Avoiding Technology Obfuscation by 'Managing Oneself': From Collaborative Storytelling to Drucker's Insights

Laura Aguiar
Postdoctoral Researcher
The Keynes Centre, University College Cork, Ireland

INTRODUCTION

This essay uses first-hand experience from outside Management to validate Drucker's insights on 'Managing Oneself' and to support the view that we should keep the focus on human relationships when engaging with technology. The following draws on my practice-based doctoral research at Queen's University Belfast which explored the strengths and limitations of collaborative storytelling in transitional societies.

MY JOURNEY

The Prisons Memory Archive (PMA)[1] was created as part of the peace process in Northern Ireland. The project recorded 175 interviews from those who passed through Armagh Gaol and the Maze/Long Kesh prisons during the conflict. Participants included prison staff, prisoners, visitors, teachers, chaplains and probation officers, who were recorded walking and talking inside the empty prison sites by a single camera operator. The focus was

Figure 1: The Maze/Long Kesh Prison

on the participants' engagement with the site and memories of it. Leading questions, therefore, were rarely asked. Thus, participants acted as co-authors as they had control over the content of the interviews, and were granted co-ownership of the recordings and the right to withdraw or veto their material.

My work with the PMA began in the post-production editing phase, four years after interviews were recorded and digitised, and consisted of bringing part of the recorded material to the

public. Motivated by the near absence of women's diverse lived experiences in cinematic depictions of the Maze/Long Kesh Prison, I selected ten interviews from the recorded material which featured fifteen female participants (relatives of prisoners and staff and prison workers). I then named my project *We Were There.* As a child of the Digital Age, my initial expectation was to create an online interactive documentary experience which would make use of various technological resources, such as:

a) Augmented reality, which would help reconstruct virtually the prison site;

b) Avatars, which would enable viewers ('users') to navigate through the stories as a character, for example the journalist, ex-the prisoner, the visitor etc.,

c) Different pathways, which would enable users to choose the order of appearance of each story;

d) Hyperlinks in most of the content (text, photo and video), so that if one wished to know more about a particular topic he/she would be directed to other pages.

However, once I started engaging with the people that I had selected for the project, my technological mind-set was challenged and began to change. I soon realised that I was concerned about finding a way to use all of these resources rather than engaging in meaningful conversations with participants to ensure they felt represented by the project. Thus, at the end of my first year, I found I had to return to a format that many of my digital-born fellows may consider obsolete: a linear documentary.

This format allowed me to focus on my collaboration with participants and use technology, in this case the intercutting of text, sound and visuals, solely as a *tool* to reach the final product – the film. Throughout the editing process, I regularly met the PMA's Director Cahal McLaughlin and had four meetings with each participant. During these conversations we discussed the rough cuts of the film and decided together the inclusion and exclusion of parts of the recordings and the addition of images of the prison, soundtrack, and on-screen text. Hence, consent was an on-going process of negotiation, not a single request at the beginning or end of the project. This ensured that the participants' earlier role as co-authors was maintained throughout my project.

On completion, participants were invited to attend screenings and take part in panel discussions in as many cases as was feasible. This gave them the opportunity to see how their stories impacted upon viewers and to participate in conversations with audiences.

Subsequently I joined The Keynes Centre, a business practitioner-oriented research facility based at University College Cork focused on helping individuals *trans-form* how they manage themselves in this complex world. Peter Drucker, among others such as

Figure 2: Belfast Film Festival Premiere Poster

John Maynard Keynes and Hannah Arendt, is one of the Centre's Source Thinkers. As new to the business management world, this gave me the opportunity to engage with Drucker's thinking and to realise that, whether one is a manager, an engineer, etc., one is always dealing with the same issues that we, storytellers, always deal with: *human activity.*

Human activity is at the core of Drucker's thinking, reflecting his belief that organisations need to develop people intellectually and morally[2]. He reminded us that 'Very few people work by themselves and achieve results by themselves'[3], and, consequently, we should regularly ask ourselves the following questions: *How can one manage oneself and others? What is the role of knowing each other's strengths and values? How do I and others perform? How can we all contribute?* This immediately resonated with me because these were the same type of questions I had to ask myself throughout my doctoral journey.

THE DIGITAL CHALLENGE

The Digital Age has brought an increasing interconnectedness, which has facilitated a move towards multinational/transnational organisations and towards, what Drucker termed, a *Network Society* in respect to relationships within organisations and between organisations. Consequently, organisations face new challenges from 'increasing complexity, enhanced
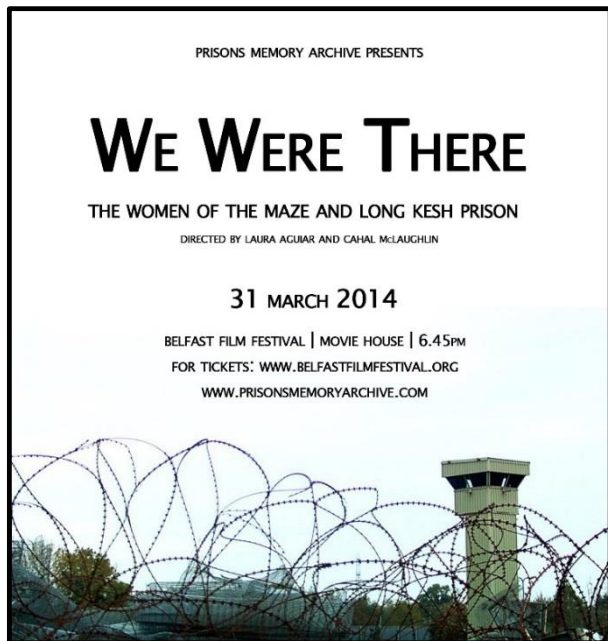
transparency, greater interconnection, shorter time horizons, economic and environmental instability, and demands to have a more positive impact on the world'[4].

The digital revolution has already permeated our social and work lives, but it is only starting to touch how we manage ourselves in our increasingly complex world. Indeed, as Kegan and Lahey's work has demonstrated, organisations have been 'investing a precious amount of resources' in development programmes to find a 'more effective way to engage the emotional lives of their organizations and their leadership teams'[5]. Drucker saw that Managing Oneself in a fast-paced world requires more than an *evolution*; it requires a *revolution in human affairs*[6].

LESSONS FOR 'MANAGING ONESELF'

Based on my collaborative experience now viewed in the light of my subsequent encounter with Drucker's insights, I demonstrate in the following why a *trans-formation* of human interactions is needed and not simply more acquisition of skills. In particular, I consider what a human-centred approach to Managing Oneself could look like in a world where *technicism* has been largely embraced by '*homo sapiens digitalis'*.

Re-structuring *Role*-ationships

Many of those involved in Organisational Development hold the view that *trans-forming* work-places requires concentration on improving foundational aspects of the way we operate, for instance, how power and authority are defined and exercised. As early as 1942, Drucker envisaged the *self-governing plant community* framework. This consisted of 'empowered and responsible employees who, by assuming managerial responsibility as individuals, could meet their personal and social needs while contributing to the wealth-creating activities of their organization'[7]. Recently, for example, Brian J. Robertson's widely publicised *Holacracy* management system has been concerned with establishing: 'a new way to structure an organization and define people's roles and spheres of authority within it'[8].

My collaborative approach shared some commonalities with both methods, but, unlike *Holacracy,* it corresponds to Drucker's view that having a leader does not undermine the attempt to solve problems together and share responsibilities. The strength of the leadership

role remains in being a *team leader*, who maintains unity among members, motivates them, takes advantage of everybody's ideas and point of views and ensures that standards of quality are maintained. Therefore, making the power balance *as equal as possible* can be as positive as trying to make it *equal*.

Figure 3: Post-screening discussion with myself (left) and participants.

Working more collaboratively with people does not necessarily guarantee equal sharing of tasks and requires an understanding that people will fulfil different roles throughout the process, and that each will bring their own expectations, concerns and ideas. Collaboration is about *Role*-ationships: relationship between roles and about clarifying what one should expect of each role for the sake of the broader purpose[9].

Clarifying different roles was crucial to my project and, as a result, there was a greater sense of trust in relation to the editing process. This minimised possible misunderstandings about the collaborative process and led participants to trust me to make decisions on their behalf when necessary. For example, they were pleased to see that I was able to manage the technological dimension of the project – the actual editing with the complicated *Final Cut Pro* software - and that I would ensure that their sensibilities were respected in the editing suite and would not let technological overtake them.

Consequently, none of them expressed any disappointment when their creative suggestions were not taken on board as they understood that this project was about *dialogue* and not about *implementing whatever they wished*. This shows the importance of having a leader committed to engaging in dialogue and negotiation with transparency and ability to listen. Otherwise, however much a leader attempts to give employees a voice, there remains the risk of employees being simply brought in to provide the appearance of legitimacy with a 'collaborative rubber stamp'[10].

My experience supports Drucker's insights about the importance of taking responsibility when managing oneself, of knowing what each person does, his/her expectations, and contribution, and of accepting the fact that 'other people are as much individuals as one is oneself'[11]. To be effective, he says, 'one therefore has to know the strengths, the performance modes and the values of the people one works with'[12]. As obvious as this may seem, Drucker noted that few people pay attention to it.

Difference is Good, But Dialogue is Key

Figure 4: Still from 'We Were There'.

Although many interpret it as common sense, 'most of us do not even know that different people work and perform differently'[13]. It is no surprise that personality conflicts have often been cited as a common problem in organisations[14]. My project could have faced this problem, as I was working with people who for years had been kept segregated from one another, but it did not because we all understood and respected difference.

Drucker says that 'the first secret of effectiveness is to understand the people with whom one works and on whom one depends, and to make use of their strengths, their ways, of working, of their values'[15]. Although each of us had our own expectations, interests and viewpoints, our differences were discussed openly and we worked together to understand each other's expectations for the film. Our dialogues gave participants confidence that my motivations and expectations as a storyteller aligned with theirs and, consequently, there was more a sense of trust rather than a desire to control the editing process. One participant's response conveys this:

> *Of course you had the bigger picture in your head in terms of how it is going to work but I felt that you actually listened and talked about things, even if something may not have worked.*

However, this does not mean that this collaborative approach is such that each participant's perspective can be combined into a kind of 'all-things-to-all-people' composite. The different

viewpoints were evident, for example, when negotiating the representation of the 1981 Republican Hunger Strike. Republican participants wanted a longer section in the film while other participants sought only a brief reference. The PMA's Director was concerned with the republican narrative being over-emphasised. I wanted to include only parts that focused on the women's experiences of it. Through dialogue, we were able to reach a settlement and included a brief section that pleased all.

This example highlights Drucker's recognition that working together does not require agreement on all things, but rather *a mutual commitment* to dialogue, to share understandings, and to respect differences. It also exemplifies his insight about the importance of the compatibility of values when working together: we all shared the view that we needed a film which presented history in a multi-faceted way. Working with people with this commitment and shared values not only facilitated the collaborative process, but it also eliminated the occurrence of 'personality conflicts', about which Drucker had crucial insights.

Trust is Everything

Drucker notes that organisations are no longer built on force and that they are increasingly built on trust. Trust, he warns, 'does not mean that people like one another. It means that people can trust one another. And this presupposes that people understand one another'[16]. The collaborative method was paramount to establishing a trusting relationship, as participants were pleased to be actively involved in the selection and re-contextualisation of their stories during the filming, editing and post-screening discussions. Consequently, they felt that their stories were 'safe' throughout all stages. For one participant:

> *It is the only reason we did this, we knew nobody would try to hijack it or depict one side or another, demonise anyone, just to tell stories.*

For another participant:

> *You were so careful to make sure that consent was given and not just ticked a box in a form. I think that really establishes great trust.*

Responses such as these validated my attempt to address the power imbalance in storytelling by establishing trusting relationships. Furthermore, an important tool for building trust was a clear understanding of how I should perform. This was particularly crucial given my outsider status in

Figure 5: Still from 'We Were There'

terms of nationality, class, age, ethnicity and language. My credibility depended not only on my storytelling skills, but also on my learning about the history, the culture, and the traditions of Northern Ireland. For example, I had to be able to judge when a story was too personal to be made publicly available and to be careful with my choice of words, given the segregated nature of Northern Ireland. For instance, I eschewed words like 'terrorists' or 'political prisoners' and used 'prisoners' to be as non-judgmental as possible.

As my project shows, human interactions should be about the sharing of a journey, of time, of information, and most importantly of trust. Trust is tangible and can be achieved with transparency, respect, dialogues, and understanding about the Self and about the Other. My journey exemplifies the feasibility of Drucker's point about replacing command and control mechanisms with trust-based relationships as coordinating mechanism[17].

Process Matters as Much as Results

Making a linear documentary was as much about the process as about the final product, prioritising relationship-building, shared authorship, and meaningful participation over results, individual decision-making and interpretation of stories. I adopted a model of storytelling where all parties shared control of every phase of the project and where individuals were transformed from passive objects into active storytellers: during filming they co-authored their interviews, throughout editing they controlled the re-contextualisation of their stories, and during post-screenings discussions they continued to speak for themselves.

Figure 6: Still from 'We Were There'

The collaborative framework enabled my interactions with participants to focus on *relationship building* rather than on *information-gathering*, as it would have emerged had I followed my initial plan. Therefore, seeing processes as important as results was crucial for *managing myself* and reflects Drucker's idea that '...people have results by performing how they perform' and that results should be meaningful and should make a difference[18]. Hence, if you are transparent, really listen, understand each other's roles, aspirations and expectations, and engage in dialogues, you can expect the same from the people you work with and therefore will be more likely to deliver positive results.

CONCLUSION

As the world grows in complexity in the Digital Age, transforming how we think about relationships is key to sustaining a society of functioning organisations. If 'most people work with other people and are effective through other people'[19], then transforming thoughts and actions from what most of us take for granted about relationships is key to effectively Managing Oneself: paraphrasing Drucker, the most effective way to manage *trans-formation* is to create it.

This essay has demonstrated how my experience is an exemplar of some of Drucker's valuable insights and also how universal they are. Drucker was a social thinker who believed that human relationships are foundational and that management is about people and power, values, structure and responsibilities[20] . Thus, one of the greatest challenges is to keep the focus on this foundational aspect and to not let technology-dominated mind-sets obfuscate it, as it almost did for me in the early stages of my project. I was fortunate that the relationship with participants helped me realise this before reading Drucker's insight but not everyone will be as fortunate. Hence, I recommend that in order to use technology best we should start with Managing Oneself.

[1] See prisonsmemoryarchive.com for details on the project.
[2] Maciariello 2014: 408.
[3] Drucker 1999: 183
[4] Robertson 2015: 8.
[5] Kegan and Lahey 2009: xiv.
[6] Drucker 1999: 194
[7] Maciariello 2014: 3-4.
[8] Robertson 2015: 12.
[9] Robertson 2015: 43.
[10] Barbash and Taylor 1997: 88.
[11] Drucker 1999: 184
[12] Drucker 1999: 184
[13] Drucker 1999: 168.
[14] Drucker 1999: 185.
[15] Drucker 1999:: 185.
[16] Drucker 1999: 187.
[17] Drucker 1999: 116.
[18] Drucker 1999: 169.
[19] Drucker 1999: 184-5
[20] Maciariello 2014: 99.

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