

Rakontu and Community Storytelling

A Rakontu White Paper available at <http://www.rakontu.org>

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Summary

Rakontu is a free, open source web application that communities and groups can use to share and work with stories together. This white paper describes why physical as well as interest-based communities need online storytelling tools, why Rakontu can help communities, and how it addresses some of the dangers of community storytelling.

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Why physical communities need digital storytelling

The most important question to ask about Rakontu and communities is this: *Why do physical communities need online storytelling?* Don't people tell stories already?

Communities throughout history have depended on story caretakers. In some cultures these caretakers have had formal titles like griots, shanachies, shamans and bards, but in other places such roles were simply filled by community elders. Story caretakers took responsibility for tending the diverse stories of the community. They often learned through long practice, sometimes in apprenticeships handed down from parent to child. They watched changes in the community as they remembered its history. They could respond to a situation with an appropriate story based on patterns across time and space of which they alone were aware. They knew what questions to ask to help people tell the stories they needed to tell. They could help groups use their old and new stories to settle disputes and make decisions together. In essence, story caretakers got to know the community's stories and helped the stories get to where they needed to be.

In many of today's communities, increased segregation of age groups, increased mobility, increased consumption of packaged media, and decreased time spent in regular conversation have all contributed to the reduction or elimination of the story caretaker role. People still tell stories, but fewer people are listening to them, seeing larger patterns in them, and helping them get to where they need to be. As a result critical connections are not being tended and cannot be called upon in times of need.

Robert Putnam's 2000 book *Bowling Alone* stimulated discussion about civic disengagement in communities. It presented overwhelming evidence that Americans today spend less time interacting with members of their physical communities than they did in decades past. Others have responded with writing such as Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody*, which describes how people use the internet to connect in new ways that are unpredictable and unchartable but still run counter to the disengagement trends Putnam documented.

One thing everyone can agree about is that generations are involved in these changes. Older people still belong to their bowling clubs, historical societies and knitting circles; it's just that the young people don't join those groups anymore. They are making friends on the internet, sometimes within the same communities where the older people are meeting. As Shirky and others have argued, it's not so much that civic engagement has declined but that it has split into the physical and the digital. This means that storytelling has also split: older people still tell stories at the community center while younger people tell stories on discussion groups and blogs and chats. The result is that nobody is bringing *all* of the stories together; nobody is helping *all* of the stories get to where they need to be.

Shirky, in *Here Comes Everybody*, cites Meetup.com as a response to the bowling-alone trend (literally; it seems that Scott Heiferman was inspired to create Meetup.com after reading Putnam's book). Says Shirky:

[Heiferman] realized that treating the internet as some sort of separate space—cyberspace, as it was often called—was part of the problem.... In the developed world, the experience of the average twenty-five-year-old is one of substantial overlap between online and offline friends and colleagues.... The internet augments real-world social life rather than providing an alternative to it.

Even though Meetup.com works well for younger people—who understand very well that

the internet can augment physical community—it is not working as well for older people. As a quick test, I browsed the Meetup.com hierarchy of topics for some things mentioned in *Bowling Alone*. I chose my zip code in upstate New York and set the search radius to 100 miles (it's a rural area). For "Bridge" there is exactly one person interested in joining a group—within 100 miles. For "Pinochle" there are five people interested. For "Spades," four. About 100 people are listed for the topics of "Bowling" and "Knitting" each, which sounds good until you look at the tiny pictures of people and see that only a few people look older than fifty. In contrast, "Hiking" brings up *nearly a thousand people* (again many of whom are obviously young). These are stark distinctions between generations, and perilous ones when it comes to sharing stories across whole communities.

Shirky also says about Meetup.com:

Heiferman assumed that people knew what they were missing and would want it back if they could get it; in an era of declining social capital, people would take steps to increase their communal participation if someone could make it easy again.

When it comes to sharing and working with stories, many people *don't* know what they are missing. The traditions that once provided story-tending functions in communities have been declining for decades as commercial storytelling has increased and community coherence has declined. In a sense people need to learn how to work with stories all over again—and in a new way—before it can be "easy again."

Rakontu's ambition is to help communities restore a social mechanism they have lost. Of course computer software cannot replace story caretakers, but Rakontu can help communities collectively regenerate the essential activities of those caretakers. To do this Rakontu bridges the divide between physical and digital community engagement. It creates mechanisms for transferring stories and patterns between online and offline worlds. It helps all of the people in a community tell each other stories, keep the stories alive, discover and discuss the larger patterns of meaning formed by them, and work with stories to understand each other and to come to decisions together that everyone in the community can live with and stand behind.

Why stories matter

Everyone agrees that communities need to share information, but why stories? What is so important about the sharing of stories in particular, as opposed to news and information?

People act differently and expect different things when they tell and listen to stories than when they talk normally, and this gives the sharing of stories a unique function in society. First, telling a story is by nature a more personal, animated and emotional activity than stating an opinion or providing a factual answer to a question. This is because it taps into a different set of instinctual behavior patterns. The separation between narrative events (storytellings) and narrated events (what takes place in stories) provides an emotional distance which creates the safety people need to disclose deeply held feelings and beliefs. As a result, people often reveal things about their feelings or opinions on a subject while they are telling a story that they wouldn't have been willing or able to reveal when talking about the topic directly.

For example, compare these two questions:

1. Do you think your local government is doing a (a) terrible, (b) okay, (c) good enough, or (d) excellent job meeting your needs?

2. What was the last interaction you had with your local government? Can you tell us what happened? (Then, after the story is told) How do you feel about that story? What do you think it says about your local government?

Which of those questions is likely to reveal richer information to communities that want to explore the issue of local government performance?

Second, listeners tend to have stronger reactions to hearing stories, in terms of the emotions they show, than they have to hearing factual information. For example, people tend to fidget less and lean in more when a story is being told than when someone is giving opinions or relating information. This makes asking people to *interpret* stories (i.e., answer questions about them), their own and those of others, a good way to surface their feelings about important issues.

Third, a story has a natural situation-tension-resolution shape, and people usually tend to find it difficult to "leave" the story before the resolution has occurred, whether they are telling it or listening to it—it pulls them in and contains them until it has completed its course. Narrative structure provides safety to the storyteller, protecting them from challenge until the story is told. A story is a socially accepted externalized package for wrapping up feelings, beliefs and opinions. People can metaphorically place a story on a table and invite others to view and internalize it without exposing themselves to the same degree as they would if they stated those feelings, beliefs and opinions directly.

Fourth, stories have long been used to unite, support and challenge communities.

- Stories unite communities by retaining collective memories, building shared identities and transmitting unspoken rules.
- Stories keep communities healthy by negotiating truths, establishing norms, confronting abuses of power, redirecting energy, and testing virtues such as wisdom and humility.
- Stories help communities adapt to changing conditions by triggering transitions, disrupting assumptions, presenting visions of the future, encouraging change, issuing challenges, and exploring new ideas.

All of these factors combine to create an effect that means sharing and thinking together about stories has a greater potential to resolve some of the difficult problems communities face than simply exchanging information.

Why *raw* stories matter

Rakontu specifically helps people share *raw stories of personal experience*, not packaged, persuasive, polished, compelling, memorable, literary or even especially news-worthy stories. Why is this important?

In storytelling sessions over the years I have watched people balk time after time at being asked to tell stories—because they think "story" means "Hollywood" or "front page" and any story they could tell would not be "good enough." To give an example, I once heard a person tell story after story, each one fascinating and insightful, and then—literally in the next breath—say, "But I can't think of any stories to tell." Since then I have often pondered: what made that person say that? Would someone have said something like that a thousand years ago? A hundred? It is not so much that people have lost the *ability* to tell stories as much as they have lost the *expectation* that it is their place to tell stories.

Ordinary people have become removed from ordinary storytelling.

Robert Fulford put it well in his book *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture*:

This has been the century of mass storytelling. We live under a Niagara of stories: print, television, movies, radio and the Internet deliver to us far more stories than our ancestors could have imagined, and the number of stories available to us seems to grow larger every year. This phenomenon, the rise of industrialized narrative—storytelling that's engineered for mass reproduction and distribution—has emerged as the most striking cultural fact of the twentieth century and the most far-reaching development in the history of narrative.

When a story is created to make a persuasive argument or sell a product, sometimes (but not always) a raw story is not "good enough." But for sharing experiences and arriving at new insights, *the best story is a raw story*. Raw stories have an authenticity and utility in context that cannot be replicated by design; and both authenticity and utility can be destroyed by "improving" raw stories. This is one of the saddest things about the prevalence of commercial storytelling—that people no longer believe their stories are real stories.

A fascinating analogue to this trend can be found in the book *Where There Is No Doctor*, where the paragraph that surprised me most was this one:

Today in over-developed as well as under-developed countries, existing health care systems are in a state of crisis. Often, human needs are not being well met. There is too little fairness. Too much is in the hands of too few.

In the same way that people in the "over-developed" countries have given doctors too much control over their health and reduced their ability to heal themselves, people (mostly in those same countries) have given commercial imaginers too much control over their imagination and reduced their ability to tell their own stories. People today are using the internet to gain more control over and information about their health, and they need to do the same with their stories.

To provide an idea of what I mean by "raw stories of personal experience," here are a few real stories told by real people in real story projects. (The stories have been edited to remove identifying details.)

1. "When I started I had no computer, I had no training whatsoever, I sat with colleagues of mine, but they were busy doing their job. They don't have time to train you. So eventually after three months I got some projects to start working on, but I'm still struggling on the system to get my way through, I still don't know all the systems so as I go along I just train on the job, not get the info from people sitting around me. It's very frustrating for a new person and you don't know the systems at all."
2. "My son's experience with his teacher was unpleasant. She scolded him for at least ten minutes in front of his peers, called my husband on the phone to complain and further added on the insult by giving him a two day detention because he did not write his name on the worksheet and wasted her time to identify the owner of the work. I asked the principal if the punishment was appropriate for the "crime." This experience has affected my son's confidence."
3. "It goes back probably about eight or ten years ago when I was living in a

place with a lot of trees, and there was a lot of wind storms in the winter, and every winter the power would go out, like a lot, where we lived, because of the trees, obviously. And the thing that I noticed was, the people behind us, whenever our power would go off, their power would stay on.... So we had been calling in for quite some time and inquiring about, can't we be moved to the other circuit? ... So my surprise, the good surprise was, is that when the next snowstorm came, ... the power didn't go off and I'm, like, "Yes!" And it just didn't go off hardly anymore. So when I called, they said they actually had moved us onto a different, ah— [grid?] Whatever it is, yeah."

4. "I met with [a person] in the integration team, and I heard that he was one of those who defended credit cards for college students, and he knew I was promoting student loans. And I told him, I would like to talk to you because I have to understand how you can defend a product which preys on innocent kids.... And he gave me an interesting difference. He said, you know, student loans are much worse. [laughter] ... Because no college kids go bankrupt from student loans.... The college kids can't see the loans because they are deferred, and they don't see the consequences so they don't learn how to manage their finances, so they borrow more than they should and they come out of school with crippling burdens and then they go bankrupt.... Whereas with credit cards, we have a very specific group of people we have to deal with who abuse them. It's much more localized as a problem. And I think there he is right. And I really came from the other side, you know—you are defending a bad product."

Imagine the power of raw stories like these, especially when people can look at dozens or hundreds of them together with answers to emotionally relevant questions like "How do you feel about the story you just told?" and "Who needs to hear this story?" The irreplaceable authenticity of raw stories creates opportunities for understanding the experiences and perspectives of other people that are impossible to come by any other way.

Examples from story work

During my work for corporate and government clients I've helped many groups collect and work with raw stories of personal experience in order to uncover transforming insights that helped clients respond to challenges and plan for the future. To provide a few (heavily anonymized) examples of the sorts of insights I've seen clients discover:

- A project on the state of volunteering was funded by a consortium of non-profit organizations and government agencies. In the stories collected a dichotomy was apparent between volunteering for caring or nurturing reasons (wanting to help others) and volunteering for "action" reasons (wanting to change the world). People volunteering for these different reasons responded differently to such things as praise, recognition, help making choices, and autonomy. These results suggested that organizations that rely on volunteers should detect which of these motivations is prominent in each volunteer and tailor their support approach to help the volunteer find the intangible reward they seek.
- A project for a power company focused on their lower-income customers and sought to find out how the company could serve them better. One pattern in the stories told was in the way people talked about and viewed the company

depending on whether they were homeowners or renters. This distinction mattered more than income, education or many other factors. Homeowners had a much better view of the company and its customer service, while renters seemed to feel the company didn't care about them. One interpretation of this result was that all those little brochures power companies stick in bills that celebrate responsible homeowners (with glowing pictures of people standing outside their picket fence homes) might put off renters.

- A project for a government agency asked people to tell stories about the behaviors and attitudes of government outreach workers and their clients. One of the patterns apparent in the stories told was that workers (but not clients) seemed to associate signs of weakness such as fear and lack of motivation with signs of anti-social behavior such as dishonesty and selfishness. When this "strength is virtue, weakness is vice" pattern was pointed out to the agency they reacted with disbelief; but when the same pattern was shown to outreach workers they immediately began telling stories about how such a belief pervaded the system and impacted clients facing difficulties. The agency then reconsidered the pattern and its implications for interactions with clients.
- A project for a police department examined records of shoplifting incidents for patterns and upturned several critical but erroneous assumptions about who was committing crimes, when, why, and under what conditions. These findings helped the police force and merchants design better preventative measures.

The sort of transforming insights described here are things I've seen *in nearly every story project*. Now imagine if *every community around the world* could be uncovering insights like this by sharing and working with stories, instead of only those with budgets to hire people to collect and pore over hundreds or thousands of stories. If people trying to negotiate better working conditions on migrant farms, or coping with refugee status, or recovering from floods, or working to bring back a struggling city block, or trying to get compensation for incidents like the Bhopal disaster, or trying to "green up" their community, could benefit from some of these understandings about stories and their power to provide insights and make change, it could change the world *one small community at a time*.

More examples of benefits

To give more examples of the sorts of benefits communities can gain by sharing and working with stories, here is an excerpt from *Working with Stories* on "the things you can do when you work with stories."

Find things out. By asking people to tell stories about subjects you care about, and then asking them some questions about the stories they've told, you can look at the patterns that appear when many of these stories are considered together. An example of a project that finds things out might be one where you ask a group of nursing home patients to tell stories about interactions with their doctors.

Catch emerging trends before they get bigger. This is sort of like finding things out, but it covers situations where you don't know what sorts of things people are concerned about and you don't have any particular questions to ask, but simply want to know what is on the horizon in terms of growing problems or opportunities. An example of a project that catches emerging trends might be one where you ask a group of teenagers to tell stories about parties they have been to or volunteer work they have

enjoyed.

Make decisions. Looking at patterns in told stories (especially when done in a group sensemaking session) can provide practical support when choosing between available options. When you want to collect stories to support decision making, you might want to get people to move into fictional space to consider alternative possibilities for the future. An example of a project that helps people make decisions might be one that presents stories representing three different possible futures of a town and asks townspeople to answer questions about the stories and respond with stories of their own.

Get new ideas. If you want to plan for the future or solve a problem but want to find as many possible options as you can, you can cast a wide net and invite a large group of people to brainstorm with you by asking them to tell stories. An example of a project that gets new ideas might be one that asks people in an area plagued with gang violence to tell stories about times when they saw tense confrontations defused without violence.

Resolve conflicts. One way to help people in a group understand life from the eyes of people in another group is to collect anonymous stories from both groups and make them available in ways that make it easy to connect stories across traditional boundaries. An example of a project that resolves conflicts might be one that asks kids from all over the world to tell about their first friendship or their happiest day with their parents or their proudest accomplishment, and reveals their nationality only after the story has been read.

Connect people to each other. Stories can connect people within as well as between groups. Providing a means for people to tell stories about their experiences in a group can help new members understand the unwritten rules of the community as well as provide a cultural language for resolving disputes. An example of a project that connects people might be one where university students are asked about their first day in their dormitory.

Help people learn. Telling stories to help people understand complex topics is both an ancient practice and an innate capacity. Providing a means to collect, provide context for, organize, and make available such learning stories can help a community to be more collectively productive. An example of a project that helps people learn might be one where a piece of software incorporates "Eureka!" and "Help!" buttons which encourage users to tell the story of what they discovered or what went wrong. In the "Help!" instance, the story could also function as a search pattern to help the user find a solution to their problem as well as to help other users articulate their needs and tell the software designers about improvements they could make.

Enlighten people. Groups that have a mandate to educate people about particular subjects will find that story projects can be helpful to them in two ways. First, collecting stories of real experiences about a topic can help plan the best method of communicating a message. Second, one of the best ways to reach people if you want to persuade them of something is to show them the raw experiences of real people, not more of the hype and prepared advertising they are immersed in. An example of a project that changes minds might be one that collects stories about adoption and makes them available to people on the fence about becoming adoptive parents.

Outcomes

The "So what?" question wants to know about outcomes, not just benefits. What does it matter if people are better connected? What does it matter if they get new ideas or catch emerging trends?

It is of course impossible to make any *promises* about results that will be achieved when communities use Rakontu to share and work with stories together. But based on past experiences working with stories I can imagine some plausible outcomes:

- better understandings of opposing perspectives
- a greater diversity of voices being heard
- better consensus on tough choices
- more common ground
- better participation in community initiatives *even by those who disagree*
- greater emotional engagement and resolve for action
- earlier detection of opportunities for positive change
- more problems dealt with before they get worse
- safer streets
- fewer footholds for extremism and paranoia
- greater common strength in times of crisis
- more sustainable communities

On ameliorating the dangers of community storytelling

It would be not only foolish but irresponsible to build tools that help people tell stories in communities without paying full attention to the dark side of community storytelling. This section describes how Rakontu addresses issues of danger in community storytelling.

The first danger is that to the storyteller. Storytellers can suffer loss in status, humiliation, attack by persons mentioned in the story who believe the story puts them in a bad light, even a risk taken by holding the floor and not presenting a "good enough" story. Fear of certain audience members, or just a strong awareness of a power differential, can lead storytellers to hide or alter their stories. Of course, adaptation to response is an important element of storytelling in natural conversation and has positive elements. One of the ways communities establish behavioral norms is by their reactions to told stories; and sometimes stories are altered to comply with the collective reaction.

A second danger to the storyteller is this: using technological tools to collect stories poses a unique loss of control to the storyteller. Asking a person to tell you a story (without recording it) is usually not threatening; but asking a person to deliver their story to be *captured* electronically is definitely more threatening to most people. This is true in the same way that photographing or videotaping someone is much more invasive than simply looking at someone.

People are wary of telling stories in electronic media because we know that unlimited copies of our story can be made easily; that our story can be manipulated at will by anyone; that our story can be delivered in any way desirable and to anyone; and that our story will live forever—and that our chance to repeal it may disappear before our need to repeal it does. This is one of the main differences between natural and online storytelling and something Rakontu addresses carefully.

In designing Rakontu I have attempted to ameliorate the risk of telling a story by these methods.

- Rakontu emphasizes the *value* of storytelling by helping communities develop nudge categories that communicate the unique values of stories to the community. Rakontu also attempts to help people understand why stories are valuable, and asking people to respond to other storytellers with inclusive encouragement.
- Rakontu make storytelling *safer*: first by offering multiple methods and degrees of anonymization, and second by providing maximal control over told stories. For example, storytellers can rewrite or even withdraw stories they have told. Of course there will always be cut and paste, so no technological guarantee of safety can be complete; issues of trust will always play the lead role in community dynamics.
- Rakontu helps people *support* the stories of others by annotating them, nudging them and telling other stories that reinforce them. For example, a person who finds the courage to speak up about an injustice may find their story quickly surrounded by a group of other stories and annotations that amplify their voice. When people take on the special "guide" helping role, they publically commit to helping the Rakontu work for the group by supporting storytelling.
- Rakontu maintains *value transparency* by helping storytellers see how their stories are being used—in patterns and collages, for example. If Rakontu helps people help their communities, it makes sense to give them feedback on whether they are doing that. For example, if a person contributes stories that inform community decision making, they are able to see that. Recommending that people feed the results of sensemaking exercises run outside of Rakontu back into patterns, collages and resources in the system will reinforce this point.

The second danger I will consider is that to story listeners. Stories are not always used for good means: they can be used to deceive, attack, and gain advantage. There are stories that can't yet be told, and there are stories that cannot be told to some audiences. Rumors can wound. In general the more open and egalitarian the culture the lower this risk because the community will tend to self-regulate.

Rakontu enables community self-regulation in these ways.

- All stories told in Rakontu "percolate" down through different "layers" of the story bank over time, so that stories not often recently accessed become less and less visible. This mimics the way people forget about stories as time goes by. How quickly particular stories fall through the layers of the story bank will depend on community-wide settings: for example, stories with strong negative nudges may percolate down more quickly than others. People browsing and searching for stories are able to set a "depth" or "level" above which stories will be shown. This percolation mechanism helps communities collectively heal from disputes and abusive behavior.
- Rakontu helps participants annotate told stories with answers to socially and emotionally relevant questions such as "How would you characterize the emotional maturity of this storyteller?" or "Would you say this story is uniting or dividing?" This mimics the way offensive stories are responded to in natural

conversation: they are not often "deleted" but are surrounded with large amounts of complex "he said she said" metadata explaining where the story came from, why it was told and what truths and falsehoods it contains (and disputes thereon). Such retained offenses can be valuable in communities as negative examples that guide behavioral norms.

- Rakontu gives people who object to a story the ability to respond *with a story of their own*. Thus an offensive story might be quickly surrounded with a cloud of "that's not how it happened" stories which counter rather than excise it. In fact, one could argue that suppressing such offensive stories would remove useful catalysts that can prod people to come forward and speak the truth about events of common importance. Rakontu does have a "flag this story as inappropriate" option, but a member has to take on a "curator" helping role before being able to set flags. The barrier to being a curator is minimal, *except* in that it requires the person to state publically that they are taking on the role and will take it seriously. (And the right to take on the curator role can be removed if it is abused.) The public nature of the curator role prevents people from indiscriminately destroying the contributions of others.

The third danger is the effect of filters and stereotypes on story exchange. Most people unconsciously place filters in front of other people based on stereotypes, and this can affect how we hear their stories. Rakontu gives communities the option to reduce the effect of stereotypes by hiding stereotype triggers in flexible ways. For example, Rakontu can decide how much or how little information to collect about members, and members can use fictional attribution to further hide their identities.

Fictional case study: Fire in Halifax

On June 13, 2008, a forest fire broke out in Halifax, Nova Scotia. A regular in the Nova Scotia Live online forum started a thread posting pictures of smoke as seen from their house. Within minutes, as a massive evacuation effort started, other people started to post information they had seen. Still others began asking for updates on particular areas. Mixed with the news, advice, warnings and pleas for information, many of the posts contained personal stories. The wife of a firefighter posted reports of "150 foot walls of fire"; a police officer confronted rumors; people told about saving pets and finding family members.

After the fire was out, people on the forum compared experiences and heaped praise on the firefighters who had saved many homes. They also discussed the causes of the fire and the conduct of local authorities during the crisis. While contributing their "two cents" people told stories that revealed conflicting perspectives on issues that would continue to be important as the community faced future threats.

One exchange involved a resident who had taken their children to see the extent of the fire after it was over. This person ended up not only mired in traffic but confronted by a homeowner who had lost their home and was enraged at the people driving by to gawk at it, as though it was a "circus." The resident used the forum to apologize to the homeowner (even though they had not been gawking) and to warn others not to make the same mistake. The story prompted discussion and more storytelling about balancing privacy with the need to understand and learn from events by seeing them first hand.

As useful as the internet forum was during the crisis and thereafter, it could have been even more useful if people had been able to use some of the aspects of Rakontu. People

could have answered questions about their "it happened to me" stories, like

- Do you live in a forested area?
- Did you see smoke? Flames?
- Do you have pets?
- Are you a firefighter? An official?
- Have you suffered any property loss? Has a relative?
- Did this story happen to you personally or did you hear it from someone else?

Answers to questions like these could have helped people find the stories they needed right away instead of simply reading the entire collection of posts.

After the fire, people could have looked at patterns in the stories told and used them to examine what happened. For example, people talked about their perception that local authorities gave out too little information during the evacuation, while others defended the authorities and said they did the best they could in a chaotic situation. People could have looked at patterns of information exchange in the stories told during the fire to see what people actually said about it at the time.

In thinking about future crises, people could have worked with the stories told during the crisis to make a timeline of the fire, making sense of the tragedy by telling the larger collective story. They could have derived personifications like "Tireless Savior" and "Heartless Exploiter" to help people negotiate community norms for desired behavior in such situations. They could have crafted a composite story to explain to community newcomers in years to come about the experience and the hard-won lessons it brought. From all of these things they could have prepared their community to deal with unforeseen crises in the future.

Rakontu's ultimate goal

While the proximate goal of Rakontu is to build a software package and help a growing number of communities benefit from the hard work of Rakontu supporters, my ultimate goal in starting it is something larger.

I would like to contribute to a cultural shift in beliefs and expectations regarding communities and storytelling. I would like to see people think of storytelling more as a natural part of family and community life that is available to everyone everywhere, and less as a consumable product created by commercial vendors.

I would like to see people develop an expectation that supporting storytelling is just *something communities do*, like paving roads and collecting garbage. I see the "Neighborhood Watch" signs on windows and streets today, and I would like to see "Neighborhood Stories" signs in the next decade. I would like to see people welcome newcomers to their communities with pie, a printed album of stories, and an invitation to join a community story site. I would like to see people reach for narrative methods of addressing community problems with the same readiness that they now think of holding a town hall meeting, starting a phone tree or sending around a petition. I would like to see community development projects include narrative as well as environmental impact studies. I want to see communities taking good care of their precious stories again.

A closing story

Years ago, when I was a young graduate student new to the neighborhood, I went to pick up some pizza and saw a stack of petitions sitting on the counter. "What are these for?" I asked.

The person at the counter glanced over at me and said, "Those are for residents."

"Oh, I'm not a resident," I blurted out, "I just live here."

I'd like to think that story says more about communities than it says about me, and I'd like to be part of changing that.