THE TEXAN ITALIAN STORIES DOCUMENTARY SERIES:

FOSTERING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AMONG MEMBERS OF A GEO-ETHNIC

COMMUNITY THROUGH THE PROCESS OF MEDIA CREATION

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my partner Romina Olson and her family and to my parents,

Pilar Leoni and Jose Carvajal. You have all been a constant source of inspiration,

guidance, and love, which was extremely necessary to carry out the Texan Italian Stories

and the ITAL project for almost three years from 2011 to 2014.

This master thesis is also dedicated to all immigrant communities across the globe. I hope

I can see the day where we can transcend borders and understand that we all are citizens

of this world; in the mean time, I hope that my work can provide further guidance to

anyone interested in using the full power that new communication technologies can offer

for the purpose of strengthening and preserving cultural identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

Recent academic research has found that *interpersonal connections* are at the core

of any strong and healthy community (Rojas, Shah & Friedland, 2011). Furthermore,

researchers working with Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) have looked at

geo-ethnic communities—e.g. the Korean community of Los Angeles, the Chinese

community of Alhambra, and the Mexican community of South Los Angeles—and have

repeatedly observed that healthy and reoccurring interpersonal communication among

community members can significantly increase the levels of neighborhood belonging,

civic engagement and collective efficacy (Ball Rokeach, Kim & Matei, 2001).

The aforementioned findings should not be of anyone's surprise, after all, it may

be safe to assume that most people place some level of importance to the idea of

establishing and keeping social connections, especially those people who are in the

process of immigrating—or have just immigrated–to the United States (Garcia, 2005).

As an immigrant in the U.S, I have used my social connections for seeking information

about health related issues, for finding good job opportunities, for staying amused and

entertained, and for obtaining practically anything else that insures the minimum

standards of quality of life that I find necessary. To create these social connections, like

many other immigrants, I have also learned to use all the tools that are available, whether

they are based on new or old technologies. If these tools require a great deal of time to

master, I have been willing to put the extra work to learn how to use them.

As a professional filmmaker, I have also looked at the process of media creation

as a potential ideal environment for facilitating social connections among the individuals

involved. Through anecdotal experience in the creation of dozens of short films–fiction

and non-fiction–as well as several medium format pieces and even a feature film, I have noticed that the collaborative nature of the filmmaking process has allowed me to establish strong bonds with other individuals in ways that are very difficult to replicate with any other activity.   Unfortunately, perhaps due to the lack of collaboration that exists between academics and professional independent filmmakers, there seems to be an extremely limited amount of research on how different strategies used through the filmmaking process could benefit communities—or geo-ethnic communities—by specifically fostering social connections among community members.

To close the abovementioned gap, I asked myself the following research question: Can a participatory approach of video creation facilitate social connections among members of a specific geo-ethnic community?   To answer this question, from 2013 to 2014 I developed a project called "The Texan Italian Stories series," a set of five short documentary episodes distributed online, which highlight people, stories and events from the Italian community in Central Texas. To help with the creation of these episodes I used different academic theories—such as Communicational Infrastructure Theory—to inform many of the decisions made through the development process in the hopes of encouraging meaningful interactions among the different people from the Italian community of Texas who were asked to participate.

This thesis research includes different field notes from the creation process of two episodes of the Texan Italian Stories series: episode 2 titled *"Rekindle the Flame"* (2013), and Episode 3 titled *"The Italians from the Bottom"* (2013). Although I do not focus on the other episodes of the series, I do mention some of them as a way to strengthen certain areas with more personal examples. For the notes, I also divide the

process of creation of each episode in five different steps, and illustrate with actual examples how connections were facilitated through each one of them. To compliment this research I also use data collected from qualitative interviews with nine different subjects of the Italian community of Texas who participated in the creation of the series. These qualitative interviews offer a deeper insight on how the different strategies employed through the creation of the documentaries gave the subjects the opportunity to establish and re-establish social connections with other members of their community.

This thesis is thus structured in five different chapters:

Chapter One: Presents the theoretical framework behind the project of the Texan Italian Stories series.

Chapter Two: Provides a narrative of the conceptualization process of the series.

Chapter Three: Formulates my research question and presents the methodology used for the collection of research data.

Chapter Four: Show my results through a narrative that intertwines my experiences making the Texan Italian Stories series with the data collected from the interviews

Chapter Five: Provides my interpretation of the results, presents the limitations and offers my suggestions on managerial implications and future research.

This is not the first time that research has been done about the process of media creation. It is already known, for example, that every decision made by the media-maker during the creation process affects not only the outcome of the finished product, but also every person involved in the different stages of production (Thomas, 2010; Wood & Brown, 2012). It is also know that the adoption of a specific process of media production can shape not only the story being told, but also the relationship between media makers

and their subjects (Galloway, McAlpine & Harris, 2007). However, this study differs

from all previous research on the subject of *process* because in it I show with tangible

examples—i.e., field notes, interviews, and the online link of the finished content on HD

video—how academic theory can be put into practice to specifically inform the creation

process of geo-ethnic short documentaries for the fostering of social connections among

members from a geo-ethnic community.   My hope is that this thesis could be seen as a

step further into the execution of more engaged research ideas where academics and

media practitioners work side by side to improve the communication ecologies of ethnic

communities in the U.S.

CHAPTER I

Literature Review

Geo Ethnic Media and Communication Infrastructure Theory.

The first step I took for the creation of the Texan Italian Stories was to visit the literature of Geo-Ethnic Media (GEM), given that the documentaries I was creating were focused on a specific ethnic community—the Italians—within a specific geographical area—Central Texas.

There has been a significant increase in the numbers of Geo-Ethnic Media producers in developed nations within the first part of the 21st Century (Matsaganis, Katz & Ball-Rokeach, 2010). Media-makers are spreading through most metropolitan areas of the U.S., using multiple platforms to tell stories that target audiences of specific ethnic communities within particular geographical areas, whether that is the Italian community of Texas or the thousands of other ethnic/geographical area permutations (Matsaganis et al, 2010). Nonetheless, as prevalent as Geo-Ethnic Media may seem at this point, their popularity could go further up in many areas, such as Central Texas, where multiple ethnic communities have kept a significantly high speed of growth (Lin & Song, 2006). Furthermore, new technological advancements are providing more powerful and affordable tools for the purpose of media creation and distribution which in turn have motivated more individuals to tell their own geo-ethnic stories (Deuze, 2006; Matsaganis et al., 2010), especially when mainstream media have continuously failed to cover the needs of communities at a hyper local level (Kurpius, Metzgar & Rowley, 2011).

The study of Geo-Ethnic Media has also gained a great deal of interest among communication researchers, (Broad, Ball-Rokeach, Ognyanova, Stikes, Picasso &

Villanueva, 2013; Matsaganis & Katz 2013; Chen, Dong, Ball-Rokeach, Parks & Huang et al., 2012; Kim, Ball-Rokeach, 2006), especially those utilizing Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT), a theoretical framework developed by legendary researcher Sandra Ball-Rokeach at the University of Southern California. For the past few years, Ball-Rokeach and her team have utilized several strategies, including engaged scholar research such as this one, in order to understand the *communication ecologies* of geo-ethnic groups (Broad et al, 2013). Communication ecologies refer "to the networks of communication connections that groups or individuals depend upon in order to achieve a goal" (Broad et al, 2013). Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) states that communities with healthy levels of interconnectedness—that is where different local stories circulate among the residents, organizations and the local media on a constant basis–tend to register significantly higher levels of neighborhood belonging, civic engagement and collective efficacy (Ball-Rokeach et al, 2001).

CIT has its foundations in another widely cited communications theory developed by Ball-Rokeach and her team in the 1970s called Media Systems Dependency theory (MSD) (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). MSD's biggest contribution is the notion that individuals use media for the purpose of obtaining the information they require to achieve their daily goals (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). MSD further categorizes these goals in three main groups: goals for making sense of their own selves and their environment (understanding), for interacting with other people and solving problems (orientation) and for entertaining themselves and socializing with others (play) (Literat & Chen, 2014).

Communications Infrastructure Theory (CIT) takes MSD theory one step further by stating that individuals do not get the information they need to achieve their daily

goals by only engaging with *macro level* agents of storytelling; for example, standard TV or any other mainstream or regional media outlet (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). Instead, individuals use different communication pipelines to get the information they need depending on the nature of their goals; this includes taking full advantage of the communication ecologies of their neighborhoods. Therefore, CIT puts a great emphasis in the stories and messages that are shared among the residents from a specific community, which are also known as *micro level* agents of communication. These stories originated and circulated at a *micro level* can offer a certain level of targeted information to individuals of a Geo-Ethnic group that mainstream media stories or *macro level* agents can hardly achieve (Matsaganis et al, 2010). According to CIT micro level communication is also largely supported and encouraged by *meso level* agents who play a crucial part in the origination and circulation of stories. These meso level agents comprise 1) community and not for profit organizations and 2) Geo-Ethnic media institutions (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001).

The interplay between the three aforementioned storytellers–residents, NGO's and Geo-Ethnic Media–is defined as the "storytelling network." Studies conducted by Ball-Rokeach and her team in different ethnic communities in Los Angeles have shown that communities with a strong storytelling network–where stories are significantly shared among the three nodes–tend to have significantly higher levels of civic engagement, neighborhood belonging and collective efficacy (Ball-Rokeach et al, 2001). Assuming that a minimum set of conditions exists for allowing communications to happen, CIT suggests that Ball Rokeach's findings in Los Angeles could be fairly consistent throughout other geo-ethnic communities across the world. These conditions

are described as the Communication Action Context, which includes schools, public

spaces, transportation, safety and anything else that allows residents to be able to share

stories with one another (Ball-Rokeach et al, 2001). In the case of war zones, for

example, the communication action context may hinder micro level communications

instead of fostering them.

Figure 1. Communication Infrastructure Theory. Illustration of how the different elements of the "Storytelling Network" interact with each other and with the "Communication Action Context" in order to shape the communications infrastructure of a community. Source: Metamorph.org

Despite of the importance that that Geo-Ethnic Media have on establishing the

storytelling networks of specific communities, the study of producers of this type of niche

media, including their backgrounds and motivations, has been one area of research that

has lagged behind (Katz & Matsaganis, 2013). So far, we know that Geo-Ethnic media

producers come from different backgrounds and that the size of their operations can vary

from simple community newsletters to complex media products crafted by institutions

with sizable staffs and funding (Husband, 2005; Matsaganis et al., 2010). On the other

hand, we know very little regarding the processes that these producers employ in order to create their media pieces (Katz & Matsaganis, 2013).

Understanding Geo-Ethnic Media, and the vital role that CIT assigns to them, helped me in the process of creating the Texan Italian Stories as a guide for dissecting the communication ecology of the Italian community of Central Texas. Furthermore, it provided me a specific platform for the type of connections that the process of creation of the series was going to be encouraging. In other words, by knowing the importance that a strong Storytelling Network has in a geo-ethnic community, I focused most of my efforts in facilitating connections among (a) residents/families of the Italian community of Texas State University, and (b) residents/families and community organizations.

There are other examples where CIT has been used successfully to inform the creation of engaged media projects that aim to strengthen the Storytelling Network of specific communities. One in particular is the Alhambra Project, a participatory media initiative created by scholars and students of the Annenberg's School for Communications and Journalism from the University of Southern California (Chen et al., 2012). The Alhambra project, funded initially by the University of Southern California itself, was created in order to provide a form of Geo-Ethnic media for a community that lacked any.

Through the website "Alhambra Source," experienced and beginning journalists create in different languages stories about the community that offer connection bridges to a community that had showed low levels of interconnectedness (Chen et al, 2012). The Alhambra project offers an interesting glimpse on how CIT has been used in order to conceptualize and execute geo-ethnic media platforms and news stories to strengthen a

community's storytelling network. The Alhambra Source website offers new avenues of

self-expression for the community, specially for the Chinese and Hispanic ethnic groups

that inhabit the area, which in turn can aid in fostering a sense of belonging, civic

participation and collective efficacy among all community members in Alhambra (Chen

et al, 2012).

There are many differences that exist between the Texan Italian Stories and the

Alhambra project; nonetheless, perhaps the most important one is the importance that I

place to professional media creation.   Unlike the Alhambra Source, the replicability of

the Texan Italian Stories depends largely on the inclusion of professional media makers

that are not only comfortable with the process of creation, but that also have the skills

necessary to conceptualize and craft professional media products of high quality.

Figure 2. Participatory media. A screen grab of the webpage for the Alhambra source, an online "citizen journalism" initiative spearheaded by USC to strengthen the storytelling network of the Alhambra community in California.

As someone with professional media making experience, I believe that CIT could

be used to inform the *process of creation* that Geo-Ethnic media producers adopt to

conceptualize, execute and distribute video stories. There are multiple decisions that are

made through the process of video creation, e.g., setting locations for interviews,

choosing to conduct individual or group interviews, which through the lens of CIT could

be used to propitiate situations that allow members of a community to connect with one

another. Specifically when it comes to documentary filmmaking, the camera "is as a tool

that provokes and produces perceptions, emotions and actions in the world" (Wood &

Brown, 2012). Therefore, its mere presence affects the interactions between the

filmmaker and their subjects (Sjober, 2008). This creates an opportunity for the

documentary director to place his or her subjects in specific circumstances that would

only take place because of the filmmaking process.

In order to better understand how this idea of filmmaker-lead participation has

been used in the past, and thus could be used in a CIT grounded project, I also visited the

literature on performative filmmaking.

The performative filmmaker:

There are many terms that have been adopted to describe documentaries where

the filmmakers have used a reflexive process of media creation to create situations that

blur the line between fiction and reality. For example, strategies employed by directors

such as Werner Herzog who have choreographed scenes and re-enactments with their

subjects to obtain a stylized version of reality (Bruzzi, 2006). One particular term that

has been used is the one of "Performative Documentary," which has been utilized slightly

differently by both film theorists Bill Nichols and Stella Bruzzi to describe films where

the filmmaker creates particular situations for their subjects defying conventions of

"reality" that most people attribute to the documentary genre (Nichols, 2001; 2010;

Bruzzi, 2006). Another accepted term has been the one of *ethno-fiction*, which has

largely been attributed to Jean Rouch's films (Sjoberg, 2008).

Jean Rouch, the iconic French ethnographer and auteur, created films of

importance both for the worlds of art and academia by refusing to utilize the constraints

imposed by mainstream media or scholastic ethnography (Rouch, 2003; Yakir, 1978;

Sjoberg, 2008). His approach was certainly radical: he described his process as a

"trance," where he had no real control of what was happening as soon as he pressed

record in his camera device (Sjoberg, 2008). Furthermore, Rouch firmly believed that

his presence as well as the one of the camera, were the ones that dictated the reality that

he was depicting in his films (Yakir, 1978; Sjoberg, 2008; Wood & Brown, 2012).

Figure 3. Performative Filmmaking. A still from *La Pyramide Humaine* (1959) by Jean Rouch, a
"real" moment orchestrated by the filmmaker justified by the presence of the camera and the
media making process. Copyright Jean Rouch.

Figure 3 shows an example of Rouch's performative approach of media making

as used during the production of La Pyramide Humaine (1959*)*. In this particular film, the

filmmaker brought black and white students together in Abidjan, Ivory Coast in order to

approach colonial racism via an improvised narrative (Yakir, 1978; Sjoberg, 2008). In

the film, Rouch asked people to volunteer in the re-enactment of one particular scene where he showed the effects that a new white student had in a mixed classroom.   The movie had such a significant impact in the European and African society at the time that it was banned in different areas such as Sudan and Senegal that did not want to tackle the issue of racism in such an open manner (Yakir, 1978). Nonetheless, one could only imagine how powerful it probably was for both factions of these students to be for the first time next to each other through the filming process. In other words, the presence of the camera justified the occurrence of an otherwise unthinkable situation.

Many years later, Michael Moore, another highly reflexive and performative documentarian, brought students of Columbine High to Kmart during the process of filming Bowling for Columbine (2002) in an attempt to return the bullets that were lodged in their bodies from the massacre, which were originally bought at that establishment (Galloway et al., 2007). Once again, strong decisions of reflexive nature allowed the filmmaker to create memorable scenes, while creating a perhaps even more memorable experience for those who participated in the creation process. Though it is not clear how much this particular action from Moore impacted the lives of the subjects in his film, here is once again another example on how the presence of the camera allowed the filmmaker to stage a real life situation with real life consequences that went beyond the actual documentary piece he was creating.

A more recent example of performative filmmaking is the documentary The Act of Killing (2012). In it, Danish filmmaker/researcher Joshua Oppenheimer worked with "thugs" in Indonesia who had been hired by the local government in the mid 1960s to kill thousands of people that had ties to the communist party (Brink & Oppenheimer, 2012).

Through the process, Oppenheimer–who spoke the local language and understood its culture–convinced the "thugs" to act, produce and write the re-enactments of the killings, which Oppenheimer would then shoot, edit and give a professional finish. According to interviews with the filmmaker, the process alone of producing and subsequently screening privately the finished scenes to the subjects had a deep impact in the lives of its participants.   Furthermore, this impact was enhanced with the film's nomination to the 2013 Academy Awards and the subsequent reaction of local Indonesian press. I believe the "Act of Killing" is an excellent example of an evolution of the ethno-fiction style, attributed to Jean Rouch, made only possible because of new technologies available for production, editing and distribution.

Figure 4. Ethno-Fiction. A still frame from "The Act of Killing" (2012). Copyright Drafthouse Films. In this scene the two "thugs" orchestrate a scene along with other members of their community. Although the subjects wrote the piece, director Joshua Oppenheimer provided direction to guarantee beautiful aesthetics, stylizing even further the "reality" of the film.

Certainly, employing a performative filmmaking is a strong stylistic and ethical choice. Performative film or ethno-fictions defy a standard "objectivity" that has been commonly attributed to the documentary genre (Yakir, 1978; Sjoberg, 2008; Bruzzi, 2010). That stated, performative filmmaking is perhaps no different than participatory research, which validity and scientific contribution has been largely studied and dissected

(Cerf, 2011).   In both cases, there is a certain responsibility that the filmmaker or researcher must embrace of making sure that the safety and psychological wellbeing of the subjects—who are in a somewhat vulnerable position—is always insured.

In defense of performative filmmaking it could be argued that the key to documentary ethics lies in the relationship between filmmaker and participant, a relationship in which trust plays a great part (Thomas, 2010; 2012). Ethical issues arise not in using a particular approach to documentary filmmaking, but also in how this approach is particularly used.   With this in mind, a geo-ethnic documentarian should perhaps employ performative filmmaking as a "respectful, non-blaming approach to counseling and community work which centers people as the experts in their own lives" (Thomas, 2012, p.334). Having this type of collaborative approach provides the participants the ability to shape the outcome of the film and thus obtain a sense of shared ownership (Thomas, 2012). Obviously, this collaborative process also requires a considerable amount of time and consideration towards the subject, which goes beyond the typical personal commitment that a standard documentary film already requires (Thomas, 2012).

By approaching *participatory media* creation from a filmmaker lead approach, in no way I would like to discredit the power that open participatory media initiatives have had in many studies where amateur filmmaking from many unskilled contributors yielded fascinating results including the strengthening of cultural identity, the building of social solidarity, cohesiveness and bonding, among many others (Sabiescu, 2012; Fairchild, 2010; Rankin, Hansteen-Izora & Packer, 2007).   Nonetheless, I argue that there is a great deal of potential that remains untapped from using academic research to guide for

implementation of performative techniques of media making. Could we not apply CIT for example to use the process of media creation to bring residents of one community closer to other residents—as Jean Rouch did in the example provided–while providing them a different type of context for their conversations?   Could we not bring residents closer to their community organizations by using the often-exciting process of media creation to create situations, i.e., interviews, screenings, fictional skits, that residents and NGO representatives could perform together and even have recorded on video for them to watch, share and remember?

The relationship between process and content:

Despite of my enthusiasm for the reflections shared, it would have been impossible for me to carry out the Texan Italians Stories (TIS) project if my creative focus had been only on *process*. Instead, c*ontent* is the most important reason behind people's willingness to share an online video with others (Botha and Reyneke, 2013). Content evokes emotional responses and emotions can very well shape someone's relationship with a piece of digital media (Botha and Reyneke, 2013): The stronger the emotions that are experienced by the viewer, the more that viewer will want to share that same experience with others who would appreciate it (Botha and Reyneke, 2013; Dobele. Beverland, Vanhammel & Van Wijk, 2007). In the case of the Texan Italian Stories series, the quality of the content that was produced was extremely important. Content was, without a doubt, one of the main reasons why I was able to get the attention, and subsequent participation in the series of many members of the Italian community of Central Texas.   Sergio Codognotto–one of the Italian nationals" who collaborated

actively in the creation of Episode 4–explains as follows the effect that the content had on his willingness to participate in this project:

"I got to know this project which is amazing that was made without any sponsorship while still with the highest quality possible. .. And really, very well done. So, I felt like it was important to help this kind of project. "

This brings back the question: is *content* indeed more important than *process,* or is it the opposite? In my opinion–which is shared by many other researchers such as digital media guru Henry Jenkins and his colleagues–the most important issue is to understand that in the world of digital media creation *content* and *process* should be seen as two interconnected and inseparable elements of any digital media piece (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). With this in mind, to use CIT to inform the process of media creation– as I aimed to do with the Texan Italian Stories Series–the content had to have a certain level of quality to justify some of the situations that I propitiated for people to connect with one another through the use of performative filmmaking.

For example, if I were to ask people to take an entire day off to travel one and a half hours to attend the taping of a conversation with people they did not know–covering their own gas and travel expenses—it became clear to me that the individual would have to have a certain level of understanding of what the final content would look like, as well as a certain expectations of the impact that such content would have in the participant's likeness and acceptance in his or her own social circle.   This was of special relevance for the TIS project as it was clear to all participants that the purpose of the video was to be shared online once it was finished. Rather than thinking of this phenomenon as some type of technology fueled egocentrism—which could be argued that certainly exists in all

of us to a certain point—the goal as geo-ethnic storyteller is to embrace it as an evolution of our social practices into what scholars now call "participatory culture."

Henry Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel (2010) coined the term "participatory culture" to explain the new set of social dynamics that people have been increasingly adopting in the post-Internet era. In his seminal white paper "Confronting the Challenges of the Participatory Culture" Jenkin et. al state, "Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and re-circulate media content in powerful new ways. A focus on expanding access to new technologies carries us only so far if we do not also foster the skills and cultural knowledge necessary to deploy those tools toward our own ends" (Jenkins, et al 2010, p.8).

Jenkins and his colleagues use the term "spreadable content"–rather than the popular term "viral content"–to identify the type of content that producers should create in this era of "participatory culture." Although both terms are used to describe content that is shared multiple times online, Jenkins describes "viral" as a term usually associated to a top-to-down philosophy of content creation and distribution where the audience is encouraged to watch the content but not to modify it (Jenkins, 2009). Spreadable content creation focuses on the audience first, understanding that the producer only has the power to create a *cultural commodity*, and it is the audiences' level of engagement which determines if a piece of content can become a *cultural resource* (Jenkins et al., 2013). "If it doesn't spread, it's dead. For things to live online, people have to share it socially. They also have to make it their own—which can be as participatory as just passing a

YouTube clip on as a link or making a copycat video themselves" (Usher, Web article. 2010).

Spreadable content creation forces the producer to conceptualize media products that can be *producerly*, a term that is used to describe a media text that offers itself up to popular production (Fiske, 1989; Jenkins, 2009). That is, a media product—e.g., a video, music, a picture, or a flyer——that gives audiences the power to reinterpret that content into whatever meaning fits their own individual needs. A producerly video "is one that can be enjoyed and accessed on multiple levels. It can be taken at face value, but also leaves openings for deeper, more active interpretation…open, loose ends and gaps that allow the viewer to introduce their own background and experiences. Such openness allows them to convey something of themselves as they pass the content along, transforming the video into a resource for self-expression" (Jenkins, 2009).

When Jenkins says "open, loose ends..." he certainly does not mean that spreadable content has to be ambiguous either, as a matter of fact, research suggests that when it comes to specific content for a specific community—such as it is the case of the Texan Italian Stories catered to the Italian community of Texas–the content has to be of high relevance to the target community in order to be shared (Botha and Reyneke, 2013). In fact, Jenkins says that the ideal type of content that gets shared among a community is usually able to 1) bolster camaraderie and articulate the (presumably shared) experiences and values that identify oneself as belonging to a particular community ("bolstering their identity"); 2) gather information and explain difficult to understand events or circumstances; and 3) establish the boundaries of an "in-group" (Jenkins, 2009).

As a media maker, keeping these ideas about "spreadability" in mind while trying to tell a good story can be an extremely taxing endeavor, especially for geo-ethnic producers who may be used to relying on their experiences to inform decisions made during the media making process instead of getting this information from academic theory. Furthermore, there is a certain spontaneity, which I have come to embrace and appreciate through my own filmmaking experience, that is very much necessary when it comes to creating moving stories on video (Yakir, 1978). For this reason, for the creation of the Texan Italian Stories episodes I developed a resource that I called a "List of ingredients for a nice spread." In this list I identified different elements that I believed made some of the online videos I liked "spreadable" and used my own particular experiences in creating and sharing digital media to fill any gap. The list was crafted as a "cheat sheet" for me to insure that I had all necessary elements that I felt could allow certain spreadability of the finished video, while providing me enough wiggle room to craft the story in whatever way I wanted and orchestrate situations informed by CIT. Once production was over, a script was written in the initial phase of post-production in order to lock down the voiceover and story structure and the "List of ingredients a for nice spread" was discarded.

This is the "List of ingredients for a nice spread" that was included in each Texan Italian Story episode:

- **A host/Voiceover:** Romina Olson, a 1st generation Italian American who spoke Italian and English was picked as the host for all episodes. Extensive use of voice over allowed for more control of the message of the documentary.

- **A personal narrative:** Every video had to feature a personal story that would walk you through the theme and sub-themes. This personal narrative could be driven by the host or by another person featured in the documentary.

- **A central theme:** One specific theme that is easily recognizable that unifies all the stories that are featured inside of the documentary.

- **At least 2 sub themes:** The video had to offer two separate sub themes that are of relevance to the target audience.

- **At least 2 Locations in Texas:** Given that I did not have a specific neighborhood, but a rather large geographical area, each video had to feature at least two cities in Central Texas.

- **Artistic flair:** There had to be moments that had to be visually striking using artistic sensibilities to enhance the emotional impact of the piece.

- **A trip:** Every documentary must feature the host actually traveling from one location to another in Texas. The physical act of driving needed to be displayed to showing how easy it was for our team, with the hopes of encouraging similar behavior.

- **1 Italian**: At least one person born in Italy had to be featured.

- **1 Italian –American:** At least one Italian American (2nd generation or further) had to be featured.

- **1 Italophile:** at least one person that is not Italian or of Italian descent but love Italy nonetheless.

- **A community pillar:** At least one person in the video had to be someone of substantial clout among a group of Italians, Italian Americans or Italophiles.

- **A joke:** There have to be at least one moment in the video that is created to make people laugh.

- **Italian Language:** Every episode had to feature Italian being spoken in Texas.

- **An open end:** Find a way to close every episode with a "What if?" type of cliffhanger which puts the responsibility on the audience of continuing research about the different themes offered in the documentary

Reshaping the process of media creation

Besides the specifics on creating "spreadable content," the other most important element that a geo-ethnic storyteller can take away from the discussion on "participatory culture" is the idea that the process of media creation has evolved from the standard three steps—pre-production, production and post-production—to a new form of media creation where all other steps that once were out of the public's sight (such as financing or distribution) have now become a clear opportunity for producer/audience engagement. That means, among many other things, that by framing documentary filmmaking through the *participatory culture* lens, Geo-Ethnic Media producers interested in using CIT during the process to create connections among members of the community, have now more steps of creation available for potential use for that intent—certainly many more than those available in the times of Rouch and his African performative filmmaking experiment.

To make the Texan Italian Stories into the impactful project that I wanted, I had to embrace the fact that documentary filmmaking—and media making in general—has been evolving due to the development of new communication technologies and the spread of *participatory culture.* I made the decision to conceptualize the series while always

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keeping in mind and maximizing—the new possibilities that technology offered for independent producers like me: from crowdsourcing ideas and writing scripts together with the audience, (Chavez et al., 2004) (conceptualization); to financing the enterprise and securing locations (Clay, 2010; Baranova & Lugmayr, 2013) (pre-production); to filming the scenes with interesting equipment that allows for more choices of framing and composition (Baranova & Lugmayr, 2013) (production); to putting the film together and crowdsourcing footage from the community (Davenport et al, 2004; Baranova & Lugmayr, 2013) (post-production); to presenting the film and pushing its release through the web (Harsin, 2013) (distribution).
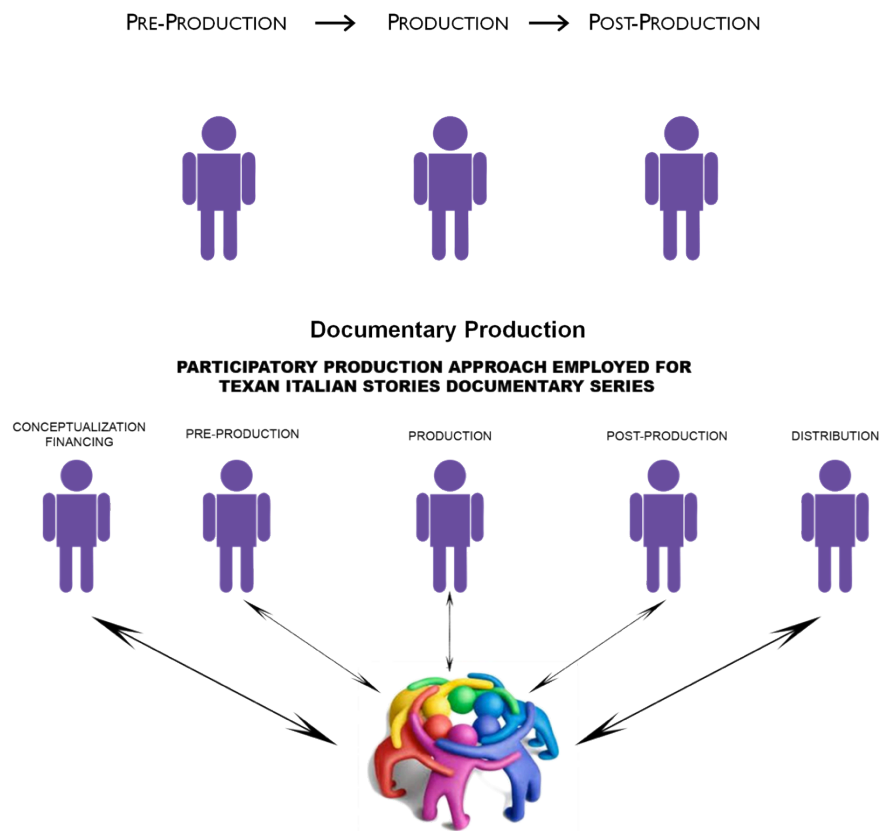
Figure 5. Steps of creation process. Standard 3 step process of documentary creation presented next to the revised five-step media creation process adopted for the Texan Italian Stories. Source: Andrew Quitmeyer

Figure 5 shows the differences between a standard approach of documentary filmmaking, which usually involves three steps; in contrast with the approach used for the Texan Italian Stories. For TIS I decided to make two other steps an integral part of the process: financing and distribution, while making sure that every step of the process offered an opportunity to collaborate with the Italian community. The five-step split was also used as a guide for organizing the different activities and steps where CIT could be used. It is important to note that there is a substantial amount of interplay between all of these steps. Therefore I find it also counter-productive to think of each step as completely individual from the others.

Chart 1 offers an overview of the different steps adopted for the media creation process of the Texan Italian Stories series along with standard definitions that explain what each step entails. The steps of financing and conceptualization have been lumped into one group given that people who invested time, money or resources were offered special access to the step of conceptualization, as we found that these people had a much more profound sense of ownership for the piece in question. For the purposes of the Texan Italian Stories "financing" is seen as the process of finding not only money, but in-kind services and time commitment. It is worth mentioning that working with donors can also be complicated, especially if people feel that their ideas should always be made a priority because of their contribution. It is up to the Geo-Ethnic Media producer then to cap the investments to manageable amounts—in our case from $10 to $500—as well as make sure that all participants understand that "artistic" and "journalistic" integrity will not be compromised, and that the pieces will not be utilized to "promote" anyone's political, religious or otherwise divisive agenda.

(A) Financing/Conceptualization	(B) Pre-Production
Definition: Raising the funds necessary to carry out production of the pieces, including transportation, equipment, crew, etc.	**Definition:** All activities that were performed in order to set up the production of the documentary pieces
Definition 2: Pitching and development of story ideas as well as possible places, events, and people that should be covered or interviewed.	
Example of tasks during this step:	**Example of tasks during this step:**
Creating brainstorm groups to conceptualize ideas	Setting up interviews.
(C) Production	**(D) Post-Production**
Definition: All activities related to the recording of the footage that is used to build a full episode.	**Definition:** All activities related to the editing and finishing of the material recorded into a complete media piece ready to be distributed.
Example of tasks during this step:	**Example of tasks during this step:**
Shoot an interview, conversation or scene	Gather and edit footage

E - Distribution
Definition: All activities related to making the finished documentary available to potential viewers. In the case of the Texan Italian Stories this included both Online distribution and Screenings.
Example of tasks during this step:
Set up of "preview" screenings where all subjects highlighted in the documentary were able to see the piece prior to its release online.
Promoting the online link for the video across social media platforms and email

Chart 1. Different stages employed for the creation process of the Texan Italian Stories.

There are many other current filmmakers who have employed an expanded process of media creation, and used each step to engage with their audience. To illustrate better the different possibilities that could arise from rethinking the process of media creation I will offer three particular examples, the last one being a personal example which served as a test for the creation of the Texan Italian series.

Example 1—Iron Sky

The fictional film Iron Sky (2012) , is a successful and much talked about example of producers using every single part of the process to engage with the target audience. (Baranova & Lugmayr, 2013). Certainly this film is fictional—its plot about Nazis that come from space to destroy earth—and it dealt with a much larger budget and team than the one employed by most geo-ethnic storytellers; nonetheless, there are many aspects that director Timo Vuorensola used in his film that I feel should be noted. For example, the film had different sources for financing, one of them including from its actual fans. Furthermore, the producers built up their community strong by utilizing resources such as Wreck-a-Movie—a self proclaimed collaborative filmmaking site—to let their fans voice their ideas for the script and production of the film.

Figure 6. Crowdsourcing distribution. A screen grab showing an online form in the website for the film "Iron Sky" (2012). By filling this form, fans of the film can request a local screening of the film in their own geographical area. Copyright Blind Spot pictures.

Figure 6 shows a screen grab of Iron Sky's website, where fans of the movie can "demand" a local theater to carry the film. This idea of DIY distribution is also available

to many filmmakers, through new independent distribution online service such as Tugg.com which let people pick a movie they want to see, and organize a screening at their local movie theaters at certain non-peak hours. Certainly this idea provides the power to the filmmaker to bypass standard distribution channels and engage with their fans through this particular stage of the process, making the screenings much more than what they usually are in standard filmmaking where fans have little control on where and when a specific movie will be shown.

Example 2—Kony 2012

Another successful example of the audience/producer interactivity that Web 2.0 offers to every phase of the media creation process is the case of Kony 2012 documentary, a 30-minute piece that gathered an unprecedented 100 million views in Youtube in less than a week (Goodman & Preston, 2012; Harsin, 2013). Although the content of Kony 2012 was certainly designed to be "spreadable"—sporting a polished look, interesting narrative threads as well as an array of characters that made it compelling (Harsin, 2013)—Kony 2012 can also be appreciated as an ideal example of a flawless orchestration of social media that started from the conceptualization step of the media making process. Thousands of other videos in the web have the same spreadable attributes that Kony 2012 has. However, none of them have found any comparable audience acceptance. Even though no theory has been able to completely justify the extremely large spreadability of the video in such a short amount of time (Harsin, 2013), one thing we do know is that Invisible Children—the organization that created the video— engaged fans from multiple cities through the process in tactical fashion which

had to at least generate a sizable spark for the video to become "viral" (Goodman and Preston, 2012).

Furthermore, watching the video Kony 2012 under the lens of everything we have covered, we can also speculate a few other elements that may have insured the videos' massive spreadability. For example, there are sequences in the video that show hundreds of people —who as viewers we assume belong to Invisible Children's network—being part of hyper stylized massive group shots as the one shown in fig 7. Under the framing of performative filmmaking, we can assume that these group shots were propitiated situations justified by the process of media creation where fans traveled to a specific geographical point—such as a park—to be part of some type of controlled event that allowed them to connect with one another over the context provided by the theme of the video—a call to arms for people to unite against an African warlord.

Figure 7. Audience participation. A screen grab of the online film KONY 2012. This shot depicts a pleasingly aesthetic representation of many of the volunteers of Invisible Children – The organization that produced the film. Copyright: Invisible Children

One could also argue that the filmmaker's decision of creating group shots may have helped in creating a certain sense of shared ownership of the video product among the people that were present, especially if the directors used a certain type of unifying

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speech and/or group activities at the moment of taping. In other words, the process of

media creation could have had a certain effect in the willingness of the participant to

share the video just as much as actually appearing in the video. Perhaps a separate study

should be conducted to analyze the patterns of sharing Kony 2012 from fans of the video

who went to the tapings and appeared in the finished product in contrast with those who

went to the tapings but did not appear in the video.

Example 3—Pesce Grande

Certainly both Kony 2012 and Iron Sky are two fairly large examples that may

seem unrelated to the usually small operations of Geo-Ethnic Media producers

(Matsaganis, 2010). Nonetheless, I believe that since most of these tools are available to

for free on the internet, all of these ideas could also be employed in much more humble

projects. For example, Figure 11 shows a screen grab of "Pesce Grande" a video I

created prior to the creation of the Texan Italian Stories that illustrates how the process of

media creation can be rethought to further engage with small Geo-Ethnic communities.

The video "Pesce Grande" involved different students of Italian at the University

of Texas through every phase of creation. Through the conceptualization phase students

were asked to develop a skit in class—for a grade—using their own creativity for the

creation of characters and situations. These skits were subsequently performed in front of

their classmates, shot with a video camera, and uploaded online. Once videos were on

the Internet, all students were asked to vote for their favorite video and choose their

"favorite actor" and "favorite actress."   The prize offered to the winners of this popular

vote contest was to be part of a professionally video that was to be inspired on their skit

and character.   Since the video that won both "best skit" and "best actor" were about a

rapper named Pesce Grande—as conceptualized by student Erik Menera—for his prize, I

created a rap video with an introduction that talked about the importance of this "famous

rapper" in the Italian community of Austin.

Once the theme of the video was conceptualized, the production team wrote the

song and the script of the film. This idea differs from typical participatory practices

where audiences also take part of it. Nonetheless, I would argue that to insure the highest

quality possible of the piece a professional must take care of crucial elements that are

necessary to create good spreadable content. I also argue—as drawn from experiences

such as the creation of "Pesce Grande"—that collaborators like to work with

professionals who can guide them through the process of creation, especially when they

feel these media makers have the ability of enhancing their likeness in the finished

product.

Figure 8. Rethinking the process. A screen grab from the "Pesce Grande" music video, featuring
students of Italian of diverse classes and levels of Italian. Their collective work in the
distribution phase, garnered 2500+ views in a week.

Once the script of "Pesce Grande" and the song was recorded with the winning

student, I proceeded to produce the film. Through production I engaged three local

Italian businesses as well as many other students of Italian who were in different levels, not just in the class where Erik, the winner, had attended. Students helped the producers in handling some of the less complicated equipment—i.e. holding bounce boards for lighting, etc.—as well as acted in the different scenes that were created. Some of these scenes took place at the Italian restaurants that were featured, which made some of these students have to visit these establishments for their first time. The owners of each restaurant were also featured in the video, while they provided food and a total of $500 in cash to cover for equipment rental (financing step).

Through the process of post-production (editing), we used the actual Facebook pages of the students in order to get pictures that we could use to build the story. Once the video was edited, we also organized a small screening at a professor's home— Antonella Olson, the instructor and facilitator of this idea—which gave the chance to students to approve the video before it went online. The idea of having this screening provided another possibility to bring people together by using the process of media creation as a justification. Furthermore, at the screening students brainstormed about ways of "spreading" the finished video and encouraged each other to participate in that particular step of the process. "Pesce Grande" gathered more than 2500 views in a week (for a total of 4200+ as of June 2014), was featured along with an article by a local University of Texas newspaper, and was ultimately one of the biggest reasons that encouraged the Texan Language Center to provide us with a $4500 grant. This humble sum provided the jump-start of the ITAL project, which subsequently gave birth to the Texan Italian Stories.
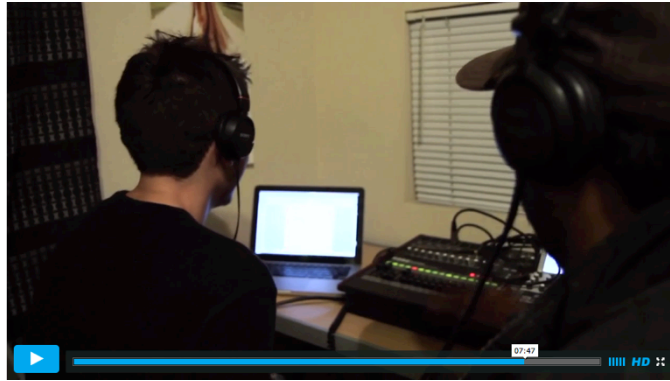
Figure 9. Rethinking the process II. A screen grab taken from a promotional video utilized to finance the Texan Italian Stories. In it Erik Menera—a Mexican American student of Italian at the University of Texas at Austin—records the rap of the "Pesce Grande" video.

Although I have not fully studied the effect that "Pesce Grande" had on its participants, I do know that after the video was released, Erik continued taking more Italian classes than the ones required and studied abroad in Rome. Erik gained the nickname of "Pesce Grande"─a title that he proudly accepted─through the duration of his studies at the Italian department at the University of Texas. He also established a relationship with a female student who was featured prominently in the video, which he did not know before the production of "Pesce Grande." Similar interesting results were spawned because of my decision of including local businesses. For example, many students who collaborated with us in the production of the video, claimed they had never visited the establishments before their participation in "Pesce Grande

Two years later, as I worked in finishing this thesis research I reached out to Erik Manera over email, to ask him about his participation on "Pesce Grande." This is what he had to say about it:

 " After the Pesce Grande video came out, my experience within the Italian Department definitely changed. Since that video, I've been approached by so many people who recognized me from it and some of those people even went on to be good

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friends of mine. Whenever I attend an Italian event I always feel like some sort of local celebrity, it's kind of funny to me.

I had heard of Lucky's but probably would have never gone if it wasn't for the Pesce Grande video. After being in those places during the video, they definitely obtained a special place in my heart and I attempted to go to these places as much as possible. This year I celebrated my 22nd birthday at Andiamo (another place I hadn't even heard about before the video) and it was really cool that the owner greeted me in Italian and addressed me as Pesce Grande. As far as the rest of the Italian Department, I definitely think the video opened up the students' curiosity. Many students who don't have the opportunity to go to Italy, look for authentic places close to home and I'm sure the first to come to mind are those they heard in that catchy song from Italian class. "

CHAPTER II

Conceptualizing the Texan Italian Stories Series

"There are two types of people in the world, is what I understand, there are Italians and

there are the people that want to be Italian. So, half of my heritage is not Italian but all

of me is Italian."

Joe Perrone—Participant in TIS Episode III

Italians have been coming to Texas since long before the state's annexation to the

United States of America (Belfiglio, 1983). Since then, Italian immigration to Texas has

been rather low and yet steady with the exception of a considerably large surge in the late

1800's to the early 1900's, when thousands of Italians—prominently from impoverished

areas of southern Italy such as Sicily—settled in cities such as Galveston, Houston, Bryan

and San Antonio. According to numbers from the 2010 U.S. Census, 480,716 persons in

Texas (1.9% of the state's total population) identify themselves as having an Italian

heritage. Despite this sizable population numbers, working with the Italian community of

Central Texas as a "geo-ethnic community" presented its challenges, especially due to the

vastness of the geography as well as to the complexity of the "Italian" ethnicity in the

region, which is fueled by the stark divisions that exist between Italians and Italian

Americans.

Italian Americans comprise the majority of the people claiming an Italian

ethnicity in the state of Texas. Understanding culture as an ever evolving system that is

highly shaped by external forces (Hall, 1993; Conzen, Gerber, Morawska, Pozzetta &

Vicoli, 1992) one could assume that the cultural identity adapted by Italian Americans in

Texas has been deeply influenced by the unique struggles and subsequent achievements

of the Italian community in becoming part of the mainstream. Factors in the immigration

patterns of the South of the United States did not necessarily contribute to the establishment of a strong Italian identity in this area (Belfiglio, 1983). Immigrant Italians in the south endured decades of harsh discrimination, which at some point forced them to abandon all sense of national pride and identify themselves completely with the Americans (Barrett, 1997). This same situation has been experienced by many other ethnic minority groups who "have been for a long time denied the exercise of full rights of expression and participation in the cultural, social, political and economic sphere of a given society, and in many instances forced to renounce their socio-cultural systems and embrace the one of the majority culture" (Sabiescu, 2012, p.1). In fact, it was not until the Italians were finally accepted as part of the mainstream, or the standard *White American* classification in Texas, that they started to seek to identify themselves "through membership in Italian groups, or by strong feelings for various themes in Italian, or Neapolitan or Sicilian culture" (Gans, 1979, p.8).

People born in Italy, otherwise known as "Italian nationals," comprise more than 6,500 Italian citizens (according to numbers from the Consulate of Italy in Houston) who have immigrated to Texas in the last few decades. Italian nationals have a completely different set of cultural values from their Italian American counterparts. First, Italian nationals are arriving to Texas in a moment where Italians have already become part of the mainstream, in other words they did not endure the harsh discrimination that seems to have forged the Italian identity in Texas. On the other hand, given the strong regional divisions that exist in the country of Italy—especially between North and South - the average Italian tends to lack a strong sense of Italian nationality (Castellanos, 2010). These two particular differences between the two groups show a lack of shared history,

which is particularly evident in most of the "Italian" events that are organized by different organizations in the area.   For example, the Spaghetti and Meatball dinners at organizations such as the Christopher Columbus Society in San Antonio, or St Anthony's church in Bryan, were seen as an integral part of the "Italian" heritage of many Italian Americans who grew up attending these events with their family, whereas the Italian nationals felt little to no attachment to these or any other Italian American ritual—i.e., Columbus day, St Peter's tavola, Galveston flood mass—that the Italian Americans in Texas have embraced with pride.

Figure 10. Italians in Texas. A picture of the "Italian Club" picnic in Thurber, TX. Many Italians came to Texas in the late 19th century to work in railroads, mines and agriculture. Many of them stayed in Texas and had large families, moving into other forms of business and obtaining economic success. Source: UTSA digital archives

Sergio Codognotto, someone who participated actively in the production of TIS episode 4, explains the sentiment that many Italians feel about Italian Americans with these words:

"As an Italian when someone shows up and tells me "I'm Italian" and I look at them and they have nothing but the last name Italian, I don't think they're Italian."

This lack of unified "Italian in Texas" identity was certainly not aided by other

Italian communities in the United States, which judged by their comments in our videos

seem to have had no knowledge that Italians had also settled in Texas (see figure 15).

Furthermore, national media outlets that covered Italian American events disregarded

Texas as an important hub of Italians. As an example, I-Italy.org, a major online

initiative launched by private and public Italian entities called themselves "the channel

for all things Italian in America" and yet offer almost no information about the Italians in

Texas.   The same could be said of Italian media channels—such as the public channel

RAI, which some Italians in Texas had access to through satellite TV—covered no news

from my target community in their already limited coverage of Italian news in America,

despite that four of the fastest growing cities in America are in this area.

Overcoming the issue of geography required a certain number of compromises.

For example, while in the initial phase of conceptualization of the Texan Italian Series

project, my first intention was to focus on the Italian community of Austin, Texas, where

I resided at the time. Nonetheless, the Italian community of Austin lacked strong Italian

oriented NGO's as well as different elements of the Communication Action Context—

such as schools and shared spaces—which I believed made my task of creating media to

strengthen the connections between the nodes of the storytelling network somewhat

limited.   With this in mind, I expanded the geography of the project to include Houston,

San Antonio, and surrounding cities of "Central Texas." Houston and San Antonio both

had much stronger NGOs, which were also utilized by Italians from Austin. For example,

many Italians and Italian Americans drove to Houston for different events offered by the

Italian Cultural and Community Center. On the other hand, Houston was the home base

of the Consulate of Italy, which is considered an important center of information for new Italians who arrive to Texas.

To get around the issues of fragmented identity, I chose to re-imagine the concept of Italian culture in Texas and utilize the content of the Texan Italian Stories series as a system for decoding and creation of meaning.   In other words, the goal of the content of the Texan Italian Stories became to create and promote shared symbols among Italians and Italian Americans as well as "re-tell" Texan Italian history on the quest of producing a shared identity for the entire group (Hall, 1993). By setting limitations to the content, the documentaries subsequently became more niche, offering a specific Geo-Ethnic perspective to Italian culture where the stories told were certainly more "concerned in the role of culture in the accomplishing what could be, not just in maintaining or submitting to what it" was (Casrnir, 1999, p.105).

 I also adopted the term "Texan Italian" as a way to describe all of the Italians of this particular community that we would be "creating." The term Texan Italian presented *Italian ethnicity* not as a collective fiction "but rather a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories" (Conzen, 1992, p. 4).   A similar term was being utilized by the Order of Sons of Italy in America (OSIA) chapter of San Antonio; nonetheless theirs was "Italian Texans," which I feel gave emphasis to Italy, instead to the local community, which was established in Texas.   As a way to further define the boundaries of the Texan Italian community, I adopted the description of the membership base of the Italian Cultural and Community Center in Houston that is—"Italians, Italian Americans and Italophiles (anyone with an avid interest in Italian)—given that the goal

was to unite residents to NGO's with the process, and these were the people for which the

ICCC was already targeting their operations.

Figure 11. Italians in Texas II. A screen grab of a Facebook post by L'Italo Americano, a nationwide Italian American Newspaper, shows an example of the perception that other people from other parts of the United States of America have about the Italian community of Texas. In the comment section, two individuals admit their lack of knowledge regarding the size and relevance of the Italian community in this state. Many other people in Texas, including Italians and Italian Americans, also shared similar comments.

The decision to include Italophiles—as the ICCC does—brought a certain number

of benefits that I believe should be further explored by other similar studies. For

example, I found many Italophiles—perhaps driven both by their lack of knowledge

about Italian culture and their enthusiasm for wanting to learn about it—would

sometimes work as a mediator for Italians and Italian Americans. This was particularly

evident at the "aperitivos"—or happy hours—offered by the Italy America Chamber of

[Commerce](#) in Austin.   In these events, I witnessed many times how individuals who were Italian nationals, would team up with Individuals who were Italian Americans, in order to explain to an Italophile a somewhat unified version of what Italy was. Thus, I found that the relationship of both Italian and Italian Americans with Italophiles could play a role in facilitating intercultural dialogue between these two factions. This is further supported by theory, which tells us that in-group friends who have out-group friends relates to diminished prejudice (Pettygrew, 2007).   On the other hand, it is known that individuals with positive experiences in intercultural relationships may have a better disposition to engage in them again (Bent, Drzewjecka, Konomi, Meares, Ortega, White & Sias, 2008). Therefore, Italophiles having no fixed version of what Italian identity should be, would continuously come to Italian events mingling with both Italians and Italian Americans alike.   The "Italophile" label was also applied to students of Italian at any local high school or University who did not have Italian ancestors.

Finally, I also made other practical considerations that helped me keep the project manageable. One of them was to limit the number of NGOs that would be part of this study to mainly four: The Italy America Chamber of Commerce—both the Houston and Austin Branches (IACC), the Italian Cultural and Community Center in Houston (ICCC), the Christopher Columbus Society of San Antonio, and the Saint Anthony's church in Bryan. On that account, the storytelling network of the "Texan Italian" was identified the following way:

Node 1─Residents: Italian, Italian Americans and Italophiles who live in Austin, San Antonio and Houston (or nearby cities such as Bryan)

Node 2—NGOs: the ICCC, the IACCC (Houston and Austin Branches), the Christopher Columbus society of San Antonio, and St Anthony's church in Bryan, TX.

Node 3—Geo-Ethnic Media: My team, as well as any other online or offline pamphlet in the area that could cater to Italians.

The "Pilot" (test) episode - Texan Italian Stories Episode 1, May 2013

On May 2013 I traveled to Houston with my co-producer (Romina Olson) to attend an "aperitivo" (Happy Hour) in Houston of the Italy-America Chamber of Commerce (IACC). Prior to my trip, my co-producer had had a conversation with the IACC's director Alessia Paolicchi and had told her of the idea of starting a local short documentary series that offered current information about the Texan Italian community, which he received with great enthusiasm. The tentative name we had for the series was "Italy in Texas—Bilingual Stories," which was later changed for Texan Italian Stories, dropping the term "bilingual" altogether.

Figure 12. Pilot episode. A screen grab of the first Episode of the Texan Italian Stories. The goal of this episode was to "test the waters" as well as to introduce my team to the Texan Italian community.

The main goal of this first video was to gauge people's enthusiasm regarding the idea of the series. Nonetheless, the video also served as an introduction to the Italian community of Texas in Houston as most of the attendees had no knowledge of my existence. Alessia's enthusiasm about our team's presence at the "aperitivo"—fueled in part by her expectations on the potential outcome of the finished video product—was certainly instrumental in establishing the credibility we needed from the attendees so they could share their story with us on camera. Despite her role as a director of the chamber, I believe that it was her upbeat attitude, which ultimately encouraged many of the people present to open up and share their story. This behavior is consistent with the literature on emotional contagion which describes it as a process "in which a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group through the conscious or unconscious induction of emotion states and behavioral attitudes" (Botha and Reyneke, 2013). I firmly believe that emotional contagion is a crucial component for insuring the success of community media projects such as the Texan Italian Stories series.

Nate Mignone 1 year ago
Grande video! Once again great job! I especially enjoyed the trip to Houston and the "Famiglia Mandola" graphic. Some great friends of mine I met when I lived in Houston are Mandolas! Thanks again for the great listening comprehension practice!
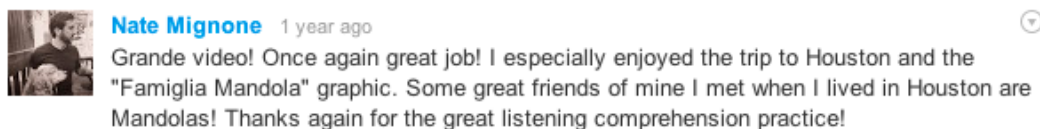
Figure 13. Community feedback. A screen grab from a comment on the Youtube comment section of the TIS episode 1. The success of this test episode had a very important influence in the creation of all subsequent episodes.

The first episode of the Texan Italian Stories was offered in English and Italian with no English subtitles. The story was composed of different interviews with Italians and Italian Americans at the "aperitivo" of the Chamber of Commerce in Houston. All interviews were centered on a central theme: *there is a strong community of Italians in*

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Houston that is growing and attracting a diverse and interesting mix of Italians to the area. The video was complimented with a short amount of history on the immigration patterns of Italians to Houston in the early 1900's, including some of the NGO's that the Italians had established in that city throughout the years. The use of a central theme and the *introspections* of the host through the voiceover, granted this video a certain "longevity" that is characteristic of newspaper editorial pieces and that I do not believe would have been possible with a strictly "current news" format. A good example of this "longevity" was expressed by Alessia Paolicchi—the director of the Italy America Chamber of Commerce in Houston—who was also interviewed via email for the creation of this thesis research:

"The video created a change for us in our communication with our partners. Compared with other traditional means we had used to tell about "the activities' of the Chamber and what is involved in our work (brochures, newsletters, email), the choice of the video made it less obsolete and rejuvenated the communication with our members. This has therefore been a significant improvement for us in the way we present ourselves to the Italian community and supporters. I received numerous demonstrations of appreciation about the video since it helped people understand better who we are. We are not sure if it helped us in the search for new members, but this is probably also due to our inability to further utilize this tool and spread it even more."

The number of views of this video in the YouTube platform (800 after a week) as well as the acceptance of its content, opened different doors in the community that were instrumental for the creation of subsequent episodes. For example, Martin Morales—the

director of the Austin branch of the Chamber of Commerce—found the idea exciting and

his involvement was crucial for creating the next two episodes.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Given that this is a qualitative study, there is a certain level of subjectivity that should be kept in mind while analyzing the results. On the other hand, since I worked both as a researcher and as a filmmaker and thus had a significant level of involvement with the subjects, it also important to note that the replicability of this particular study may be somewhat compromised.

In this study I blend field notes, media examples (i.e., pictures and video), and data from in depth interviews with nine members of the Italian community who participated through some or all of the six steps of creation of the Texan Italian Stories series. Interviews of 20-30 minutes were conducted over the phone and recorded with the previous consent of the participants. Because I had developed a high level of involvement with the subjects during the creation of the media pieces, the interviews, which took place during the month of June 2014, were conducted by a separate researcher/interviewer—Leo Bini Carter, an Italian American Master's student of global policy at the University of Texas at Austin—in order to mitigate any bias that could emerge if I had done the interviews.. Claire Soto—one of the subjects interviewed—responded to the questions over email instead of a phone interview. Two of the other 8 subjects interviewed by phone—Fabrizio Nava and Tiziana Triolo—were contacted over email as well to elicit responses to short additional questions.

The goal of this study is to answer the following question:

RQ1—Can a performative/collaborative approach of documentary production, be utilized to create connections among "micro-level" members and between "micro-level" and "meso-level" members of the storytelling network of the Texan Italian community?

Subject	Stages of process	Profession	Age	Sex	Italian Connection	Speaks Italian	Other specifics
1	A, B, C, D, E	Financial consultant for transnational bank	60	male	Italian American	No	3rd generation Sicilian
2	A, B, C, D, E	Mechanical engineer	41	male	Italian	Yes	Italian, Treviso
3	A, B, C, D, E	Director of Marketing of ICCC	43	Female	Italian	Yes	Italian, Sicily
4	A, B, C, D, E	Management at large tech corporation	49	Male	Italian	yes	Italian, Rome
5	C, D, E	Entrepreneur	60	Male	Italophile	no	Partner of Italian American
6	C, D, E	Executive leadership Italian/US corporation	34	Male	Italian	yes	Italian, Treviso
7	A, E	Creative writer at large tech corporation	48	Female	Italian American		2nd Generation,
8	B, C, D, E	Consul of Italy in Houston	45	Male	Italian American	no	Italian, Rome
9	A, B, C, D, E	Student of Italian at University of Texas	22	Female	Italophile	yes	Knows Italian, has traveled to Italy

Table 1. Subjects Interviewed. An overview of the 9 subjects who participated in the interviews of this qualitative research A:Conceptualization/financing; B:Preproduction; C:Production; D:Post-Production; E:Distribution.

In this study, I will describe the creation process only of two Episodes: Texan Italian Stories episode II—Rekindle the Flame, and Texan Italian Stories episode III— Italian from the bottom.   I will divide each episode in the five steps of media creation adopted, in order to explain how connections were made (or not made) through each part of the process. I will use data collected from interviews of subjects who participated also in Episode IV—Texan Italian innovation in the discussion and limitation sections, though for the purposes of keeping this study somewhat contained, I will not divide the processes of that episode nor the one of Episode V—Tex Mex Italians. While the data gathered from observation in the field—such as witnessing subjects shaking hands with other Texan Italian residents for the first time─could provide sufficient evidence to answer this question, I believe the interviews provide a more in depth study of the relevance of the different connections that our subjects established with other members of the Italian community of Texas because of their participation in the creation of the series.

Texan Italian Stories Episode II

Overview:

The episode "Rekindle the Flame" was the first documentary of the Texan Italian Stories where the "List of ingredients for a nice spread" was put into practice. Nevertheless, notions of CIT were applied during the production process in comparison with subsequent episodes. For the content, I developed—under the guidance of my mentor Dr Sandy Rao—a style for writing the story, which mixed "digital storytelling" techniques with certain elements of feature and travel writing. As a result, the mix of writing styles produced a multilayered documentary, where the host Romina, took the role of an *explorer* who was trying to unveil the different treasures that existed in Texas that most people did not know were contributed by the Italians in the state. (e.g., the story of Pompeo Coppini, an Italian sculptor who lived and worked in Texas in the first half of the 20th century).

The *explorer* narrative was interweaved with two other separate stories from two different Italian events that happened that month of June 2013 in Texas: a celebration of the day of the Italian Republic which was held at the City Hall in Austin; and a gala to honor important Italian Americans which was carried out by the ICCC at the Four Seasons Hotel in Houston. If I was to describe the finished video from a storyteller perspective, I would think of it as a mix of a social magazine, a travel video, and a personal digital story, where the sculptor Pompeo Coppini serves both as an unifying platform and "sub-theme" that supports our host's exploration of the concept of the "Year

of Italian Culture in the U.S. 2013." Fabrizio Nava, the consul of Italy in Houston, describes how he felt about my decision of covering the "Year of Italian Culture" and how this affected his subsequent increased support for the series:

"The episode reflected in a unique way the mandate of promoting 2013 Year of Italian Culture in the USA, and I felt that the Consulate General of Italy and ITAL could partner and support each other in this endeavor."

Figure 14. Producerly content. Digital flyer created in support the release of TIS episode 2 in 4th of July. This flyer explores the idea that the contributions of Italians in Texas are not always stereotypically Italian.

Figure 14 some of the *producerly text* that was created for the second episode of the Texan Italian Stories series. The image shows a quintessential view of the University of Texas featuring its famous tower and the Washington statue—the latter built by Italian sculptor Pompeo Coppin whose work on iconic "American" characters allowed us to expand the definition of "Italian" and play with the popular notion that "nothing is what it seems."   I believe that Pompeo Coppini's story and his contributions to Texas, which

had been for the most part unknown or forgotten before our video, was the ideal type of unifying symbol that embodied the full meaning of the term Texan Italian that I wanted to convey.

Steps of creation process

A. Financing/Conceptualization

For the financing and conceptualization step I teamed up with Martin Morales, the director of the Austin Branch Italy-America Chamber of Commerce, to create a "Board of Advisors" for the production of the Texan Italian Stories. I believed that the creation of this Board would be the ideal vehicle for people to connect with one another during the conceptualization process. Martin had seen the effect of the first Texan Italian Stories and had high hopes of what could be achieved now that the series was going to be completely in English. In Late May 2013, Martin arranged for two people to join us in a lunch meeting at a local Italian restaurant. One of these people is Joe Perrone, who would later become the protagonist of Episode III. Joe remembers this meeting the following way:

"This friend (Martin) had become part of the Italy-America chamber of Commerce and he has an association with Sergio Carvajal , and he said we are doing this thing with Texan Italians, would you be interested in talking to Sergio? I said sure. So that's how I got involved in it."

The creation of the Board of Advisors provided for reconnections to happen between Martin and all the people that he invited to participate. Given that Martin represented a Texan Italian NGO, I could say that the process of media creation of this episode propitiated the connection between two nodes of the Texan Italian community. The people that came to the Board of Advisors meetings seemed to all have a great time

talking about their own heritage. The group—which was all Italian-American—was also

instrumental in the conceptualization of the story and theme.   It was very important for

them, for example, that *Italian nationals* saw the importance of Italian American culture,

which is something that I tried to integrate in Episode II, and certainly in Episode III.

Through the creation of Episode II, Tiziana Triolo—the director of the Italian

Cultural and Community Center (ICCC)—also participated in the financing process by

covering my team's traveling costs ($170) to travel to Houston to shoot the ICCC gala

that was also part of the event. No meaningful connections seem to have happened

because of that process, though it is noted that the ICCC's director had to ask her board

of advisors to request the traveling budget and that other team members were also a part

of this process.

B. Pre-Production:

No specific decision was made through the pre-production process to facilitate

connections among individuals.

C. Production:

There were a few decisions made through the production process, which

facilitated connections and reconnections. An example of the aforementioned statement

can be seen in Figure 15, which shows a picture of Tiziana Triolo next to Monsignor

Frank H. Rossi, a spiritual leader of the Italian American community of Houston.

Although they already knew each other before this interview, my decision allowed them

to discuss important issues on camera—such as the importance of "unity" between

Italians, Italian Americans and Italophiles—which spawned a healthy conversation that

has been watched by almost two thousand people online by the time of writing this thesis.

Figure 16 shows what could be considered another mild example of connections being carried out through the process of filmmaking. In this case I asked Martin to meet us at the Capitol of Texas, where we would be looking at sculptors of deceased Texan Italian artist Pompeo Coppini.   Martin had no previous knowledge that these statues existed—right on Capitol ground—nor he was aware of Pompeo Coppini prior to my decision of bringing him here. Although this connection was made between a member that is alive, and another one that is not, I would argue that this experience impacted Martin's ability to connect with other members of the Texan Italian community—who may not know about Coppini either—given the personal experience he had with Coppini's work.   My co-producer also reached out to the Coppini's foundation in San Antonio, with the hopes of bringing a representative to this shoot as well, but we received no call back.

Figure 15. Facilitating connections. A still frame from Episode II showing Tiziana Triolo and Monsignor Rossi discussing different topics of importance to the Texan Italian community. CIT informed the decision of interviewing them together.

D. Post-Production:

During post-production my team reached out to several people in order to get footage and

pictures that could help us better tell the story. This idea was carried out to encourage

individuals to create connections while gathering the right type of pictures/footage that

could make it into the video.

Figure 16. Facilitating connections II. A still frame from Episode II showing Martin Morales and
the host, Romina Olson, covering one of Pompeo Coppini's statues. Martin was not aware of
Coppini's statues until we took him there to shoot this sequence.

Figure 17 shows a still from episode II showing the president of the Board of the

Italian Cultural and Community Center next to a superimposed image of the ancestors of

Joe Montalbano—an Italian American entrepreneur who was honored that evening. MY

team asked the ICCC to get us this and other pictures, which would have facilitated

connections between them and their members; however, the ICCC opted for letting us

make the contact instead. It was the ICCC's perception that they would be bothering the

honored family by asking them for these pictures.

Figure 17. Facilitating connections III. A still frame from Episode II showing the president of the board of the Italian Cultural and Community Center next to two superimposed images of the ancestors of Joe Montalbano – a man that was honored at the gala that evening of June 8, 2013 .

E. Distribution:

For the distribution phase, my team and I set up two different small screenings to show the film in its "rough cut" and "fine cut" state to the participants prior to our release online as a way to allow people to connect with one another.   The screening was the first time that Tiziana (from the ICCC) and Martin (from the IACC) met. They also arranged a separate meeting that day—taking advantage of Tiziana's trip to Austin—where Martin met Tiziana and two members of her team and they talked about future goals that they could achieve together. Tiziana remembers the experience the following way:

 "Yes, with that occasion we meet some Italians that are present in Austin. And we meet the chairmen of the Italian Chamber of Commerce at Austin (Martin Morales)."

Through the distribution online, my team and I also sent group emails where all the names and emails of every one of the participants were openly featured on the "TO:"

line, in order to encourage further connections among them.   We received only individual emails back and do not know if this strategy allowed for any connections to happen.

During the process of distribution I was also approached by the Consul of Italy in Houston, Fabrizio Nava, to add a "Presented under the auspices of the Consulate of Italy in Houston" sign at the beginning of the video, as well as the emblem of the country of Italy. This public act of support from this government institution provided the series with a high degree of credibility among future participants. For example, we used this information several times to explain the idea of the series to different people, which always evoked a positive outcome from the person listening. On the other hand, I believed that adding the Consulate emblem also allowed the Consulate to connect with a group of people that may or may have not of their existence. Nonetheless, when asked if the process of sharing the video helped the consulate create new connections, the consul Fabrizio Nava replied:

"Well, these videos largely deal with organizations I am already acquainted with. So they haven't really open any road's for me…but also keep in mind I am in a pretty unique position. Since I am the consul of four states. "

Figure 18 shows an example of the Texan Italian episode 2 as a "spreadable" text that allowed viewers to mix, remix, and share, changing its meaning to adjust to their needs (Jenkins, 2009). Another participant Paolo Papi—also interviewed for this thesis—took the screen grab and subsequently shared it online along with his own comments. Given that Paolo and Tiziana were already close friends before the film was

released, I could only say that the process facilitated a form for them to further connect with one another.

Figure 18. Participatory culture. Paolo Papi's screen capture of the video is complimented by a caption in Italian that translated in English reads: "Certainly this charming lady did not go unnoticed, note the look of the reverend." Paolo also "tagged" Tiziana's name, which automatically shared this post through parts of her social network as well.

Texan Italian Stories Episode III

Overview:

During late July 2013- early August 2013 my team and I traveled three times to the area called "the bottom of the Brazos river" to the towns of Bryan and Hearne, Texas—the latter the actual hometown of Joe Perrone, one of our main collaborators for the making of this episode. The story of the Italians who settled in that area dated to the large Italian immigration to Texas of the late 1800's/early 1900's, when Italian and Texan entrepreneurs lured Italian farm workers—specifically from impoverished areas of

Sicily—to move to that area with the hopes of obtaining their own piece of land to farm (Belfiglio, 1995).

Figure 19. Producerly content II. A still frame of the introduction of the Texan Italian Stories Episode 3, featuring the story of Joe Perrone an Italian American man who is reconnecting with his Italian ancestors of Hearne, Texas.

Even though most of the interviews done for this episode were carried out in collaboration with Joe Perrone and the board of advisors, I also took the liberty to interview a professor of Texas A&M University named Leonardo Lombardini, who worked in the horticulture department and specialized in Pecan (a plant that is native of Texas and does not exist in Italy).   The inclusion of Lombardini—an Italian national—and his unconventional research background provided the opportunity of further exploring the sub-theme of "Agricultural life versus city life," which was instrumental in crafting a multi-layered story that tackled current and relevant issues for the people who had grown up in that area of Texas.

Steps of creation process:

A. Financing/Conceptualization

For the financing/conceptualization phase of the process of Episode III, I continued the meetings with the Board of Advisors that was initiated by Martin Morales—the director of the Austin branch of the Italy-America Chamber of Commerce—which continued on providing a space for the participants to connect with one another. Martin also contacted more people on his own, which allowed him to establish other connections while allowing us to raise $2,000 for the production of episode III. One of the people that Martin contacted was an Italian American writer named Traci. She remembers her connection with Martin over financing the following way:

"Martin Morales pointed out that they where short of funding, I was sorry to hear that because he had said the filming was going to take place in Bryan college station and I do t have any family connection but I went 20 years ago to interview some older Italian Americans and I had the best time. So I really felt strongly about that particular episode was funded." "I really wanted to honor those people I had met (beause they passed away)."

B. Pre-Production:

For the pre-production of Episode III, I asked our participants to set up interviews with people in the area. I provided them with a list of people that I wanted—based on the ingredients list I had developed for insuring spreadibility– with the understanding that they would find people that fit the profiles that I required. Joe Perrone and another

member from the Board of Advisors spearheaded the pre-production in the Bryan area,

given that they both knew a great deal of people in the bottom of the Brazos River area.

Though the pre-production was not particularly addressed in the interviews, the process

of contacting these people certainly provided the opportunity for these individuals to

connect—or at least re-connect—with others in the community. That said, I believe that

although they may have enjoyed contacting these people, they also were very cautious

about not bothering these individuals. Ultimately, I believe that Joe and the Board of

Advisors saw their participation in the pre-production phase of the process more as an aid

for me in the making of the video, rather than an opportunity for them to make

connections and reconnections.

C. Production:

The process of production of the Episode III facilitated a good number of

interesting opportunities for Texan Italians to connect with one another. I used CIT to

inform the decision of shooting "group interviews" where my main participant Joe also

participated, to allow him to connect with these people and have an interesting

conversation while being guided by the filmmakers. The decision of having Joe

interview others is something that none of the other interviewees expected; however,

everyone felt at ease and accepted it as part of the media making process.

For one of the scenes of this third episode, Joe visited the house of an elder farmer

from the area, who brought along his son and two grandsons. Prior to the conversation,

Joe had been asked to prepare different questions to help the filmmakers interview this

family. There were extra questions and moments that were also encouraged by me,

depending on the topics that the participants were covering in their conversation.   The

presence of the film crew and the process of media creation provided the platform for this conversation between Joe and this family to happen for the first time in their lives.

Through the process of production I also used certain strategies that I found necessary in order to fully utilize the presence of the camera to shape the dynamics of the scene and allow for more meaningful connections to happen. For example, I often moved the camera in the middle of someone's response, which I felt provided a sense of uncertainty among the participants regarding the exact moments when the camera was recording. I noticed that by moving the camera several times, all of the participants started to pay more attention to each other and to the host, rather than concentrating on what I was doing.   I also tried to allow for people to pay more attention to each other by giving the following directions to everyone before starting the interview:

"Please control the movement of your eyes. It looks much better if you look at each other in the eye rather than when you look all over the place nervously. I will be moving the camera between takes, so never mind me because Romina is always recording audio."

I cannot speak of the effects that the aforementioned direction had in the participants from a psychological standpoint and if having them look at each other's eyes created a stronger connection between them. I can only state that the decision was successful from a storytelling point of view, given that many of the comments that we received after the film was released mentioned that scene as the mot powerful in the episode. It is also important to note that the ability of having a trained actress and filmmaker as a host—who knew well both how to maintain a consistent demeanor through the process and also to record audio at the same time—was crucial in bringing a sense of calm to the participants while allowing me to cover multiple angles of the

conversation with only one camera, knowing that I would not be missing any of the audio of the conversation.

Figure 20. Facilitating connections IV. A still frame from the third episode of the Texan Italian Stories: The Italians from the bottom. The farmer interviewed, Mr Denena ,said several times during the conversation that he was glad his grandsons were there to listen to this conversation

Another example of connections made through the production process, which were propitiated by the media making process, can be seen in figure 21. In this still frame from a scene in Episode III we see how Martin Morales and another gentleman from the Board of Advisors and his chid were made part of the interview we had with Mr. Johnny Lampo—one of the most respected individuals in the Italian community of Bryan, Texas.   This was the first time that Martin and Joe had met Mr Lampo. I do not know if they have kept their connections ever since.

Figure 21. Facilitating connections V. A still frame from the third episode of the Texan Italian Stories. This was the first time that Martin and Joe had met Mr. Lampo.

D. Post-Production:

During the post-production process I contacted Joe to get us different footage/pictures from this family that could tell better the story. This decision of involving Joe in the post-production process also propitiated further connections between him and other members of his family who were excited about the creation of this story. Joe contacted his cousins and got us two different DVD's, which had Super 8 footage that had been shot by one of his uncles in the 1960's. I was told—not in the interview—that Joe's cousin had particularly liked to see his father's footage in this piece. We do not know if this action facilitated any strong reconnection between Joe and his cousin, but I can speculate that it probably did.

E. Distribution:

For the distribution of Episode III, my team and I organized once again a screening in which the participants could see the film before it was released online. To

make this happen, Joe was asked to spearhead the process and contact St Anthony's

church in Bryan so they could provide us with a space for the screening.   This action

allowed Joe to connect with this Italian NGO and its people, as well as with everyone

else he reached out to tell him about the screening. This is what Joe shared with us about

the experience:

" I contacted those folks and asked them if I could use their facility at the Parish…you

know to show them and it's sort of in a small community and it sort of spread like wildfire. You

know there people that showed up there that I didn't know who they where, never met them before

in my life. So, they came they saw it, they loved it. It made me feel so good. It made me feel good

for everybody."

Another example of connections made through the distribution process was the

inclusion of Claire Soto, an Italophile student of Italian at the University of Texas at

Austin. She was hired to be an intern for the Texan Italian Stories, and thus she traveled

with us to the screening and helped us set up the projection and promote the event.

Additionally, Claire became in charge of talking to a student-journalist from "The

Batallion"—a paper from Texas A&M University—which came to cover the Bryan

screening. Claire offered her particular perspective about the same event:

"Bryan was my first event with ITAL and TIS. It was really exciting to meet people like

Joe Perrone and others who were excited to see their community on screen. Setting the event in

the church really gave the event a small-town feeling that I think strengthened the community in

the room as they watched the video (and laughed)."

Once the video was released online, I worked with the Board of Advisors to

spread the video with the community. One of the strategies used was the one of setting

achievable yet ambitious weekly goals for increasing the number of views on the video

online. This idea allowed for connections to happen over email, which intensified as the

participants kept on sharing the video and meeting higher a view count than expected.

The enthusiasm of these people in spreading the piece made the Texan Italian Stories

Episode III the most popular video of the series by far with a total view count of over

4,500. The episode was also shared by multiple outlets including *L'Ialo Americano* and

the *Italian American Journal*, two nationwide newspapers/online communities that cater

to Italian Americans in the United States. I chose to have the participants be the ones that

talked to this media outlet, which propitiated connections between them.

Just as it happened with episode II, because of the "spreadable" nature of the

content, episode III also allowed for multiple connections to take place without my

participation. Figure 25 is a good example of some of these connections that were

created by spreading the content online. In this "Facebook comment" we find

representatives of the three nodes of the storytelling network of the Italian community of

Austin: a locally owned Italian restaurant (Carmelo's Ristorante), a resident (Joe Perrone,

the protagonist of the film), a Texan Italian NGO (Amici Austin, which was "tagged" in

the post) and my team (ITAL, who represent the Geo-Ethnic Media faction).

Carmelo's Ristorante via **ITAL Austin**
September 19, 2013 ·

👍 Like Page

Here's another great video featuring, one of our Amici Austin's very own, Joe
Perrone. Thanks Joe for sharing your family and your proud heritage. Also,
thank you to ITAL Austin for sharing this story.

Show Attachment
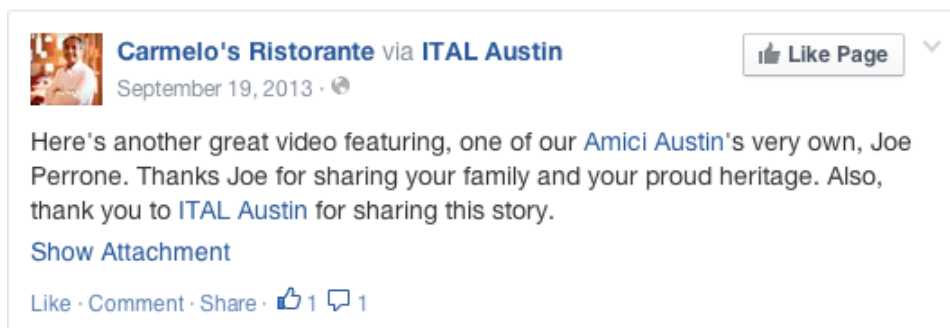
Like · Comment · Share · 👍 1 💬 1

Figure 22. Participatory culture II. A screen grab of a Facebook comment that shares the video

link of TIS episode III.

Furthermore, Joe and his family used the opportunity to connect on their own with several people by sharing with them the piece.   This is what Joe had to share regarding his involvement in the online distribution step of the process:

"I work for a team of financial advisors, and one of the things that I did was to post the link of the video to my website (my personal resume page for my biography) did that. I also sent it to everyone that I knew co-workers, friends, family who I knew had Italian heritage, and I had people from all over the country respond to it. I had people that had seen the video and contacted me that I had never known before."

"It just showed me the power of what this thing did to connect people. Many of the people I had never known before, connected before. I had lunch with a gentlemen several weeks ago (even after the video) that had seen it on Vimeo and reached out and contacted me . I posted the video on my linkedIn page. ...he contacted me after seeing it on my Linkedin page and wanted to see me. Come to find out his family lived relatively close to my family in a different county . We met for lunch we talked about the different rituals that the family did every week. He was a young man, probably 30 years younger then I am and it was just great."

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

I started the project with the following research question "Can a performative/ collaborative approach of documentary production be utilized to create connections among "micro-level" members and between "micro-level" and "meso-level" members of the storytelling network of the Texan Italian community?" I believe that the results clearly show that the answer is "yes" and that there is great connecting power through the use of Communication Infrastructure Theory and spreadable content to inform the process of creation of geo-ethnic documentaries, especially when applying a performative technique of filmmaking. Through each step of creation I was able to use the media-making process to connect individuals of the storytelling network of the Texan Italian community with one another.

It is important to note that such connections were also possible by rethinking the creation process to adapt to "participatory culture." This particular idea allowed me to add other steps such as financing and distribution, which I believe that not only were crucial in the creation of a strong bond between the participants and me, but also served as a perfect environment for people to connect with one another. For example, different strategies through the "production" phase provided great opportunities for micro-levels to connect with one another, as evidenced in Episode III and the inclusion of Joe Perrone— one of the participants—as the interviewer. Connections between meso-level storytellers—specifically NGOs—and micro-level storytellers were also possible, especially during the planning and execution of screening events through the "distribution" phase of the episodes. That said, this research makes a significant

contribution to the studies of Geo-Ethnic Media and Communication Infrastructure

Theory, by presenting alternate forms of hyper-localized media creation that can be

employed by producers to strengthen the storytelling network of a specific geo-ethnic

community.

Figure 23. Facilitating connections VI. A picture of the screening of Texan Italian Stories Episode IV at the Italian Cultural and Community Center in Houston, Texas. Sunday, May 25, 2014. To the far right, Sergio Codognotto, one of the participants was asked to lead the discussion.

Figure 23 shows an example of connections being made through the screening

event of the Texan Italian Stories episode IV "Texan-Italian Innovation." For this

particular event we asked one of the participants—Sergio Codognotto—to lead a

discussion that occurred right after the screening of the episode. By doing this, the

episode served as a platform for discussion about the present and future state of research

and innovation for the "Texan Italian" community. The panel featured many of the

participants that were interviewed in the episode, although we also invited a member

from the COMITES, an Italian government agency who is responsible for putting

together the Conference of Italian Researchers in the World in Houston, Texas.   This

event took place at the Italian Cultural and Community Center. Four of the participants, as well as many of the members of the audience, had never been at the headquarters of this NGO prior to this event.

Despite of the success of this strategy for the purpose of facilitating a platform for connections to take place, it is important to note that even though I witnessed many of the participants establishing new connections, when asked, most of the interviewees did not necessarily see any of these events as an opportunity to connect. Participants tended to see their participation in the documentary making process as a way to assist me with the creation of content. Some of them have even pointed out that they helped also because they believed in my team and me and our ability to "succeed" as media-makers in the professional world and thus wanted to give us a push, which moved most of the conversation in the interviews from a focus on process to a focus on content.   For example when asked if the process of distributing the video had helped the ICCC connect with their members or new members, Tiziana Triolo, the director of the Italian Cultural and Community center, said:

"Maybe it was really us that made the connections for you more then anything. Being a cultural center we have many members /subscribers. We didn't have any feedback from our members on the video they received. Certainly from my point of view, since they are stories very well done, from a quality standpoint to the real story they created connecting the two realities Italian & Italian America. I think that either way the entire community benefited. Becausec it gave the possibility to visibility , and based on the stories Sergio & Romina made that most people didn't know about . Using this instrument [video] gave the possibility to let come out many realities/stories that most didn't know about that do exist on this topic."

In other words, most of the participants did not necessarily took advantage of the opportunity that was presented to them to create connections, because they were mostly focused on helping finish the video, rather than paying attention to one another. Nonetheless, they do see the potential of the content, which was created following theory on spreadable content, to connect individuals with one another and to expose them to realities of their community that may not be of common knowledge. For example, Fabrizio Nava, the consul of Italy in Houston, shared the following thoughts when we asked him how the TIS had helped the Texan Italian community connect with one another:

"Well I'm not into the community, full time, so I don't think I can really comment on this but I think that it did provide a basis on which people could meet and compare and perhaps interact. People got to know about other people. I know that in one or two stories saw other people stories and said hey I have to get to know this person. Consider that the Italian Texan Community s very disperse. The state is larger then Italy itself and it has les then 70 thousand Americans. For these people who enology themselves as Italian Americans. So people don't get to see each other a lot as Italian Americans. In this reality I'm this people in getting to know each other."

Paul Fellegy, one of the Italophiles who participated in Episode IV, had similar things to say, although he emphasized in the possibility of using the content to create connection through the distribution process. I believe that his own personal desire of connection, given that he is as an entrepreneur, was what ultimately allowed him to see the potential of the pieces to propitiate personal connections. This is what he shared:

"What I think it provides is a common denominator for people to rally around Italian culture, Italian discovery, and Italians intellectual capacity, intellectual property that's coming

out of the research community. And because folks are busy, this provides people an opportunity to look at something, I think it was 27 minutes, was the overall piece and in a short space of time, you can be vey moved to want to connect with other folks that are identified in the documentary. Both the ICCC & and the researchers ...this gives people a form to allow people to pickup the phone and say " hi I saw you in this feature, I'd like to talk about your work. Let's see if we can help".

Some other participants did see the potential of the process to create connections, such as Davide Pesca, who participated in episode IV. Davide worked especially hard for promoting the screening event of episode IV in Houston. He invited everyone in his network and even contacted a person in Dallas, which he convinced to co-sponsor a reception at a local upscale Italian restaurant after the event.   Nonetheless, Davide's guests were one of the only people who came to the event. Subsequently, Davide felt somewhat disappointed with the event given that he had put much more effort into this initiative than some of the other people who also participated.

In conclusion, I believe that this project shows clearly how media initiatives such as the Texas Italian Stories can propitiate situations that will spark conversations and connections in a community's storytelling network.   However, it is hard to gauge if any of these connections are meaningful in the end, and if people turn them around for their own benefit. In the case of Joe Perrone, the process worked out great for him, as he was already trying to reconnect with his heritage and the people that he grew up with. In the case of most the other participants, they tended to value the content of the series and what it could do to promote Italian culture in Texas in overall, however they did not seem to have valued the process as a way to create connections. In most cases, it was not until the question was asked in the interviews that they were able to look back and realize the

connections that they had made.   For example, Sergio Codognotto, someone who also participated actively in episode IV through multiple steps of the process, was one of the interviewees who did not notice the connections he had made until he was responding a question regarding the TIS ability to connect people with one another. This is what he said on the interview:

"I think I had the chance to meet like Tiziana and her husband he was very nice, which I'm sure I can call them up and go for a coffee. The consul general, I mean where talking now in an informal way, you he writes me "ciao" in the emails and things like this. Seen from an Italian perspective where you always use a formal way of talking to people especially when they are ranked you know… with the diplomatic insignia or something it very….yeah I mean. That opened up doors in fact tomorrow I'm going to be in San Antonio b/c I was invited to that Italian celebration by the Consul so he sent me an invitation on my email. So yeah I think, this project helped to make some very good connections. First on all in a personal manner but can very well be used in a professional setting.

I believe that this study adds this research adds an important contribution to scholarship in the areas of geo-ethnic media studies and participatory communication. Nevertheless, further studies must be conducted in order to analyze not only how connections can be created through the process of media creation, but how these connections can have a meaningful and lasting effect on the participants

Limitations

There were multiple limitations to this research. The single and most important one was my deep involvement with the subjects, which I believe may have biased, albeit slightly, some of the answers in the interviews. I believe that many of the interviewees

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rooted for me and my partner Romina and therefore wished to give us answers that would

be of our liking. However, I do believe that the participants were honest about their

enthusiasm regarding the TIS project and saw a great benefit for the community with it.

There are also different limitations for the replicability of this study. Creating

high quality media can be expensive. For example many independent professional media

makers would charge a client at least $15,000 for the creation of one particular episode of

13 minutes, especially if it requires travelling to locations sometimes 100 miles apart

several times. For TIS, I was able to raise a total of $7,000 for the creation of five

episodes, including two of them that were over 25 minutes long. Therefore, I cannot say

the TIS project can be sustainable without major funding.   On the other hand, I believe

that had I belonged to a established Geo-Ethnic Media institution such as a TV station or

a newspaper, the entire process would have been different.   For example, I may have not

had the same level of personal access that we had, which was instrumental to create the

stories they way they turned out.   On that note, I would define my participation not as a

Geo-Ethnic Media institution, but more as a "Trained Storyteller," in other words,

individuals from a community with special training and skills to tell stories and a desire

to make Geo-Ethnic media. I would compare my involvement to the one of filmmaking

students of universities such as the University of Texas at Austin, who choose to tell

stories of their ethnic communities as part of their work.

Future research on geo-ethnic media should analyze the role of these "trained

storytellers" in the communication ecologies of ethnic communities. Also, local NGO's

should make it a priority in empowering these "trained storytellers," as they are able to

share stories of the community in ways that producers from established Geo-Ethnic institutions cannot.

Furthermore, in institutions that teach film and video production and also among media professionals there should be some more training about the process of creation of media, especially since the process has changed because of new technologies and "participatory culture." There seems to be a certain inclination by mainstream media to present the process of media creation as something that can only be carried out by large teams, expensive equipment, and a certain protocol that insures the quality of the product. Though certain conventions are certainly needed in order to create high end media products—and I certainly do not advocate for geo-ethnic media makers to do away without them—I do believe that projects like this show that the process of media creation could be re-envisioned in order to increase the levels of engagement between the media maker and its audience. On that account, I believe that both the public and the media makers must be educated to learn how to expect more of the process. For example, if I had had a proper opportunity to educate my target community about the potential that the strategies I employed would have in their creating new connections and re-connections, they may have taken more advantage of the process. Nonetheless, explaining exactly what I was trying to achieve would have most likely forced the participants to create connections, and thus I would have not been able to objectively analyze their behavior.

I recommend for further studies to be carried out between two groups, one that is completely informed of the goal of a project such as the TIS—which is to allow them to establish connections—and one control group that is not informed at all.

As a last limitation, my co-producer for all episodes—Romina Olson—is also my life partner, and thus I believe that this could have added another layer of subjectivity to this study, especially since she was involved in certain areas of the networking process. On the other hand, Romina is a first generation Italian American with proficient knowledge of Italian language and culture; thus, her participation was crucial in the creation of the series. I find thus crucial for producers interested in replicating this study, to seek out a partner with deep knowledge in both American and the culture of the target ethnic group, especially if the producer's background does not belong to that specific ethnic group, as it was my case.   Although I certainly saw as a limitation my lack of knowledge of Italian language and culture, I also believe that this condition provided me a certain level of objectivity when crafting the stories and interview questions that would have been harder for someone from that particular community to achieve. For example, I often found myself extremely interested about certain issues, stories, or anecdotes, which people in the community—including my partner Romina—had originally found mundane and irrelevant. On the other hand, even though I decided not to include Romina as one of my subjects—because of her proximity to me—I believe she was also greatly benefitted from the different connections she was able to create; I find this to be yet another reason for similar groups to be created for any future replication of this project.

APPENDIX SECTION

Video links for featured video work:

1. Pesce Grande Italian Rap Star (2011). Example of video using participatory culture theory to further maximize each step of the media creation process, highlighted in Chapter I https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DlqJiZQFnDU

2. Texan Italian Episode I – "Italy in Texas Bilingual Stories" (2013). First documentary of the series, highlighted in Chapter II. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-6rDBtZoIs

3. Texan Italian Stories Episode II – "Rekindle The Flame" (2013). Second documentary of the series, highlighted in Chapter IV http://vimeo.com/69587218

4. Texan Italian Stories Episode III – "The Italians from the Bottom" (2013). Third documentary of the series, highlighted in Chapter IV. http://vimeo.com/74607939

5. Texan Italian Stories Episode IV – "Texan Italian Innovation" (2014). Fourth documentary of the series, briefly explained in Chapter V. http://vimeo.com/96467723

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