks and gaining strength, going beyond localism. Thus, communication design takes part in the co-design process with the aim to decrease the gap between micro-narratives and mainstream.

Web-series as audiovisual products are addressing the local community as general audience and local institutions as focus target, but processes and narrative practices, from which the products come from, represent the most meaningful aspect, which can attract the audience also outside the community. They represent best practices to compare with and to amplify by networking, linking and monitoring the development, also in terms of social impact.

We can argue that local participatory experiences enabled by Plug Social TV can build a widespread network of smart community TV all over the world that is expected to develop micro-narratives beside the mainstream. Even though it is an on-going project, we are already willing to identify what could be the proper approach to evaluate the impact and the outcomes – in terms of cascades of transformations produced and processes triggered - of this activities, (e.g. the Dynamic Evaluation approach) specifically designed to follow and support the development of innovation processes, within the Emergence by Design project (MD, FP7- GA n. 284625 www.emergencebydesign.org). Moreover colleagues from MAD/LUCA in Genk (Belgium) and Università degli Studi di Verona are already asking to test this model of transmedia practice with other local communities in collaboration with local stakeholders, in order to strengthen both the social role of the academy and the relationship between the campus and the neighbourhood by building a common narrative.

The narrative process that Plug as transmedia practice is unfolding opens up new possibilities, according to one of the main characteristics of participatory video: the original goals defined at the very beginning phase, even if confirmed, often leave the stage to the brand new social and communicative aims and solutions that the community of citizens and researchers together might discover and experience along the way due to the transformative power of stories.

On one hand, Plug Social TV can be considered as a cultural attractor (Jenkins, 2006), able to set up the conditions for people engagement in meaningful experiences. On the other hand, Social TV system scalability can be possible if we consider it as a format made of practices and partnerships, which are able to complete social values with the economic ones.

That means that we can refer to the Social TV as a narrative system that enables communities (worth) and not just as an editorial product with a commercial account (value) (Jenkins, 2013).

Plug Facebook page, in fact, provides qualitative information coming not only from the insights, but also from the comments users post on videos. Thus, they highlight the most meaningful matters: 'What a thrill!' ('Che emozione!'); 'I'm so proud of living in this neighbourhood. Beautiful and precious things are happening' ('Orgogliosa di abitare in una zona dove succedono cose così belle e preziose'); 'It was nice to meeting you, Mauro! Good job, Plug, Thank you!' ('Che bell'incontro, Mauro! Bravi, Plug, Grazie!'); 'Great!' ('Fantastico!'); 'Ahah, that's me and Micia [in the video]' ('Ahah, ci siamo anche io e la Micia').

Expected results and next steps

The next step of this ongoing project is the production of the web-episodes together with citizens and partners, developing the participatory process throughout the audiovisual pipeline and according to the transmedia strategy. We assume that the different genres of the series themselves will, in the next future, be able to activate different communicative patterns and manifold expectations, propping up narrative acts and enabling different nuances and approaches to participation and engagement.

But how can we actually keep on monitoring the engagement? We must consider both quantitative and qualitative results: by the end of February, after the publication of the web-series promos, Plug Facebook Page had more than seven hundred 'likes' and Plug Youtube channel counted about two thousand views. Almost a half of Facebook fans were actually active users, liking, sharing and commenting posts and videos.

What we can consider as a qualitative result is the fact that the most commented and shared contents are those videos in which the presence of the community is more evident: we can notice more interest towards those clips in which citizens are the main characters of the story.

Conclusions

We concentrate on the three key features of Transmedia Practice (Dena, 2009): first, the creation of a story world towards the construction of a complex 'mythology' (Jenkins, 2009); second, the distribution of content on different media with the consequent blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality; third, the audience engagement, which allows people to participate into meaning making processes becoming aware of their main role in the media landscape (Ciancia, 2013).

Putting the project into practice requires a large productive effort, that we are able to face thanks to the collaboration between students and citizens. The business model can be sustained merging skills and resources, which are already available within the community: partnerships, product placement activities, sponsorships, service providing, stakeholders involvement, crowdfunding and crowdsourcing initiatives.

However, the final result cannot reach a high quality aesthetical standard: the online spread of UGC (User-Generated Contents) gets people used to videos and products realized and distributed online despite a lack of literacy that broadcasting editors would never distribute on mainstream channels. Therefore, it is necessary to keep track of the process triggered and to collect those practices, which are able to communicate and give value to the social and productive context in which the project is considered as a meaningful social experience.

The collaboration between professionals and non-professionals, then needs to be designed: we need to document the process of engaging citizens and making them become protagonists (both as main characters of the story and videomakers). We have to film people filming themselves in order to record the self-narration process, to provide them further materials for self-expression and self-reflection, and to amplify the project itself and the framework we are developing (meta-cinema, meta-TV).

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