

***TELLING THEIR STORY: A Study of Storytellers in the United States***  
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The Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University (RCAC) has created and conducted a series of projects seeking to identify and define the situation of artists and cultural creators in the United States. *Information on Artists I* (1988) which surveyed 10,000 artists in ten U.S. cities and *Information on Artists II* (1997) which surveyed 7,700 artists in four of the original cities, created a profile of the American artist and his work-related human and social service needs and realities while providing basic demographic information. The *Artists Training and Career Project* (1991-1994) continued this investigation, but with greater concentration on training and career development, and focused on three specific kinds of creators: actors, craftspeople and painters. It conducted 150 personal narrative interviews, culminating in three published books (Greenwood Press), and surveyed 12,000 artists and cultural creators. By 2000, the RCAC was conducting the first national *Study of Jazz Musicians* for the National Endowment for the Arts in four U.S. cities. And currently, commissioned by the International Organization for the Career Transition of Professional Dancers (IOTPD), it is conducting a study on career transitions for dancers, and *Information on Artists III*, San Francisco.

#### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to conduct the first-ever, systematic investigation of the storyteller's role in America. This will be achieved by exploring the legacy aspect and intangibility of their cultural work, the relationship of the tellers to spoken and written stories, the manner in which tellers and their stories move within online and offline, traditional and nontraditional communities, and the power of the art form itself in order to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship of non-mainstream artists and their work to institutions, to society, and to culture. To understand the process of contemporary storytelling practices, the study will divide into two phases. It will begin with an information gathering phase that will create a meaningful framework of inquiry for a quantitative survey. In phase two, a survey of 2,500 storytellers will be conducted using Respondent-driven sampling (RDS). A special focus will be created for Native American storytellers. This study will provide statistically significant results for the first time on this hard-to-identify population of cultural creators.

#### **DEFINITION**

The project on storytellers poses a particular challenge since storytellers function on a grassroots level, and are more difficult to identify than those artists who commonly join organizations. For the purposes of this study, the definition will be inclusive and more exacting definitional criteria will be determined with focus groups during the first phase of the study. We see our definition as evolving throughout the project in order to allow us to describe and include as many aspects of the field as possible. The hypothesis asserts that storytellers will adhere to one of four overlapping categories: Performer, Preservationist, Practitioner, or Citizen. Performance Tellers are those who have defined themselves as storytellers, have formal training in theatre, education, or library science, who seek compensation for their telling and make a living primarily by telling stories at organized storytelling events. Preservation Tellers are those who are self-taught, deeply connected to their indigenous roots, and who may or may not seek some form of compensation to tell at organized storytelling events. Practice Tellers, often referred to as organizational storytellers, are those who have training in organizational psychology, management, or education, and are paid to tell at organized storytelling events; they have also parlayed the telling into other arenas such as knowledge management, grief management, or change management. Citizen Tellers are storytellers who naturally emerge from a community to tell stories; they often influence other tellers, but rarely self-identify as storytellers or tell at organized events.

#### **METHODS**

The study will begin with an information gathering phase that will involve two focus groups: 1) heritage scholars and 2) storytellers who represent different regions of the country, different races and ethnic backgrounds, different genders and ages and the wide variety of kinds of experiences unique to the field.

The focus groups, an extensive literature search, and open meetings at key storytelling festivals will serve to inform the definitional criteria of a “storyteller” as well as the themes and questions of the survey. The survey will be conducted using a deeply community-based technique called Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS), developed by sociologist Dr. Douglas Heckathorn at Cornell University. RDS will allow storytellers to identify other storytellers and thus, to penetrate deeply into the storytellers’ community. In 2000, this method was pioneered in field of arts and culture research with the RCAC’s study of the work life of Jazz Musicians. It is expected that 2,500 telephone questionnaires will be administered to storytellers. Eight to ten local, well-connected and willing storytellers will be contacted to be the first recruiters in the community. They will be told the motivations for the study (better services for storytellers, more support for them, the importance of educating the public on the value of storytelling, etc.). These storytellers will be asked to recruit four other storytellers each through a system of tracked coupons. From there the referral system is in place; the system can be likened to the ever-expanding branches of a tree.

### **ANALYSIS**

After the surveys are completed and the data entered and analyzed, both an executive summary and a longer report will draw conclusions about storytellers. Because the RCAC has been the primary auspice in the United States studying individual artists and cultural creators for almost two decades, it has data and information about many kinds of creators that can be used for comparisons with storytellers. For example, in terms of training, we would expect that self-teaching will have a lot of importance to storytellers, just as it did for craftspeople. In addition, work being done in communities by Americans for the Arts and the Urban Institute should have implications for our findings.

### **IMPACT, DISSEMINATION AND BENEFITS**

Capitalizing on offline and online distribution channels, the findings will be disseminated to relevant academic and professional nonprofit institutions, artists and cultural creators and other related agencies. The *Telling Their Story* report and database will also supplement previous RCAC studies and, like them, will be used by policy and decision makers, artists, arts service organizations and the cultural and heritage communities. Articles on the study will be published with specific recommendations and graduate technicians will be commissioned to work with storytellers to create an online platform that will compliment an existing online network structure or envision and implement a new structure. The platform will be complex enough to allow for a feedback loop of data to the *Telling Their Story* database, but be simple enough for storytellers to evolve the platform to suit their needs. Presentations will be made at colloquia, conferences, seminars in the storytelling world, the arts world and the academic world (e.g. National and Regional conferences like National Storytelling Conference, ALA Annual Conference, The Social Theory, Policy and Arts Conference, The AIMAC Conference, The Association of Arts Administration Educators Conference, The American Sociological Association Conference). The *Telling Their Story* database, along with other RCAC and arts policy data housed at The Cultural Policy and the Arts National Data Archive (CPANDA) at Princeton University, a searchable, digital archive containing policy-relevant information on arts and culture, will be used to create new curriculum in the Graduate Program in Arts Administration at Teachers College Columbia University as well as other university arts management programs and relevant departments (e.g. sociology, political science, public policy). Because this will be the second time the RDS method has been used to identify artists and cultural creators, along with the lessons learned from the RCAC's Jazz Study, RDS will be honed as a model for broader use in hard-to-identify artistic and cultural communities. In conjunction with this effort, collaborations will be fostered with grassroots groups and organizations as well as with other academic fields at Columbia University (sociology, visual arts, etc) to explore the continued potential of RDS.

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