

A Case Study: Investigating the Past, Present, and Future of Shanghainese Teenagers with Intellectual Disabilities from the Perspective of Societal Adaptation in the “Dream Café”

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Abstract: This investigation aims to shine a light on the employment problem of people with intellectual disabilities, starting from a special perspective. This study focuses on a unique place, the Dream Café that gives jobs to teens with intellectual disabilities, including Down Syndrome and Autism. My approach to is to reveal this topic through the personal story of Hao, the main character featured in my documentary short. Both this paper and that documentary began as a Video Journalism project. The video was produced in stages – from raw concept, development and planning in the pre-production” stage, to shooting footage and recording interviews during “production”, and the scripting and video editing phase known as “post-production”.

Keywords: Journalism; Video Journalism; Documentary; Social studies; Intellectual disabilities; Social adaptation; Case study, Employment; Preliminary.

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1 Introduction

The Intellectual disabilities of those featured in the research project arise from a variety of causes, genetic, problems before or during birth, and in many cases science still does not fully understand the causes. But the results are limitations in intellectual functioning, co-

existing with limitations in areas like socializing and self-care. The outcome is these patients usually have few chances to find a productive place society, trapped in a cycle of exclusion by their congenital deficiency.

The main character of this project, Hao, is a 19 years old teenager with Down syndrome. Down syndrome is a genetic disorder, caused by an extra copy of chromosome 21. Patients with Down syndrome have distinctive facial features they tend to share, which sets them apart from normal people. The condition’s severity varies among different individuals^[1].

Journalism aims to reveal truths in a society, to show the familiar in a different way, to change how people view those less fortunate than they are, to inform and engage its audience in a larger dialogue. Video Journalism has strengths and weaknesses when comparing it to Print writing. It can contain less information than print does, but it’s strengths are it can provide a more immediate and deeper engagement with the characters. Above all the video documentary form at its best can tell a story in an intimate and emotional way through sound and visuals.

This project was done in Shanghai. The main character of the film is a boy called Hao aged 19, a patient with Down syndrome living in this city. He and his schoolmates are currently working in a unique café which only hires teenagers with mental disabilities like autism and down syndrome. Our investigation focuses on Hao’s story, and on the purpose of the café, the role of the associated school for special children, and on his mother to tell a larger story about the current situation

for teenagers with mental disabilities in China.

2 Research process

There are many challenges in beginning a video documentary project. The demands for doing good journalism are there, but to do a video demands more than a print version of the same story. You need a story that is visual, with characters who help viewers either learn from the situation or be moved to think differently though seeing and hearing about it directly from them. And to be effective as both journalism and a story, it should also have a reason behind it. In Journalism this is commonly called the “nutgraph”, meaning a statement that tells the audience why this story is worth watching.

To this end, I began with broad research looking for situations and events happening in and around Shanghai that met the particular needs of a documentary story. I pursued several ideas.

The ideas were generally divided into these different categories: Arts, social issues, disability. All topics I felt strongly about. I researched each according to the required criteria for what makes a strong video story. High on that list is access. Unlike print, I learned that without access to film and interview, an idea cannot become a film.

Among the ideas I pursued and wrote a formal pitch for or discussed with my Professor: A famous traditional Shanghainese (wooden) puppet theater - closed for a year of renovations I discovered; I turned next to a Shanghainese shadow puppet theater - but the Grand Master refused my pleas to grant an interview. As the deadline to find an idea shrank, I found the only woman who specializes in Xuzhou style paper tearing art - until on calling it turned out she was working out of town. Then a story of street cleaners - the most dangerous job in the city. And, an idea for a story about how a deaf friend has learned to hear with a cochlear implant. Other ideas I researched included a special choir in Shanghai, the story of a LGBT friend. Each of these either collapsed because of access, scheduling or they lacked a story with visual action. Each of these items are crucial criteria to learn quickly, to decide whether or not the video story can even begin.

Take the idea of the Shanghainese shadow puppet theatre as an example. I set my sights on an ideal main character - either the leader of the troupe or a student currently studying this theatrical form. Through them the focus would be on the culture, history, difficulties,

and challenges to the ongoing survival of Shanghainese shadow puppets. This idea has good possibilities for action and visuals. It's also an idea with social value in celebrating a tradition, and it has the potential above all for the interesting stories of the lead puppet masters.

I designed a story arc about how this special cultural heritage faces difficulties and what people could do to help pass it on. Plus, as an art form – a living theatrical form – it meets my personal interests. But despite my best efforts to secure access to the members of this troupe, the leader turned me down. There was nothing I could say to convince the master puppeteer to be interviewed. He said he'd done too many films already, they took too much of his time. He allowed us to film the performance but not one interview with him, or anyone in his troupe. I also found the puppetry auditorium and museum are tiny with limited space for filming. Back to square one for pre-production and finding a new idea.

In journalism, deadlines are critically important and at this point I had spent days finding stories with hopes high each time only to have them fall apart. With the deadline pressing, I saw an idea on WeChat that seemed rich with potential - about a month old Café unique to Shanghai in its approach. This was an interdisciplinary topic – a combination of social issues and disability with possibilities for both a personal profile story and an example of something unique being done to help people with mental disabilities.

I immediately called and was there the next day in person to scout the situation and ask for permission to film. This time they gave me permission, I chose my main characters, and then raced to complete the next phase of preparation: Pre-Production. Pre-production demands doing all research, lining up all logistics needed to shoot, and preparing all interview questions.

The teacher from the school that started this café, and the shop manager not only permitted our request, they helped me find a main character: a star worker named Hao. They also helped us contact Hao's mother. I managed to get her agreement to be interviewed on camera. With permissions in place, I planned out the schedule.

However later, after the interviews and main shooting were done (2 days in total), we discovered that the interview questions were actually not complete. Some important questions about what the café was and how it began had been left out - which resulted in hunting for some difficult creative solutions while scripting the

video.

Moreover, I learned to not assume. I had asked about a quiet room for the interviews, but did not ask if the room was available for the day I was coming there. I arrived in a noisy café with the one quiet room booked for meetings all day long. What I learned was that solutions have to be found. Improvisation is essential as you have just one chance in these situations. In order to avoid the environmental interruptions, we moved into the school yard for a critical interview with the mother. Even here there was construction noise to disturb our interview. The problem was solved by asking the workers to stop working for a while.

Another huge problem was the shortage of batteries. The battery died during one of the interviews. Luckily my professor also took his camera and I took over that camera. This was my training by fire into all the challenges of doing documentary production in which I learned you have to think on many levels at the same time to get the job done.

Post Production, the editing and scriptwriting phase, I learned is the longest, and in many ways the most tiring, requiring hours and hours of detailed attention and knowledge of the editing software. It is the most tedious but also the most rewarding to see the results when they work.

My chosen topic included a lot of characters, information and personal reflections. I learned how difficult it is to do more than 30 minutes of interview with each person and then find, transcribe and translate it all and then search for just a few short minutes from them for the script.

The Professor warned that transcription was a potential danger: it could take more time than you expect and must be done immediately. While we used automated transcription and translation. I also learned it takes hours to correct the mistakes made by computers. The Chinese to English translation is frequently inaccurate, with misunderstandings and accidental deletions of important sentences. To avoid such problems, we changed translation methods aiming for a better comprehension of the original Chinese meaning.

The script writing period was also not fluent. Structurally, my initial idea was to put the piano playing scene in the beginning, then introduce the café and the main character. Nevertheless, this idea didn't work because it made other scenes hard to organize: should we introduce the café first, or Hao first? If we introduce the café first, then where should the main event – the

café – go? After some discussion with my Professor, we decided to introduce the café first, so that people understood the “what and why” of the story right away. And once we established why this café was unique, different and important, we could then talk about the main character – Hao – as an example of what it could mean to one person and their family.

Even though my initial idea for beginning may have appeared more dramatic, I have learned through this how important it is to keep your audience clearly informed at each step about the topic of the story and where it is leading them. I learned that the most effective way in telling a video story is to express everything in a highly logical manner. Which is even more a requirement of video storytelling than print, because in video we must follow a story as it unfolds through audio and image, rather than reading at our own pace.

During the editing phase, everything would have done faster if I had not encountered many technical problems. Sadly, it was hard for me to purchase a new hard drive, and I discovered my old one was too slow for video editing. Many annoying problems and delays resulted. My computer crashed at least twice every single day – which affected my progress rate a lot.

Luckily, through a logical and effective schedule, I finished editing a full 10 minutes story, working right to the minute of the final deadline. What I learned from this process is that having the correct equipment, as specified, and creating an effective schedule are extremely important – otherwise you add a lot to your stress, and most critically, might miss your deadline.

During the rough cut period, I also realized that I didn't have enough visual pieces for the video. Therefore, professor and I returned to the café for a “pickup shoot” – during which I gathered more shoot coffee making and more shots for a highly important piano playing scene. I again learned that you can make plans for video documentary filming, but then reality often steps in.

While we had planned to re-shoot some additional welcomes by the special staff, and do more people entering from the exterior and also having coffee inside, the re-shoot day was a Monday. A very busy work day for potential customers, hardly anybody came in for coffee. After this experience, I realized more the importance of deciding what time to shoot a given scene during pre-production, otherwise the plans can face lots of difficulties. And can waste a lot of time.

3 Analysis: The employment situation of people with mental disability in China

Nowadays in China, the employment rate for people with disability is about 43%, whereas the employment rate for those with intellectual disabilities is only about 10%^[2]. The employment rate is extremely low because of the limited choice for jobs, lack of education and medical rehabilitation for people with intellectual disabilities^[3]. Though policies are in place to help them, they are not having enough effect – the government is not taking action to implement these policies, according to “The Analysis of current employment for people with disability in China”. Starting from 2011, the employment rate of both mentally and people who are physically disabled has decreased about 12%^[4].

Differences between rural and urban people with disability is a crucial factor that influences the employment rate. From 2007 to 2012, the employment rate for people with intellectual disability has decreased for about 15%^[5]. According to “The Cost of Disability in China”, the poverty gap between rural and urban areas in China is huge and that has a major impact on work options for the people with disability. For those in urban areas, the average household income is below 20000 RMB; as compared to below 10000 RMB for those in rural areas. This average rate doesn’t take into account the number of adults, their age, nor the severity of their disability. So it is not difficult to imagine the economic hardships these families must face^[6].

Luckily, in recent years more people are becoming aware of this issue. According to the documentary *The Graduating Special Children* by CCTV, children with mental disability and physical disability rarely have even the chance to be employed after graduation. The documentary resulted in a rise in awareness of the issues these people face. The government is also showing signs it is getting more involved again in these issues.

For example, in Shanghai, Pudong New District, the government partly supports the Pudong Special School for such kids with mental disorders, with an added focus of providing them with job opportunities. To this end, in July of 2019 they opened up the Dream Cafe as a place for some of their students with mental disability to work. According to Miss Yang, Dean of studies of the school, “We opened up this café to provide the children with job opportunities. We want them to live independently; we also want to help ease the worries for the families of these special kids. This was our purpose

of opening up this Café^[7].” Currently 7 of their students work there.

The Cafe manager added: “We hope these special children can get more directly integrated into the society and live like normal people”^[8].

What began as an experiment just one month before our filming began, is already showing definite results. The evidence indicates that the café has successfully awakened people’s consciousness about accepting people with mental disabilities as people and as workers serving them in the Cafe. Attesting to this, hundreds of notes of appreciation hang on a special wall there, all written by customers.

Teachers, the manager and parents also all say that the café has built greater confidence and provided a stable income for the workers. It is making it easier for them to become more involved in society and to communicate with people. Within only one month, the total number of customers in that café has already reached 5000. And these efforts have been getting even wider attention: Many newspapers and magazines have published the story of this café. Government officials and military officers have even visited the teenagers there.

As Hao’s mother said, “Now, the society is more inclusive in regards to these special children. So, it’s now more important for us, as special children’s family members, to be more optimistic.”^[9]

The Café project is also doing a great job of bringing school and family together to help their experiment be successful. Besides the special school’s student employees, the Café has parent volunteers. Plus a teacher who watches over them every day.

“This Cafe provides to both special children and their families a sense of safety for the future since they have stable income.” said Miss Yang.^[7]

4 Reflection

This project is my first times filming and making a complete video by myself. It was an intense and steep learning curve for me. When several of my story ideas fell through, the pre-production period became shorter. I adapted quickly by finding and pitching this new story on the Dream Café. However, by then, my overall deadline became shorter. I didn’t have as much time as I hoped to do full preparation and research. I missed the opportunity to ask is the meeting room was reserved; I also realize now I missed asking some of the most basic parts of the “Who, What, When, Where, Why

and How” of Journalism. In my case, I was so focused on the personal and social story that all my questions were about my main character. But I left out key, basic questions about what is the Dream Cafe and How does it work? I also realize now I could have helped myself prepare and form my ideas by more research into other articles and videos on the Dream Cafe Project in newspapers like the Shanghai Daily for ideas on what was important to ask about, shoot and write into the script.

For example, Hao’s mother didn’t mention anything about the café itself and how the café changed her son - my main storyline. Instead we focused mostly on her son. While I got excellent answers from her, I had to learn how to use narration to “fill in those holes” as my Professor put it.

Now I realize how preparing my “pitch” for a story thoroughly makes everything from writing to editing so much easier and better if the planning is thorough and the questions include the basics I need to tell the story, not just the most emotional and interesting parts of the story. Also, I’ve learned through experience that a documentary requires more variety of shots than I expected, and I can plan ahead what the most important scenes and shots are in advance - which provides many more choices during post-production and can save hours of time during the editing period.

This whole process made me realize that if I have great interest and put focused effort into it, I can be very productive. Beside these factors, scheduling and preparations are also important because they are the foundations of making a good documentary.

As a beginner, I am very happy to see people enjoying and praising my final production. But still, if I want to be professional, I still have room to grow in both my shooting techniques and my planning, and time organization during post production.

In my very first ever documentary attempt I have created a piece that has powerful interviews, tells a story in unfolding scenes of action, weaves together several points of view from a variety of people to tell the story along with having written a narration. It has a clear story arc, and some highly memorable and moving emotional moments. I was able to apply my lessons and shoot interviews in a professional fashion, and edit sequences and scenes according to the rules of filmmaking. And very importantly, it tells an important story, with emotion, with a clear beginning middle and an end. I have learned tremendously on all levels in doing this documentary video. The audience reaction

at the screening was very strong, and it has encouraged me to go farther in the future.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, according to the recent studies by Docin and Loyalka, we find that although towards the people with intellectual disability are gaining more general acceptance by society, the employment rate for these people in China has actually been decreasing recent years. Therefore, many are unable to support themselves or their family.

In order to avoid this situation, Shanghai Pudong Special School established Dream Café as an experiment for its students to get a job. My project focuses on Hao, an employee and also a patient with Down syndrome. This documentary aims to reveal the employment problem and let more people be aware and care about this issue.

As a beginner in Journalism, after this experience, I know there are areas I need to improve my ability to plan, shoot and edit a film of my own. However, through this project I have opened a new door of storytelling with video, and gained essential skills and more confidence in filmmaking. Above all, I feel it has let me become more passionate about doing Journalism that informs and matters.

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