The Rakontu Vision

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

Cynthia Kurtz, October 2009

Summary

Rakontu is a free and open source web application that helps people in neighborhoods, families, and other groups share and work with stories together. This white paper describes the origin of Rakontu, why I believe it is needed, how it differs from other online software, how it meets the needs it addresses, and how it plans to grow to meet the needs more completely in the future. Specifically, the paper examines the needs of online groups to *talk* through sharing stories, *look* for insightful patterns among told stories, and *think* together about what those patterns mean.

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The origin of Rakontu

Rakontu grew from an approach to helping people share and work with stories that was developed over about a decade as a joint effort with several colleagues at several places (among them IBM Research, IBM's Global Services consultancy practice, IBM's Institute of Knowledge Management, IBM's Cynefin Centre, and Cognitive Edge). Dozens if not hundreds of consultants around the world use variants of this approach to help clients collect and work with stories to pursue goals in areas such as education, health care, police work, community development, peacemaking, policy planning, counter-terrorism, marketing, manufacturing, urban planning, trade, and so on. I myself have helped plan and carry out over fifty such projects since 1999. My book *Working with Stories* describes the approach in some detail.

I realized soon after starting this line of work that most of the fruitful ideas and techniques I was using and developing for my corporate and government clients were available only to groups in possession of money and knowledge and power. But I could see that the people *most in need* of the ideas and techniques were Margaret Mead's small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens trying to change the world. The book *Where There is No Doctor* was an inspiration: it helps people in communities without medical care help themselves restore and maintain their health. I found myself wanting to do the same thing for communities and groups lacking good care of their stories.

In the spring of 2008 I wrote the free online book *Working with Stories* for this reason. But not every community has someone willing to read books and learn how to work with stories. Communities need *tools* as well as understanding. As I watched how people tell stories online over the past decade, I have been saddened to see that nearly all of the stories I could find there were either displayed in simple unidimensional lists or embedded in conversation and difficult to pry out for any use. The chasm between the complex metadata structures and multidimensional insights I was helping my clients achieve and what I could see people doing for themselves online simply begged for Rakontu to be built.

The first version of Rakontu extends the work started in *Working with Stories* by providing tools that help communities create their own resources for sharing and working with stories. There is much more to be done; but this is a start.

Note that some sections of this white paper refer to Rakontu functionality that exists today (as of this writing), and some refer to functionality that is planned for future versions. Where functionality is not yet implemented this is indicated.

The unique benefits of Rakontu

The first and most obvious question about Rakontu is: If communities need online storytelling, why don't current online tools support storytelling well enough? Why are new tools needed?

To answer that question I will describe how people share stories using the internet now, based on preliminary (though not exhaustive) research. I will look at three things people can do with stories, thus:

- People can ***talk*** about stories in order to share experiences and help each other.
- People can ***look*** at stories in order to find patterns that trigger insights.

- People can **_think_** about stories in order to consider new perspectives and make decisions.

Talk: Shared storytelling

Stories told in natural conversation are like seeds, sprouting anew with each telling: heard, experienced, translated and retold, adapted to each person's experience and perspective, and ultimately remaining alive in the community by continual replanting and regrowth. This excerpt from *Working with Stories* uses the story-is-a-seed metaphor to show how stories live in communities.

In a natural ecosystem, the *soil seed bank* is the community of living seeds present in the soil.	In a human ecosystem, the *mind story bank* is the community of living stories present in the minds of people.
The soil seed bank is constantly being updated by new seeds falling and being churned deep into the soil by water percolation, decomposition, and disturbances such as falling trees. As the soil churns, old seeds come to the surface and germinate.	The mind story bank is constantly being updated by new stories being told and churning deep into minds by the percolation of ideas, reflection, and disturbances such as relocations and deaths. As minds reflect, old stories come to the surface and are told again.
Soil seed banks are like living museums of the plant community, places where dormant organisms are held in memory for future growth and in safety for use after a cataclysmic event.	Mind story banks are like living museums of the human community, places where dormant stories are held in memory for future understanding and in safety for use when they are most needed.
A soil seed bank is a reflection of what is going on above the soil. Studying the soil seed bank can reveal patterns that give us important insights into the community and its unique characteristics and needs. It can give us a glimpse into the past and future of the ecosystem.	A mind story bank is a reflection of what is going on in the world of human endeavor. Studying the mind story bank can reveal patterns that give us important insights into the community and its unique characteristics and needs. It can give us a glimpse into the past and future of the community.
One of the problems with large-scale commercial agriculture is that though it produces short-term vigor, it reduces diversity in the soil seed bank. This impoverishes the system and reduces its ability to help the plant community survive and recover from catastrophe.	One of the problems with large-scale commercial storytelling is that though it produces short-term entertainment, it reduces diversity in the mind story bank. This impoverishes the system and reduces its ability to help the community survive and recover from catastrophe.
A *seed bank* is an artificially created collection of seeds maintained by people in order to preserve diversity in the face of depleted soil seed banks. One of the challenges in managing seed banks is the need to	A *story bank* is an artificially created collection of stories maintained by people in order to preserve diversity in the face of depleted mind story banks. One of the challenges in managing story banks is the need to constantly

constantly replant seeds in order to maintain the viability of the stored seeds. In particular maintaining the endosperm layer surrounding the seed embryo, which provides sustenance to keep the dormant seed alive and able to germinate, can be a challenge. Seeds whose endosperm is lost cannot survive.	retell stories in order to maintain the viability of the stored stories. In particular maintaining the contextual layer surrounding the story embryo, which provides memorability to keep the dormant story alive and able to be told, can be a challenge. Stories whose context is lost cannot survive.

The goal of Rakontu is to help communities build, maintain and use their own story banks. The creation of such story banks depends on three functions: context, organization and linkage.

- Naturally occurring stories are richly associated with socially relevant context. For example, when a person passes on a story to another person, they often attach quite a bit of metadata to the story: where they heard it, the circumstances of the storytelling, who else heard it, whether they believe it, what the storyteller said and did before and after the storytelling event, where else they heard a similar story, and so on. The context of a story, like the seed coat of a seed, provides nourishment for the story as it germinates in the fertile soil of another mind.

- When people hear naturally occurring stories, they intuitively organize them in multiple meaningful ways. For example, a person hearing a story about a bear raiding a garbage can could relate the story to a lecture they attended about bears and people, to their opinions of those irritating neighbors who never close up their garbage properly, to rumors about bears being "dumped" in the neighborhood from a nearby suburb, to fears about the safety of their children, to property values, and so on.

- Naturally occurring stories become linked together in multiple meaningful ways. For example, a story about vandalism to an abandoned building might remind someone of another story about a similar problem, solution, worry, hope, location, behavior, image, person, group, building, and so on.

In contrast, most stories collected today on the internet are devoid of context, poorly organized, and isolated from each other. People do read stories online, learn from them, and connect with other people through them. But this is not because online community storytelling is well supported: it is because people have amazing abilities to make do with inadequate resources. If naturally occurring stories are like well-nourished seeds carefully planted in prepared soil, the great majority of online stories are like dried-out seeds dropped on the side of the road. The odds of a story surviving on the internet—and by "surviving" I mean being heard, experienced, translated, adapted and retold, as opposed to being told once and remaining frozen ever after—are poor, let alone the odds of providing benefit to communities.

Rakontu helps people preserve context, organize stories in multiple meaningful ways, and create a web of relevant links. Exactly how this will play out in practice will depend on research and testing, but these are some early ideas.

A person who has just read a story in Rakontu sees options like this:

- I'd like to tell a story about what happened in this story *from my perspective.*
- I'd like to answer some questions about this story *from my point of view*.
- This story *reminds* me of another story, and I'd like to tell it now.
- I'd like to build a *connection* between this story and another one I've read, for this reason.
- I'd like to *rate* this story for someone who [is new to the community, wants to explore diversity, wants to understand important issues, wants to be uplifted, wants to be persuaded, is against the new mall, is for the new mall]. (Reasons are different for each community.)
- I'd like to *tag* this story. (This is similar to tags on Amazon.com and many other sites; the user has the opportunity to choose from previously entered tags or enter a new one.)
- I'd like to *comment* on this story.
- I'd like to see other stories that [are about the same events from other perspectives, are related to this story, were connected to this story by other readers, people were reminded of by reading this story].
- I'd like to see other stories that also have these [words, tags, comments, answers to questions about the story, answers to questions about the storyteller].
- I'd like to see [patterns, collages] that contain this story. (More on patterns and collages later.)

You can imagine how a set of stories linked with this degree of richness compare with stories lost in many pages of forum posts or simply listed in dozens of pages with useless titles like "stories 50-75 of 530." Stories in Rakontu are unlikely to fall into a deep freeze (unless they should) but will continually resurface as people navigate (and build) the web of stories. These are not heaps of stories; they are living, breathing collective memories able to respond to the needs of the community.

A special note on rating reasons: It says "reasons are different for each community" above because it should never be possible to rate a story for a value-laden reason such as "quality." When you want people to talk honestly and share their experiences, it is best not to allow them to perform in a popularity contest, because it will bring out competitive behaviors that hamper the honest sharing of experiences. Rather, the system will help people rate stories *for particular purposes* important to each community.

Sharing stories among communities

Another aspect of shared storytelling is that *among* communities. Gathering stories from two or more groups with different perspectives and sharing them in facilitated ways has been a feature of several successful client projects over the years. For example, in a project about leadership for a large corporation, subordinates of top executives were asked to tell stories about their bosses. In a workshop, the executives looked together for patterns in the stories—without being told whom the stories were about. After the workshop, each leader was given a code with which they could find the stories told about them. The exercise helped the leaders place their behaviors in context and evaluate their performance in new ways.

Rakontu could help communities share stories with each other in similar ways. (In the current version there is no such support, but this can be done manually.) Even something as simple as showing people stories without revealing which community the storyteller lives in can be a strong conflict resolution device, because people can learn what unites different communities—perhaps worries about children, or hopes for the future, or fears about the economy. For example, communities could exchange selected stories, either mutually or through a community-to-community story request. The choice of which stories to share could be based on answers to a question, like "How widely can this story be told?" Or people could select those stories recommended by community members for the purpose of understanding a particular topic of mutual interest. Shared stories could be reviewed and anonymized so that information that should be kept inside the community could be removed, like the answers to the questions "Is this story true?" and "How does this story make you feel?"

Bridging past, present and future

Another exciting idea (again, not yet implemented) is to give Rakontu a means to bring stories from historical archives into today's communities to help them gain broadening perspectives. Working with my colleague Dave Snowden, I have used historical stories for this purpose in several client projects. In the leadership example given above, stories about historical leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Napoleon, and Helen Keller were combined with collected stories about the corporation's leaders to stimulate discussion and thought.

In another example, stories written from opposing views of asymmetric historical conflicts were collected from public domain sources and interposed with stories about recent events in order to help foreign policy analysts and decision makers get a fresh perspective. In one case a decision maker remarked to us that he had for the first time understood that the relationship between his country and its neighbor was similar to a relationship between two other countries centuries before. This had given him a new insight into the dangers and opportunities involved. The same insight-producing effect could be available in the future to communities using Rakontu.

Look: Finding patterns in stories

Finding patterns in stories means looking for trends that tell you useful things. Some examples of patterns found in real story projects:

- A project for a university study centered on major urban projects. One evident pattern was that residents found government aspects of urban projects to be chaotic (anything could happen) yet trusted (acting in the best interests of the public). Private actions, on the other hand, were seen as controlled (less likely to go wrong) yet suspect (possibly working for their own agendas). The results also pointed to a distinction between consolidated government power (seen as influential) and distributed community power (seen as inconsequential). It seemed from these results that the people who told the stories were unaware of or did not value the considerable power at the disposal of communities (through activism and protest, for example).

- In a project for a university study on leadership, stories told revealed a distinction between qualities of "hard power" (self-reliance, direction) and "soft power" (consultation, collaboration). These qualities were associated with

generational differences (older people were more reliant on hard-power attributes), sizes of organizations (the larger the organization the harder the power), types of organizations (non-profits were more collaborative), and types of activities (strategy was more connected to hard power, learning and innovation more to soft power).

- A project for a government agency about the future of technology asked people to tell stories about new technological products and services. The stories told revealed some startlingly contradictory feelings. People believed that future technology would be enabling, yet unsafe; beneficial, yet frightening; and unstoppable, yet positive. The overall impression was that people believe that technology will bring benefits but are uncertain how those benefits will come about given their interactions with technology today.

Typically when stories are found online, there are no opportunities to find such patterns among them. A few examples give a range of what is common in current web story collections.

- Probably the most common way stories are shared online is in discussion groups, of which there are many thousands. In these, stories are mixed with conversation and almost impossible to find again without remembering specific terms for searching.

- On most sites with collections of stories, the stories are grouped in simple lists, usually in fixed categories. For example, a web site of birth stories (http://www.birthstories.com) lists dozens of undifferentiated stories within each category.

- Commercial sites often use the we-will-select-for-you approach. For example, on a web site for the Hallmark channel (http://www.hallmarkchannel.com) visitors are invited to "tell us your story," but only a small number of stories are shared with other site visitors.

- Sometimes stories are mixed with factual articles. For example, a diabetes wiki (http://diabetes.wikia.com/wiki/Diabetes_Wiki) has stories listed along with articles such as "What is Diabetes?" and news items. There is an article category named "Stories," but it is hard to find, and once found simply lists the stories.

- Some sites collect metadata with stories, but it is almost always limited to factual information. For example, the LiveStrong foundation has a "share your story" web site (http://shareyourstory.livestrong.org) which has collected thousands of stories of surviving cancer. A "Find a Story" button leads to a form on which the only selection criteria are the person's name, city, state, country and type of cancer.

- There have been some recent developments where stories are shown on a geographical map. The Organic City (http://www.theorganiccity.com) is one such example. This site allows the user to select stories by location, genre, title, author or date, as well as keywords. This is a step forward, but geographic location is still just another factual element.

In my work with clients, I have found that the most effective organization of stories for pattern detection and sensemaking is to juxtapose factual elements with *elements of resonant collective meaning*. For example, going back to the cancer story collection

mentioned above, it would help story seekers if their search could include answering some of these questions:

- Should the story end well or badly, from the viewpoint of the storyteller?

- How should the storyteller feel about the story? (happy, sad, angry, relieved, frustrated, confused, etc)

- Should the storyteller have much or little support from family and friends?

- At what point in the progress of the disease should the story take place? (initial diagnosis, treatment, remission, metastasis, terminal stage, etc)

- Who should tell the story? (patient, physician, family member, friend, etc)

- Should the health care givers in the story have been considered helpful or hindering by the storyteller?

And so on. The purpose of these questions is to help the seeker find the story they need, and for personal stories people rarely need to find stories based on factual elements alone.

And so on. Even this one change—better metadata—would give online story collections far greater utility to people in need of support and understanding.

Sharing patterns

Rakontu helps participants preserve and *share found patterns*. For example, two people might discover that more stories have been told about "survivor guilt" by women than men. They might save the pattern and tag it with an observation (what anyone can see), interpretation (what they think it means) and implication (what they think should be done about it). They might then invite others to view the pattern and add their own interpretations and implications. In this way looking at stories becomes a form of collective sensemaking that reinforces the web of meaning.

Think: Sensemaking with stories

In years of watching people tell stories online, I have not found any web sites in which stories *have anything done with them* except being read and sometimes commented on. Stories are never *used* to explore anything or build anything—except possibly during off-line discussion.

Sensemaking refers to our human ability to make sense of ambiguous and complex situations in order to make decisions; group sensemaking is when people do this together. Narrative sensemaking exercises are structured tasks that help people build common collages of shared meaning, deriving new and transformative understandings while doing so. They dig deeper than unstructured conversation because they ask more of people than just sitting in a circle talking. Group exercises can help people bring out things that are hard to articulate or deep below the surface, and they generate diversity in situations where it is lacking.

I chose four group exercises out of the dozens I have participated in developing and using with clients to describe in my book *Working with Stories* for these reasons:

- because they have been proven useful in dozens if not hundreds of projects carried out by various story consultants worldwide for years

- because they are fairly simple to understand and facilitate
- because they have been so widely published and used by so many people that they could not be in danger of dispute as to ownership or use rights

The current version of Rakontu does not yet support online exercises, though the results of exercises can be input in a simplified (annotated list) format. My eventual plan is to support online sessions that implement the four exercises found in *Working with Stories*, since the same selection criteria apply to the software as to the book.

The four selected exercises are as follows.

- In the ***twice-told stories*** exercise, a story is chosen to tell more widely based on criteria important to the purpose of the exercise. As people consider the stories they derive broader understandings about the messages and emotions they carry.

- In the ***composite stories*** exercise, a larger story is built from smaller stories for the purpose of conveying a message related to the purpose of the exercise. By using narrative forms that have conveyed complex truths throughout history, people explore what is needed to represent their complex experiences.

- In the ***histories*** exercise, factual and/or fictional timelines are built from stories. This exercise is particularly useful when people are recalling events over long periods of time or are making sense of a long series of events such as a community conflict.

- In the ***emergent constructs*** exercise, representations of narrative aspects of collected stories are created. Emergent constructs are things built (constructed) through the emergent interactions of a group of people in order to explore complex topics in the stories under consideration. Some examples are:
  - situations like "On the ropes" and "War-time footing"
  - personifications like "Worker bee" and "Double dealer"
  - themes like "Can't get no respect" and "Violation of norms"
  - values like "Prosperity for all" and "Value all life"
  - relationships like "Big brother little brother" and "Honorable adversaries"
  - rules of thumb like "Get out while you're on top" and "Keep it simple"
  - transitions like "Sea change" and "Berlin Wall"

Group exercises can be carried out in two modes, as follows:

- In ***generative*** mode, for storytelling, the exercise helps people bring out stories that would otherwise go untold. People participating in a generative exercise build something, but the real outcome of the exercise is not the thing they build: it is the stories they tell on the way. The task is really just a way to get people past whatever stops them from telling the stories without it.

- In ***integrative*** mode, for sensemaking, the task helps people bring together disparate material into a coherent, complex whole. Whatever people build in an integrative exercise is the primary outcome, and any stories told are secondary.

Communities who eventually use these exercises as part of Rakontu will obtain three main benefits. First, group exercises will help people generate a larger and richer base of stories than is possible through simple online submission or offline interviewing. This will both seed the original story collection and reinvigorate it, providing material with which to build the complex webs of meaning mentioned above. Such exercises will avoid the "type your deepest fears and dearest hopes into this sterile web form" problem that plagues many current attempts to collect stories.

Secondly, group exercises will help people develop the sorts of deep insights and revelations that can only take place in synergistic group sensemaking sessions. A good example of such an insight arose in a project conducted by my colleague Dave Snowden. In a project for a police force, police officers built emergent constructs representing behavioral abstractions from many told stories about counter-terrorist efforts. One of the collages they built was the "Hero" personification. They were amazed to discover that the attributes describing the "Hero" were equally attributable to terrorist as to police characters in the stories they had told. In other words, some of the qualities they admired most in themselves could also be found in those they were working against. We want to give the opportunity to develop such insights to any community using Rakontu.

And finally, results from group exercises might be saved and viewed by people who did not attend the exercise, and they could persist in new organizations among the stories in the collection. For example, if a group of stories are linked in a history timeline by a group, anyone who had not participated in that exercise would be able to view the timeline and use it as a visual index into stories later. Built objects such as timelines and emergent constructs can be incorporated into shared languages with which people can refer to complex topics. For example, in another project done by Dave Snowden, the personification of a "seagull" who flies into situations and makes a mess of things was derived during a group session, and people were heard referring to the metaphor in daily conversation months later, in another part of the world, to refer to a similar problem. The seagull metaphor had become part of the organization's shared language of negotiated meaning.

Shared exercises

In future versions of Rakontu, two or more communities may be able to conduct a shared sensemaking exercise. For example, they might use the same anonymized stories to build separate collages such as themes and values, then reflect on how people in each community perceived and used the stories differently. In this way people could explore commonalities and differences of perception about themes of shared interest through the medium of stories.

In my work I have seen many instances of people discovering how someone else sees the world for the first time through such exercises of exchange. I have seen how the process challenges their unquestioned assumptions and changes their perception of issues they thought they understood. These challenges and changes are not always met with enthusiasm, but they rarely fail to leave a lasting impact.

Some examples of exchange:

- In a project for a school, stories were collected from teachers and students, and both groups separately used the stories to derive emergent personifications like "Porcupine," "James Dean" and "Wimp." In looking at how teachers and

students used the same stories to build their personifications, teachers saw that they were more likely to make "bad seed" judgments of behavior as immoral or antisocial, while students tended to ascribe the same behavior to ignorance and inexperience.

- In a corporate project, people from the executive office and from the rank-and-file group at a major corporation created emergent constructs (personifications, themes, values) from the same stories. The two sets of collages were then presented to each group. The rank-and-file group recognized the behaviors and values immediately. The executive group had more trouble with the process, since some of the perceptions uncovered in the exercise challenged their self-perceptions. Twice senior executives walked out of the exercise. But when it was explained to them that the other group had undergone exactly the same process they had and that this was the result, they began to listen and understand.

Developing support for group exercises

My eventual plan is for Rakontu to support the four group exercises described in the book *Working with Stories*: twice-told stories, composite stories, histories, and emergent constructs.

Exercises in Rakontu could take place in any of these ways:

- one person per computer, possibly in separate locations
- multiple people per computer, but all using computers to interact with the system, possibly with each group in a separate location
- a group of people in a room with one computer present
- a group of people in a room with no computer present

Each of these situations will require a different way of using Rakontu. The first two cases will require synchronous interaction over the internet such as is found in collaboration software. The last two cases will require methods of helping people go through the exercise with step-by-step instructions, either online or printed, and helping people enter the results of the exercises, either step by step or afterward. One possibility is to have Rakontu print customized worksheets people can use to record their exercise results off-line.

To take one example, we can imagine a group of people in a room using one laptop, which is the third situation above. At each step they read the instructions for the step, conduct the exercise using paper sticky notes on walls, then pause for a break while the facilitator enters the information into the system and prepares for the next step.

In essence the plan is for Rakontu to *embody knowledge* about the exercises so that whatever way people choose to conduct their exercises, it will be like they have a story consultant standing next to them. They might ask Rakontu to run the session, or help them run it, or simply explain what needs to be done.

Rakontu and other online software

People already use online software to tell stories, even if it doesn't support the richness of storytelling as well as it could. How is Rakontu different from software that is already available to support communities online?

These are some similarities and differences between Rakontu and other software associated with online communities.

Social and sharing software

Social networking

The software that runs Facebook and LinkedIn supports people building social connections in general. The software that runs Ning, CrowdVine and CollectiveX supports groups of people connecting, discussing issues and sharing information.

On all social networking sites the emphasis is on *people*, with each contributor having their own photo, page, blog, answers to profile questions, activity log, messages, contacts, and so on. In Rakontu social activity does not center around people but around *stories*. Profiles, images, discussions, requests, and activities feature sharing and working with stories more strongly than connecting with people directly. This is because the purpose of Rakontu is not only to connect people. There is already an abundance of software available to do that. The purpose of Rakontu is to help communities share and work with their stories online in ways they cannot do today.

Forums

Software to create forums, of which Wikipedia lists some 85 packages, connects people through the mediating artifact of a message or discussion post. This is probably the predominant way people share stories online today. A community could use forum software to support online storytelling, and many do.

But when people tell stories in real conversation they do not talk in the same way as they do when sharing information. A few of the many ways in which storytelling is different from other conversation:

- Storytellers "hold the floor" for an extended period of time, for which they solicit tacit approval from their listeners as they start the story. Power differences impact who tells stories and who listens.

- The telling of a story often signifies the transition of a conversation from the impersonal to the personal, and the storyteller checks to see if their listeners agree with that transition.

- Socially acceptable responses change when conversation turns to storytelling. For example, someone stopping a storyteller to challenge "facts" in the story will often find themselves shouted down until the story is over.

- The telling of a story often implies an obligation to tell another story in response.

And so on through many other (well studied) nuances. Software that supports the delicate

dance of storytelling has to be different from software that supports ordinary conversation. Differences between Rakontu and forum software include the following.

- Forum software typically connects discussion posts in hierarchies, lists and threads, but Rakontu connects stories in more complex ways.

- Forum software rarely collects metadata on posts, while Rakontu collects emotionally relevant metadata about stories and storytellers.

- Forum software supports only speaking and responding, while Rakontu supports structured conversation and the shared building of meaningful artifacts such as annotated story collages. (And Rakontu plans to extend to more complex forms of artifact building in the future.)

- Because of the emotional (and sometimes confessional) nature of storytelling, there is more attention to anonymity and privacy in Rakontu than in most forum software. For example, attribution of stories to fictional characters helps people tell stories that would not otherwise be safe to tell, though they may benefit everyone.

Blogs

Software such as Movable Type could be said to connect communities of people through the writing and reading of each other's blog posts and explicit linking. Blogging connects people through the medium of the blog post rather than directly and is distributed across many web sites. Similarities and differences in this case are much like those for social networking software (which may contain blogs).

Image sharing

Software such as Flickr and Picasa support people sharing photographs with others. Here the mediating artifact is the photograph, and all centers around it. Metadata is important, as in Rakontu: on Picasa photographs can be located on maps and grouped into assemblies based on various types of similarity, which is a sort of sensemaking in juxtaposition. Flickr includes some community and social awareness elements such as joining groups, building contact lists, inviting people to view photo albums, and contributing to projects. For example, a Flickr wildflower guide (http://www.flickr.com/groups/wildflowers) was created by people contributing their own photographs and others helping to identify species.

Photo-sharing web sites also are useful in looking at how people support partially online activities, since they use information gathered offline (photographs) and help people organize and package information for offline use (photo books, framed prints, calendars, coffee mugs). In some ways these sites are more like Rakontu than forums, because photographs are like stories in being personal and requiring a different mode of interaction than simple conversation or information collection.

Narrative self-expression

Web sites in this category encourage people to share their personal stories on the web to express themselves and connect with others. Like Rakontu, these sites connect people through the medium of stories.

Examples are:

- the Fray (http://www.fray.com), which has been active since 1996
- Overheard in New York (http://www.overheardinnewyork.com)
- Tokoni (http://www.tokoni.com)
- One Sentence (http://www.onesentence.org)

These sites are half social networks, half sounding boards. People contribute to get feedback on their writing, to help others learn from their experiences, and to meet people.

A related set of sites are of the "confessional" type, such as:

- Group Hug (http://grouphug.us)
- Post Secret (http://www.postsecret.blogspot.com)

Confessional sites help people unburden themselves of stories they need to share but can't tell to anyone they know. Some of the stories on these sites are moving and filled with angst, but some are offensive (and most such sites use strong moderation to delete deliberate attempts to offend). Confessional sites are of obvious benefit to those who express or unburden themselves through them, and they are helpful to others going through some of the same emotions.

With both self-expressive and confessional web sites, the medium of exchange is stories. But there are a few differences between these and Rakontu which are useful to examine.

First, these sites are not available to small groups or configurable to their needs, but exist only on one site run by whomever is sponsoring it and backed by proprietary software unavailable for use by others. Such projects are often started by people exploring an idea, but sponsors often have difficulty sustaining such efforts for years, especially given the high need for moderation. (I've watched several more such sites come and go over the years.)

There is a key difference in control between using a free hosted service and installing free software on your own web site. As an example, Vox (http://www.vox.com) offers free blogs —at the moment and unless the Six Apart company changes their mind about supporting it for free. In contrast, WordPress (http://www.wordpress.org) is an open-source web application which anyone can download, install, customize, and redistribute. This difference in control may not be important for public blogs, but for private community stories it may be critical. I have been keen on making sure that Rakontu is not only *available* to all communities but *under the control* of any community using it. That is one of the main tenets of the open source movement, after all: keeping control of software in the hands of users, not providers.

Tokoni is (as far as I know) the first self-expression web site to be backed by investment capital. Tokoni's business model is unclear, but since the company has chosen the proprietary route is it likely they will want to recoup their "angel" investment at some point and in some way. For example, they might charge for membership, overload the site with advertising, sell marketing information, or restrict some features to only those paying a fee.

Such changes do happen. Meetup.com started as a free service and caused an outcry—and a rush to the exits—when it suddenly began charging usage fees. According to Wikipedia, the number of Meetup.com groups declined from nearly 200,000 in May 2005, when fees

were first imposed, to around 16,000 in October 2006. According to the Meetup.com web site the number of groups has rebounded to nearly 50,000 at this writing, so the site may be finding a new niche; but it is not the same niche as it had before.

A second major difference between Rakontu and narrative self-expression web sites is that such sites support only one community—people interested in the site. In that sense these services are more like Facebook than Rakontu. This Facebook-like emphasis is also evident in the features offered. In general such sites address the "talk" portion of the talk-look-think triad only. They rarely ask questions of collective meaning, since they have no particular collective group in mind. Some support visual browsing, but interestingly, usually not in a way that reveals larger patterns in stories. This is because people using these sites don't need to find larger patterns: because they are not pursuing *collective* goals such as resolving disputes and coming to decisions together. Self-expression sites also provide no support for shared browsing or group sensemaking, since again that is not a priority.

Rakontu focuses on helping small, existing groups and communities. To show how far the small-community focus behind Rakontu goes back: I first got excited about making tools to support community storytelling in 1999 at IBM Research. In fact, a presentation I made about such a project is still (at this writing) available on the web site I created there (google "story colored glasses" to find it). Even in that early design I had envisioned storytelling as best supported in small community "circle" groups: *because that's how people tell stories*. Though some points of that presentation are pleasantly embarrassing now (pleasant because it verifies that my thinking has matured), some of the conceptual elements of Rakontu were already present in it. I said then:

> [S]tories are most likely to survive and prosper only where people are found ... in groups large enough to interact in interesting ways but small enough to share a common culture and history.

Now as well as then, I believe that helping small communities share and work with stories *for reasons important to each community* is a more useful support of storytelling than helping people tell stories in general.

The fourth and most important difference between self-expression sites and Rakontu is that self-expression sites *feature the individual strongly*. Profiles and popularity or quality rankings are usually prominent. For example, Tokoni has a "token" system where people can send each other icons to communicate appreciation for stories. This places the emphasis on *people as story authors* rather than on *stories as collective phenomena*. While this may be appropriate for social networking and self-expression, it is something I have learned to avoid when supporting community storytelling. Any hint of ranking tends to undermine the open sharing of stories *when the purpose is mutual understanding*. This is especially true when people of differing cultural backgrounds live together, because what is popular in one culture may be offensive in another.

Collaboration software

Wikis

Software such as MediaWiki supports the collaborative building of information collections. Like social network software, these packages have community elements such as profiles, discussion, groups, and social awareness. Like Rakontu and unlike social network

software, interactions are conducted through a medium: the article or document. Semantic wikis such as Metaweb and Semantic MediaWiki add metadata capacity to collaborative building. In fact, Rakontu is much like a semantic wiki with the story as the collection unit rather than the article.

So why use Rakontu when semantic wikis are available?

- A group of sufficiently motivated and knowledgeable people (or a single person) might be able to build a web site for simple community story exchange, using a semantic wiki, right now. However, they would probably not know what questions to ask (for their particular community), and they would probably not be able to help people connect the stories to each other in meaningful ways. So one valuable part of Rakontu is essentially built-in advice on how to help a community structure their growing story collection in ways especially appropriate to narrative (rather than information) sharing.

- Most semantic wikis available have means of navigating collections through filling out forms, and new ideas in data visualization are starting to appear. For example, the Parallax engine for the Freebase (http://www.freebase.com) semantic wiki is impressive and the Vispedia project at Stanford (http://vispedia.stanford.edu) has some new ideas. However, these systems have been designed with informational articles in mind, not stories.

- Wikis, whether semantic or not, do not support any activities except building a connected and indexed collection of documents. I have found that asking people to tell stories requires a stronger human connection than asking people to provide information, because while stories are powerful they are also emotional and personal. The goals of helping people share stories, look at stories together, and think together using stories require another layer of community support.

Educational materials

Software such as Moodle helps people collaboratively build educational resources online. Again this is a system for connecting people who are building something which mediates their exchange: educational courses (with elements like lessons, quizzes, resources, surveys, glossaries, workshops, assignments, and so on). Moodle is in a way an example of a successful Rakontu-type project: someone wanted to help people make sites where people could learn things, so they created what is essentially a wiki builder with special attention to educational materials. Note that Moodle did not just build *one* site, but made it possible for many people to build *their own sites* by creating a foundational tool. Rakontu does something similar to what Moodle has done, but with a different purpose: sharing and working with stories.

Prediction markets

The main thing Rakontu and prediction market software (such as at the Foresight Exchange) share is that people use them to *think together* through structured interactions. In a prediction market interaction between people is mediated through marketplace bids. All interactions with the system take place at the individual level and there are no shared synchronous activities. Still, some aspects of prediction market software show up in Rakontu. For example, prediction markets often feature visualizations for viewing changes in market valuations, which are essentially results of group sensemaking about issues.

Software such as at epinions.com and the reviewing parts of amazon.com and Netflix is especially relevant because of its attention to trust and recommendation, which are important in Rakontu. Here the element of mediation is the *review*, which is a sort of story but one with a specific purpose. Because this type of software is so strongly centered on the review rather than on the reviewer, it is a closer match to Rakontu than network support software.

One aspect of sites like amazon.com and Netflix which is similar is the many ways of linking products and reviews, most of which are quite helpful to users: lists, guides, forums, comments on reviews, user tags, collaborative filtering, user reporting of problems, and so on. Some good ideas on clean, understandable linkages can come from looking at this sort of software. However, there are no group activities going on in these spaces.

Project oriented software

Oral history

Some excellent story gatherings have taken place in large oral history projects, some government-run and some charitable. The American Memory project at the US Library of Congress (http://memory.loc.gov) includes many gems such as the 1930s WPA Slave Narratives project and interviews with Native Americans and immigrants. Studs Terkel's (http://www.studsterkel.org) candid interviews with Americans about race, work, and communities transformed cultural understandings. More recently, the StoryCorps project (http://www.storycorps.net) is exemplary in its focus on people interviewing their family members and friends about US cultural history.

Many regional and local museum projects also fit into this category, and some have developed software to support their efforts. For example, the CIPHER project (http://cipherweb.open.ac.uk), which was run by the Open University in London and completed in 2004, created "Cultural Heritage Forums" in which local community members could "participate and learn through exploring and contributing to a range of heritage resources around a common theme." In a CIPHER project at the Bletchley Park Museum (http://www.bletchleypark.org.uk), dozens of WWII code breakers who worked in the area (a center of wartime computing activity) were interviewed. Their stories were annotated by museum tour guides and made available to give site visitors a more in-depth view of Bletchley Park history.

The main difference between Rakontu and oral history projects is in purpose. These projects concentrate on the "look" part of the talk-look-think triad, because their purpose is to give people the means to understand history through viewing patterns in collected stories. The conversations such collections enable, though powerful and of inestimable importance, are one-way and take place over great periods of time. Nor are such stories used to help people make decisions together or resolve disputes *in the present time and in a small group*, though doubtless they have made contributions to national and even global understandings about such issues as race, power and rights.

Digital storytelling

Software such as MemoryMiner and PhotoStory helps people organize their personal

stories into presentations to share with family and friends. Software such as Dramatica Pro helps people write creative fiction. In addition, there is a large community of service providers in the digital storytelling field who help people create compelling stories in various media for the purpose of presentation.

This sort of help has definite benefits to people who are doing things like writing their memoirs for their families or putting together a persuasive package to get somebody to do something. But when the goal is sharing and understanding in a community, there is no such thing as "improving" stories—*every* story is a good story—and it is critical that the item of exchange is *raw* stories of personal experience. For that reason Rakontu does not help people improve the narrative or dramatic structure of their personal stories.

However, there is one way in which people *should* be able to use Rakontu to develop better stories: for *collective* endeavors of the community. It is not only reasonable but valuable to help people craft persuasive, entertaining and compelling stories at the community level. In the first version of Rakontu only simple annotated-list collages are possible, but full support of the group exercieses described in *Working with Stories* is planned for the future. The outcomes of all of the group exercises, when used in integrative mode, could be exported to other software and used to create polished presentations. For example:

- In the *twice-told stories* exercise, the chosen stories could be used to create a printed "album" of stories for presentation to people who are not online or who have just joined the community.

- In the *composite stories* exercise, the larger built story could be collageed around a goal, for example of helping new community members join, or making the case for something people want, or helping to resolve an issue.

- In the *histories* exercise, timelines could be used for such things as museum displays.

- In the *emergent constructs* exercise, representations such as characters and situations could be used to create skits that introduce people to the community or confront some members of the community with truths that they are denying.

Qualitative and narrative analysis

Software such as NVivo and ATLAS.ti supports researchers who study qualitative aspects of community issues. The SenseMaker suite of software developed and sold by Cognitive Edge (some of which I researched and wrote) supports the detailed analysis of patterns in collected narratives for high-profile corporate and government projects, as well as complex modeling for collaborative decision support.

Such analysis software shares with Rakontu its use of stories (though sometimes mixed with other utterances such as statements and opinions) as the primary element of interest. However, its audience is analysts and project sponsors, not community members. And its purpose is to reveal useful patterns through the collection, processing and detailed analysis of many thousands of stories, not to connect small numbers of people in small communities. Rakontu offers little support for such detailed analysis. It focuses instead on what best helps community members derive insights that meet *their* needs, not the needs of anyone who might be studying the community or particular issues.