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Holding a Brave Space: Lessons from Reality Storytelling

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Abstract

Brave spaces can be understood to be anything from everyday life to spaces with ground rules and an agreement to have challenging conversations. Brave spaces are sometimes assumed to be at odds with free speech. However, since hate speech discourages the speech of those targeted, brave spaces may provide more freedom of speech overall. Reality storytelling shows, in which ordinary people share personal stories, often offer an intentionally or unintentionally brave space and encourage mostly uncensored speech. For this study, the author attended reality storytelling shows across the United States and interviewed participants of these shows, seeking to answer the question: How do reality storytelling shows establish and hold a brave space? Interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were analyzed through qualitative coding, and memos were made available to the public through a blog. Some shows state ground rules along the lines of "no hate speech" for storytellers and audience members and express a willingness to remove offenders. Even shows with no rules do not tolerate hate speech when it happens. In practice, those who transgress are not always removed. Unintentional offenders may be "called in." Although educational, the process remains uncomfortable. Lessons from reality storytelling that may translate into other areas include these actions: leaders must be willing to take action to hold the space, the community should be explicit about consequences for transgressing norms, and all participants should truly understand how they might be called upon to be brave.

Keywords: brave space; free speech; information practices; storytelling; United States

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Introduction

The host of Ex Fabula, a Milwaukee story slam, takes the stage. She reminds the audience of the theme for the evening and the story slam rules. Then she reads part of a poem by Beth Strano (2023). The entire poem states:

> Together, we will create brave space
>
> Because there is no such thing as a "safe space" --
>
> We exist in the real world.
>
> We all carry scars, and we have all caused wounds.
>
> In this space
>
> We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world,

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We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,

We call each other to more truth and love.

We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.

We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.

We will not be perfect.

This space will not be perfect.

It will not always be what we wish it to be.

But

It will be our brave space together,

And

We will work on it side by side.

Reality storytelling events, like Ex Fabula, at which volunteers tell true, personal stories, often explicitly or implicitly, attempt to create a brave space. Producers and hosts want storytellers and audience members to feel safe enough to risk telling or hearing uncomfortable stories (Nelson, 2019). Brave spaces and the tension between brave or safe spaces and free speech are gaining increasing attention. Examining the brave space practices of reality storytelling shows may further this conversation.

Literature Review

In the United States, the histories of libraries and storytelling are intertwined. As described by Ruth Sawyer in *The Way of the Storyteller* (1942), German immigrants brought the kindergarten program to the United States, which included storytelling. Storytelling was part of the first kindergarten in a U.S. public school in 1873 (Nelson & Sturm, 2017). The American Library Association was founded not long after, in 1876 (Nelson & Sturm, 2017). Public libraries had already begun including storytelling in their "story hours" when Marie Shedlock's 1900-1901 national storytelling tour solidified librarian interest in storytelling in children's programming. In the U.S., storytelling spread beyond classrooms and libraries, eventually leading to the founding of the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, in 1973 and a membership organization initially known as The National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS), now National Storytelling Network (NSN), founded in 1975 (ISC, 2024). With the rise in professional storytellers in the 1980s and 1990s, librarians began hiring storytellers for library programs rather than doing all the storytelling themselves (Nelson & Sturm, 2017). Libraries have influenced storytelling in the United States, and U.S. storytelling trends also impact library programming.

Library literature includes articles on the values of storytelling, its place in library programming, and how to perform. Just a few storytelling manuals by librarians include *Storytelling: Art and Technique* (Baker & Greene, 1977), *Handbook for Storytellers* (Bauer, 1977), and *The*

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Storyteller's Start-Up Book (MacDonald, 1993). Sturm & Nelson (2016) compiled librarian views on how storytelling benefits librarians (building a professional repertoire, creating an emotional bond of trust with children), libraries (marketing the library to children, increasing book circulation), and children (motivation to read, listening skills, character education, safe space for children to explore ideas and identities, exposure to other cultures, and improved listening and language skills). Most library literature indeed presumes storytelling will be for children in libraries. There may be a need to explore further how libraries can offer storytelling for teens and adults, especially with the current national interest in reality storytelling.

Information science literature investigates the information practices of many communities, including enthusiast car restorers (Lloyd & Olsson, 2019; Olsson & Lloyd, 2017), theater professionals (Olsson, 2010), and martial artists (Olsson & Hansson, 2019). The reality storytelling movement makes an exciting addition to this discussion of oral and embodied information practices. Even setting aside the shared history of storytelling and libraries, the study of storytelling events can contribute to information practice research.

The brave space conversation is highly relevant to libraries as places that attempt to both facilitate free speech and welcome everyone. One example of the difficulty this poses for libraries is the meeting room controversy of 2018. As described by Yorio and Peet (2018), a revision to the American Library Association's (ALA) interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights regarding non-discrimination in library meeting room policies stated that a library could not deny a group use of a meeting room based on the content of their speech, and specifically named hate speech as an example. This revision sparked "an ongoing emotional debate among library and ALA staff," which continued on social media after the 2018 ALA Annual Conference (Yorio & Peet, 2018, para. 2). The version of the ALA's interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights available in 2024 uses slightly different language. The library "may not exclude any group based on the subject matter to be discussed or the ideas for which the group advocates" (ALA, 2024, para. 2). The meeting room interpretation continues that the library should follow their policies around acceptable behavior if "a group's actions during a meeting disrupt or harass others in the library" (para. 2). According to notes at the bottom of the page, the June 2018 amendments were rescinded in August 2018. The last amendments were made in January 2019. As we continue to have these critical conversations regarding the use of libraries, we can learn from other brave spaces.

Brave Space

Much of the brave space literature points to Arao and Clemens's (2013) chapter "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialog Around Diversity and Social Justice" in *The Art of Effective Facilitation* as an excellent place to start. Arao and Clemens (2013) assert that safe spaces prevent meaningful conversations because typical "safe space" ground rules are not sufficient "when the dialogue moves from polite to provocative" (p. 135). Participants conflate "safety with comfort" and are often unwilling to have their views challenged in a "safe space" (p. 135). Furthermore, Arao and Clemens (2013) posit that a safe space tends to privilege those who already hold other privileges in society as participants "classify challenges to one's power and privilege" as unsafe (p. 140).

Participants belonging to oppressed groups are likewise unsafe, as they are encouraged not to share their pain with members of the dominant group. Setting the expectation that participants are in a brave space rather than a safe space can reduce some barriers to meaningful

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conversation. Writing specifically about social workers serving transgender individuals, Shelton et al. (2019) additionally suggest that brave spaces may lead to more intersectional conversations that better address "the multiple sources of inequities faced by trans people and communities" (p. 114).

Although brave spaces own and expect some level of discomfort for participants, Brazill (2020) found that students rated brave classroom space as having a high impact on their "overall quality of learning experience" (p. 62). Many education students expressed in written feedback wanting to create brave spaces in their classrooms (p. 64). Brave spaces are uncomfortable and desirable. Writing on oral cultures, Ong (2008) notes that the spoken word especially "situates knowledge within a context of struggle" (p. 44). The potential discomfort that can come from engaging with others has likely been around at least as long as speech and is part of how we learn from each other.

Arao and Clemens (2013) recommend that social justice facilitators "strive for protracted dialogue in defining brave space and setting ground rules, treating this conversation not as a prelude to learning about social justice but as a valuable part of such learning" (p. 142). Creating a brave facilitation or classroom space starts with discussion and ground rules. Recent brave space literature presents a spectrum of interpretations of brave space, from loosely defined and facilitated to strictly defined and highly facilitated.

On the looser end of the spectrum, Palfrey (2017) defines brave spaces as "learning environments that approximate the world outside academic life" (p. 21). This contrasts with safe spaces where "students can explore ideas and express themselves in a context with well-understood ground rules for the conversation" (p. 20). He gives the example of a safe space for LGBTQ students. Palfrey seems to equate rules of engagement with safe(r) spaces, going on to suggest that some spaces "might also serve as a blend of the two ideas [safe and brave], with well-articulated expectations set out by the teacher or discussion leader at the outset" (p. 21). Palfrey defaults to learning environments like the outside world, with ground rules for discussion that are possible but not required.

Without ground rules and set expectations, Palfrey's (2017) "brave space" may ask oppressed people to be brave while upholding the status quo for dominant groups, very like "the world outside academic life." More intentionally created brave spaces ask privileged participants to be brave as well. Pawlowski (2019) talks about white students being afraid of saying the wrong thing but asserts that they need to take that risk so that they can "confront and intervene in the problematic views they secretly harbor" (p. 69). In discussing how universities might address microaggressions, Palfrey and Minow (2019) point out that the person who is confronted about a microaggression might "feel like they are racist" or "feel that they are being told they are misogynist" for something that "they did not intend" (p. 30). A brave space does ask these individuals to be brave and take the risk that they will be called out for intentionally or unintentionally harmful comments.

One of Arao and Clemens's (2013) proposed ground rules is "own your intentions and your impact" (p. 145). The "impact of our actions is not always congruent with our intentions and [...] positive or neutral intentions do not trump negative impact" (pp. 145-146). An involved facilitator can also help separate people and actions. Calling an action racist is not the same as calling a person racist, although it may feel that way. Addressing the common ground rule of "no attacks," Arao and Clemens discuss with participants the difference between "a personal attack on "an

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individual and a challenge to an individual's idea or belief or statement that simply makes an individual feel uncomfortable" (2013, p. 148). In a brave space, participants might be called in for an accidental racist or misogynist comment, and a facilitator can help the group navigate that uncomfortable experience.

Ali (2017) recommends ground rules paraphrased from Arao and Clemens (2013) but without the discussion and nuance from the original chapter. For example, Ali (2017) lists "challenge by choice" as one of the ground rules, briefly elaborating, "where students have the option to step in and out of challenging conversations" (p. 3). Arao and Clemens also want participants to "be aware of what factors influence their decisions about whether to challenge themselves on a given issue" (2013, p. 147). A good example of this in action comes from Pawlowski (2019), who describes having students complete a form at the end of each class, asking, "Did you participate? If not, why not?" (p. 68). Providing ground rules alone may not achieve the same brave space forged through meaningful discussion and co-creation.

The BIPOC-only (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) Library and Information Science conference (POC in LIS Summit) described in Masunaga et al. (2022) is another type of brave space. Limiting the conference to a specific group makes it similar to the safe spaces Palfrey (2017) describes. Masunaga et al. also use the term "counterspace," saying BIPOC folks need "safe spaces to support and mentor other information workers of color" (2022, p. 16). Ultimately, they choose to use the term brave space because "We recognize that any event held on occupied white, capitalist lands could not be inherently 'safe' for BIPOC" (Masunaga et al., 2022, p. 18). Others agree with this sentiment. "Indeed, the pervasive nature of systemic and institutionalized oppression precludes the creation of safety in a dialogue situated, as it must be, within said system" (Arao & Clemens, 2013, pp. 140-141). Speaking of arts spaces in particular, Austin and Vadiveloo (2023) say a space "cannot be determined so [safe] by those in positions of institutional or social power" (p. 55). Interestingly, Masunga et al.'s (2013) and Palfrey's (2017) interpretations of brave space call primarily on marginalized people being brave. In contrast, Masunga et al.'s (2013) brave space provides more safety to support that bravery.

The POC in LIS Summit also included a code of conduct, which was updated for the second summit held online during the COVID-19 pandemic (Code of Conduct, 2021). The code "defines forms of harassment," describes "the consequences for those who engage in harassing or discriminatory behavior," and supplies "a mechanism for grievance reporting" (Code of Conduct, 2021; Masunga et al., 2023, p. 24). Although this brave space was carefully crafted by limiting participants and offering ground rules, it is not clear that participants were actively involved in defining brave space or creating their rules of engagement.

Other authors describe creating intentional brave spaces with the help of their students or participants. Austin and Vidaveloo (2023) created a Brave Space Agreement with their young actors. They did not wish to begin with any assumption about how participants might define *respect* or *inclusion*. This left the actors "free to build terms of engagement that can decentralise whiteness, and other dominant normative discourses" (p. 69). Brazill and Ruff (2022) highlight the importance of leadership in "transforming classroom culture" away from "avoiding confrontation" and toward a culture "where tacit assumptions can be questioned and discussed among the group" (p. 116). Teachers led the discussion and nudged students toward accepting some discomfort.

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Leaders facilitate the creation of a brave space and have a responsibility to hold the space. Pawlowski's (2019) students "report to me that it is far more damaging to a class dynamic to see a classroom stay silent in the face of a student's racist comment, or hear that comment uncritically validated than to hear that comment in the first place" (p. 67). It is the teacher's responsibility to respond. Pawlowski also keeps the brave space conversation going throughout the course with a brief form at the end of each class, an anonymous mid-semester evaluation, and an in-class written reflection at the end of the semester (p. 68). The importance of the facilitator, teacher, or authority figure in brave space creation will be relevant to libraries as they consider how the entire library and specific programs may function as brave spaces.

Brave space facilitators recognize that they are "not just modeling brave space" but going "through the process of brave space with" participants (Pawlowski, 2019, p. 85). Austin and Vidaveloo (2023) describe creating a culture in which their young actors are encouraged to have and articulate boundaries, and leaders seek consent when asking actors to rehearse and perform. This assumes that the leaders do not necessarily know what is best for the actors and humbly request their participation in communicating their needs. Brazill and Ruff (2022) specifically call upon leaders to be humble, modeling cultural humility. This humility "provides opportunities to learn from others with curiosity and it gives individuals power to share their own culture and values" (p. 122). Pawlowski (2019) states that "[v]ulnerable disclosure must be reciprocal" (p. 73) and shares entries from her own racial development journal before having students write their blog posts. Brave space facilitators help shape and hold the space, while simultaneously joining their participants in humility and vulnerability.

Brave space can mean anything from everyday life to an intentional space created with rules of engagement in which all actors can expect to act with some bravery. Even the safest of spaces cannot claim to be completely secure, meaning the term brave space may be more honest. Brave spaces can allow for challenging conversations that are not possible in safe spaces where participants may expect to remain comfortable. With their ground rules, brave spaces may seem at odds with free speech.

Free Speech

In the United States, the First Amendment to the Constitution includes a right to free speech, but the scope of that right is often misunderstood. Brison (2021) explains the right to free speech "is a negative right to be free from governmental interference of a certain sort" (p. 107). The First Amendment does not guarantee freedom from private interference (Brison, 2021, p. 107). Governmental entities, such as public schools and libraries, will be more responsible for not interfering with free speech than private venues or storytelling show producers. Some may argue that free speech is a moral right separate from the First Amendment rights, and therefore, private entities have an ethical obligation to allow free speech, too. For example, Brison (2021) discusses that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are being criticized for impinging on free speech.

The perception that brave spaces may not allow free speech likely comes from an association with common safe space ground rules, encouraging participants to be respectful and not attack one another. Arao and Clemens (2013) take issue with both guidelines and suggest a conversation to clarify their meaning. People who want to feel free to use hateful language might be stifled by instructions to be respectful and not attack others. However, Arao and Clemens (2013) point out that standard guidelines often silence marginalized people from whom critical inquiries can

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be viewed as disrespectful attacks. Brave spaces are meant to allow more speech, not less. With this in mind, it is also worth noting Brison's (2021) point that "if vulnerable minority members are targeted by hate speech, they may well become less, rather than more, likely to express their ideas" (p. 112). Although guidelines such as "be respectful" and "no attacks" should not be taken at face value, hate speech has no place in a brave space.

Palfrey (2017) describes a "clash of values" when "a commitment to a genuinely diverse community comes up against an equally genuine commitment to a free and open environment for expression" (p. 92). He does indicate that universities should "eliminate hate speech" but continues that "some degree of noxious expression must be tolerated by all sides in any debate" (p. 93). Palfrey advises "taking the long view on the topic of free expression" because "the dynamic of who is in the minority is likely to change" (p. 90). Even as we understand that hate speech is not desirable and challenging to defend in many environments, such as higher education, there is some hesitance to make it against the rules.

Questioning whether hate speech is and should be covered by the First Amendment, Brison (2021) addresses some of Palfrey's (2017) points. Brison disagrees with the reciprocity argument, which is the idea that we should tolerate hate speech so that those participating in hate speech will reciprocally tolerate ideas they disagree with. Brison gives the example of tolerating fascist speech, which we see "emboldens fascists and incites them to violence, rather than making them more tolerant of opposing views" (p. 116). Whether it is people from the majority or minority group using hate speech, it is questionable whether there is any value in tolerating this speech under the assumption that there will be reciprocity.

Without going into all of Brison's (2021) arguments against the protection of hate speech, a final point worth mentioning is his assertion that hate speech is at odds with self-realization and diversity. As discussed above, minority community members may be silenced by hate speech. Those spewing hate speech may have become socialized to this behavior such that they "become incapable of critically examining their beliefs" and "cannot be said to be expressing their 'own' personalities in conveying their ideas through hate speech" (p. 113). Brave spaces are necessary to ensure everyone can speak and critically examine their beliefs.

Bravery Practices

Some existing literature on communities' information practices allows us to see glimpses of local rules of engagement. Communities tend to have official or unofficial rules; inclusivity and dialogue may or may not be important to each community studied.

For example, Olsson and Lloyd (2017) studied local car restoration clubs in Australia. These clubs were open to some, being significantly male-dominated. When their male participants talked about women, they "othered" them and relegated them "to observer or support status rather than partner in the restoration practice" (Lloyd & Olsson, 2019, p. 1036). There also seemed to be some bias against those who did not do restoration themselves. One participant described how "there are those who 'buy cars for the wrong reasons' " (p. 1038). They disapproved of men who were there only for socializing. Knowledge-sharing regarding car restoration's "complex embodied skills" was expected and practiced. Olsson & Lloyd's participants "all talked about how invaluable it was to be able to work with and learn from other, more experienced enthusiasts in this way" (2017, "Car clubs," para. 8). These car restoration clubs sound like safe spaces for

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enthusiast car restorers where they can freely enact their masculine identities and understand that information related to car restoration will be willingly shared.

In studying theater professionals, Olsson (2010) found it was common for participants to have suspicion of the academy. They found academic writing generally "obscure and irrelevant" and felt a "suspicion that academics look down on theater professionals" (p. 275). Theater professionals felt safer interpreting Shakespearean plays in their own communities, away from academics, with their own "techniques for determining meaning and authority" (p. 275). In the examples of the car restoration clubs and the Shakespearean theater professionals, we see communities that are not intentionally brave spaces but include practices that involve safety, inclusion, and exclusion and expectations around what can be discussed.

Based on my prior research, at least one reality storytelling show, Carapace (Atlanta, Georgia), actively seeks to make storytellers and listeners feel safe enough to risk uncomfortable stories together (Nelson, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, storytelling shows that moved online became more inclusive in some ways. The National Storytelling Network slam, for example, which is usually held in person, was "easier for members from across the country to attend" online (Nelson, 2022, p. 105). Not only were travel costs reduced, but some shows, such as Ex Fabula (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), "moved from $10 tickets for story slams to 'pay what you can'" (p. 105). The virtual stage may have been more physically accessible for some storytellers. "There is no worry over whether the stage is wheelchair accessible, and since most virtual tellers remain seated during their performances, these audiences might not even know whether a teller uses a wheelchair" (p. 105). These added safety measures at virtual shows meant that community members who could not attend could be included. Because tellers share personal stories, more diverse storytellers means that more diverse stories are shared and heard.

Virtual shows also provided a unique opportunity for holding a brave space, in the ease with which troublemakers could be removed. Should "such an ejection be required, it is much simpler online and carries minimal, if any, risk of bodily harm" (Nelson, 2022, p. 107). It is interesting that, in some ways, it is easier to both invite people in and kick them out of virtual spaces. Masunaga et al. (2022) had 124 attendees at their virtual POC in LIS Summit in 2021, as opposed to 78 at their in-person summit in 2018. The Summit may have grown over time anyway. Still, they recognized some benefits of the virtual format as planned: "It would allow for more attendees unrestricted by the physical library space and invite global participation while maintaining free registration" (p. 24). The inclusion possibilities of virtual spaces may be part of the reason they persist even as we have returned to in-person events post-COVID quarantine.

This study of the reality storytelling movement brings together discussions of information practices and brave spaces. Lessons from reality storytelling may be relevant in classrooms, libraries, and other informational or educational contexts, especially in which oral, face-to-face communication occurs.

Method

I conducted this research from July 2019 to May 2024 as part of a larger ongoing project on the American reality storytelling movement. There is variety among reality storytelling shows, but some features familiar to many of them include the fact that they are held in venues such as bars and coffee shops; they encourage ordinary people to tell true, personal stories; they occur

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once a month with a new theme for the stories each month; they give storytellers a time limit of 5-10 minutes. The story slams usually include some judging and competition.

The institutional review board at my institution approved this study. I employed ethnographic methods, including observation, participation, and interviews. Building on a previous study, in which I spent several months learning about one reality storytelling show, Carapace (Nelson, 2019), I spent a shorter time with shows across the United States. Except for some shows that were easier to access, I visited the shows in this study only once and interviewed a few people involved with each show. I attended over ten American reality storytelling shows for this study and interviewed over 20 participants. Some shows I attended as an audience member; at others, I volunteered to tell a story. Craft (2015) points out that by performing, the researcher gives the community she is observing a chance to "watch the watcher watch" (p. 12). I allow storytelling communities to observe and critique me when I tell a story.

Author positionality

Agreeing with Austin and Vadiveloo (2023) that researchers' "intersecting identities and positionalities offer a crucial, reflexive engagement with how we interpret new knowledge, how we listen to understand, and the way in which we might respond and question" (p. 51), I will share some information on my own positionality.

I am an American, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-aged, middle-class woman of mixed-European descent. Both of my parents have college degrees. I am married and have children. I am a tenure-track professor serving mostly people who currently or plan to work as librarians. I worked in public and school libraries before becoming an academic. I perform as a storyteller outside of this research on reality storytelling, offer workshops, and produce a house concert series.

In the larger project, I am learning about the information practices of the American reality storytelling movement. For this paper's purpose, I am focusing on the question: How do reality storytelling shows establish and hold a brave space for sharing true, personal stories? Whether these shows are explicit about being a brave space or not, that does seem to be what most of them are going for. They wish to encourage all kinds of authentic and vulnerable personal stories, many of which are not shared in other spaces. It is difficult for these communities to have a conversation and agree on ground rules together as part of any given show, due to the limitations of time and the performance ritual. Therefore, we can ask how these shows attempt to set up a brave space without that dialogue, and how they hold a brave space, enforcing community norms. What we learn from these brave performance spaces may help inform how we create and hold brave spaces in other settings, such as schools and libraries.

Data Collection

I took field notes while attending shows. I conducted in-person interviews while in town visiting whenever possible and conducted interviews by video conference when that was a better alternative. Madison (2012) says that the interview "is a window to individual subjectivity and collective belonging: *I am because we are, and we are because I am*" (p. 28). I gave participants the option of using a pseudonym, but everyone preferred to use their real name. I audio-recorded interviews and transcribed them using Otter.ai (a web-based artificial intelligence-driven transcription software), with my human corrections to AI errors.

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I collected print or digital writing related to the shows I observed, such as programs or social media posts, when these items were available and provided insight into the community. Garcia et al. (2009) state:

> Our review of existing research into the Internet and CMC [Computer Mediated Communication] suggests that 'virtually all' ethnographies of contemporary society should include technologically mediated communication, behavior, or artifacts (e.g., Web sites) in their definition of the field or setting for the research. (p. 57)

Most shows have a website or Facebook page where they at least share information on future themes.

I conducted qualitative grounded-theory-style analysis, coding field notes, documents, and transcripts to "group together themes and categories" (Madison, 2012, p. 43). Following the advice of Charmaz (2014), I began my initial coding by focusing on actions rather than people. For example, creating codes such as *signing up* or *breaking the rules*. As described in Charmaz (2014) and Madison (2012), I could form codes into clusters as I saw relationships between them. I used the tool Dedoose (a qualitative mixed methods data analysis software) to help with coding. I uploaded documents to Dedoose to highlight sections of text and assign codes. I could create new codes or change the names of codes in Dedoose at any time. I also nested codes as categories came together.

Charmaz (2014) calls memo writing "the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers" (p. 162). Through memos, I stopped to analyze "ideas about the codes in any - and every - way that occur[ed] to [me] at the moment" (p. 162). I also posted these memos on a public blog where study participants or any member of the public could read them and respond. Michels (2012) found that blogging "research experiences has allowed me to think about and articulate my involvement in a context that invites feedback" (p. 19). I received occasional responses to blogged memos during my previous study with Carapace (Nelson, 2019) but have not received any feedback from participants of the current study.

For this study, I attended thirteen events (Table 1). All locations are based in the United States.

Table 1. Storytelling events attended

Event	Location	Month
Ex Fabula	Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Virtual in 2020)	April, May, September 2020; December 2023; April 2024
National Storytelling Network Slam	Virtual	June 2020
Story Collider	Virtual	June 2021
Story Slam Workshop	Janesville, Wisconsin	November 2021
National Storytelling Festival Slam	Jonesborough, Tennessee	October 2022

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Six Feet Apart	Virtual	November 2022
Mad City Story Slam	Madison, Wisconsin	February 2024
OUTSpoken	Chicago, Illinois	February 2024
Odyssey Storytelling	Tucson, Arizona	March 2024
The Moth	Milwaukee, Wisconsin	April 2024
Poetry on the Patio	Duncanville, Texas	April 2024
Writing Workshop	Forest Hill, Texas	April 2024
Meatman Chronicles	Green Bay, Wisconsin	May 2024

Findings

Establishing a Brave Space

Most of the shows I have studied so far do not explicitly use the term *brave space*, except the Milwaukee-based (Wisconsin) arts organization, Ex Fabula. The host of Ex Fabula reads the brave space poem from the introduction of this article at each show and asks the audience to clap if they agree. This is the extent of the conversation around brave space and participant buy-in. The host of Ex Fabula also explicitly states that they “do not condone racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, xenophobia, or other hate speech,” and they invite anyone who is confused to “see an Ex Fabula Staff Member” (Fieldnotes, May 22, 2020). There is also signage around the venue with this information. Some other show hosts share similar, although less thorough, guidelines verbally. For example, at Mad City Story Slam (Madison, Wisconsin), the host instructed the audience, “don’t be a bigot” and included some examples such as “don’t be racist, don’t be homophobic, don’t be transphobic, don’t try to argue that being transphobic is actually feminist” (Fieldnotes, Feb. 20, 2024). Notably, the Mad City host typically ends this speech with, “You don’t have to be at the mic to break the rule,” making it clear that this is not just a rule for storytellers.

Internationally renowned Spoken Word artist, Mike Guinn, hosts numerous poetry slams and spoken word events in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas area. I attended Poetry on the Patio and a writing workshop at a library when I visited. Guinn instructed speakers to “consider the audience.” At Poetry on the Patio, he noted that no children or clergy attended, but speakers might not want to use too much profanity “for the ladies” (Fieldnotes, April 26, 2024). Meanwhile, other reality storytelling shows tend to have few guidelines for speakers other than “no hate speech.” Guinn asks them to limit their free speech further for the audience's comfort. I’ll note that the participants at Guinn’s shows are primarily BIPOC attendees, and the other shows I’ve attended have been made up of mainly white attendees. I cannot say there is a correlation between the demographics of the audience and the comfort of speech, such as profanity, but I find this co-occurrence interesting.

I noted that during Guinn’s opening remarks at the writing workshop the next day, he reminded everyone to be a “captive audience,” which I understood to mean “captivated” and attentive

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(Fieldnotes, April 27, 2024). Similarly, the host of Carapace tells the audience that there is no heckling. If they don't like someone's story, "It's only five minutes. You can last five minutes" (Nelson, 2019, p. 88). Along with the comment from the Mad City host that audience members can also break the "don't be a bigot" rule, we see that shows may include speech guidelines for audience members as well as storytellers.

Some shows go more into safe space territory by highlighting the stories of a specific group. OUTSpoken in Chicago, Illinois, features LGBTQ+ stories. The storytellers are planned ahead of time and are all part of the LGBTQ+ community. The show is also held in Sidetrack, a gay club in the Northalsted (also called Boystown) area of Chicago. The location and guidelines around who can perform make this a safer space for sharing LGBTQ+ stories, however there are no restrictions on who can attend as an audience member. And acknowledging that Sidetrack and Boystown exist in a larger geographic and cultural context that is not always friendly, and sometimes openly hostile to the LGBTQ+ community, bravery is still required to be part of this show.

The night I attended, the OUTSpoken host did not open with guidelines for storytellers or audience members but did have a disclaimer. Speakers were expressing their own views, not those of Sidetrack or OUTSpoken (Fieldnotes, February 6, 2024). I observed that a disclaimer sometimes stood in for guidelines, especially in shows that claimed not to censor storytellers at all. The program for the Odyssey Storytelling show (Tucson, Arizona) that I attended, with the theme *Legacy*, included a statement:

> *Storytelling is a way to make connections with diverse and different people that you may not meet in your everyday life. Because people are telling stories from their lives, they may be amazing, messy, enlightening, disturbing, profound, and entertaining. Our storytellers have guidelines but they are uncensored.* (Odyssey Storytelling, 2024)

Odyssey chooses its featured storytellers before the show and may feel that there is less risk of them doing something truly objectionable, like using hate speech. As for anything else they might say that could offend audience members, the audience has been warned. In my interview with the founder of Odyssey Storytelling, Penelope Starr, I learned that they did have a bad experience with a 'three-minute' storyteller. As part of the normal program of the evening, they draw a name from a hat right after intermission and invite the random volunteer on stage to tell a three-minute story. Starr said that one time a three-minute storyteller told a racist story. As the host that night, Starr got on stage afterward and said that "obviously, this person's story does not reflect the values" of Odyssey Storytelling and that "that kind of speech isn't acceptable and won't be tolerated" (Starr, April 10, 2024). This was a combination of a disclaimer and statement about allowable speech but after the fact rather than issued as a ground rule.

Even when a version of the *no hate speech* rule is not explicitly stated, participants at reality storytelling events seem to understand this as a community norm. Odyssey storytelling having only one racist storyteller take the stage in ten years is one example. Marty Sosnowski, who runs The Meatman Chronicles in Green Bay, Wisconsin, told me that his show has no rules at all. He conceded that "if somebody got into some kind of racial rant or even politics or something like that it's gonna become a problem" and he would stop them; Sosnowski remembered that he "almost had to stop a guy one time" (Sosnowski, May 18, 2024). Again, having only one incident suggests that an overwhelming majority of attendees know this rule (in a show with "no rules") exists without being told.

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Returning to the idea of safe spaces filled with people who are similar or like-minded in some way, it is entirely possible and maybe even likely that reality storytelling shows attract people with particular views or values that make them more willing to exist in this space together. It is my observation that the vast majority of participants in reality storytelling have more liberal or progressive leanings. I have tried to press on this issue in interviews, which I am continuing to investigate. Most show producers tell me that their show is for everyone. Starr told me that Odyssey Storytelling has had Republicans tell stories and people who are anti-abortion: “not a diatribe about being anti-abortion, but in the course of the story, it comes up that that’s part of who they are” (Starr, personal communication, April 10, 2024). I asked her about my observation that these events tend to skew liberal, and she continued, “I mean, if you’re gonna open it up and have queer people tell stories, have Black people tell stories, you’re gonna offend somebody who’s ultra-conservative. They’re not going to show up” (Starr, April 10, 2024). It isn't easy to know why the people who aren’t there aren’t there, but I tend to agree with Starr’s suggestion that these shows allow and encourage stories on topics that may not appeal to a conservative audience. Certainly, stories told by minority and marginalized people will not appeal to individuals who are inclined to use hate speech against those same people. The make-up of the community, then, may contribute to any agreed-upon but unspoken rules.

Holding a Brave Space

Whether a reality storytelling show explicitly names itself as a brave space or if this is more implicitly understood, there are times when people transgress, and hosts and producers must decide how to respond. Starr responded to a racist story by reminding the audience that the story did not reflect the show's views. Sosnowski expressed a willingness to end a problematic story, and the Mad City host tells attendees in his opening remarks that he will ask them to leave if they do not follow the one rule (don’t be a bigot). Similarly, at the Story Collider show I attended online, the host said that it was a safe/brave space and people could be removed if they were not “safe” (Fieldnotes, June 18, 2021). As noted earlier, removing attendees from a virtual space is much easier.

I have been to Moth shows in a few different cities and witnessed someone tell a long, offensive, ableist joke instead of a personal story at the Atlanta, Georgia Moth. The teller “was not removed from the stage by the host or producer” but got very low scores from all three judging teams (Nelson, 2019, p. 100). Additionally, I noted that “[o]ne team gave Matan a 4 out of 10. I had heard the producer giving the teams a crash course in judging at the start of the night, and she had told them tellers should get a 5 just for getting on stage” (p. 100). The Moth allowed the ritual of the show to deliver natural consequences to a storyteller who broke the rules.

At an Ex Fabula show, the Executive Director, Megan McGee, stepped in to respond to a storyteller's unintentional use of ableist language. During his story, a regular attendee said it was ‘lame’ to listen to some of the records at his father’s record store, but others were pretty cool. McGee got on stage after he stepped down. She was not the host of the show that night; an Ex Fabula volunteer was. Nevertheless, McGee had her phone out and said this was a new thing they were trying. She wanted to let everyone know that ‘lame’ was ableist language and shared alternative words that could be used instead. Some synonyms she had pulled up on her phone were ‘pitiful,’ ‘pathetic,’ etc. She said this was ‘no shade’ to the storyteller. She wanted to help make this a place for everyone to learn together. After the show, I overheard McGee talking with the storyteller. She said that she hoped what she did was okay. He said it was uncomfortable and

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could have been done privately instead. McGee countered that it was important for the whole community to learn together (Fieldnotes, December 19, 2023).

In many ways, McGee's reaction upheld the brave space by disallowing ableist language while simultaneously gently correcting someone who had made an honest mistake. She was correct that this was an opportunity for everyone to learn together. Speaking to the storyteller privately would only have alerted him that "lame" was ableist, whereas addressing the entire group allowed others to reconsider this word in their own vocabularies. Not saying something publicly may also have given the impression that Ex Fabula tacitly approved of this language, which could have felt unsafe, especially to attendees with disabilities. Recall that Pawlowski's (2019) students report that silence in response to such a comment is more damaging "than to hear the comment in the first place" (p. 67). The storyteller seemed somewhat unprepared to be brave in this moment of being called in and perhaps did not know this was what he was signing up for when he clapped for the poem at the beginning of the show.

As a final example of holding a brave space through a challenging moment, I will share my experiences during a slam storytelling workshop I held at a public library. I did not start the workshop with any deliberate discussion or ground rules but admittedly believed that I was implicitly offering a brave space. My experiences with people who tell personal stories have influenced me to believe that storytellers can collectively cultivate a brave space. Later in the workshop, I would encourage vulnerability in individual stories, and again, I thought I was offering a space where participants might feel safe enough to risk being vulnerable.

As a warm-up activity, I asked participants to tell a story about their name. I had used this exercise as an icebreaker in classes and workshops before. I like the name activity because it helps us all learn each other's names, and most people can come up with something to say about their names. When introducing this activity, I referred to it as "low stakes," meaning there are no high expectations, and we will not judge each other. This is just an introduction, not a polished story.

I told my name story first, because being first can be challenging. As we went around the circle, most people had something to share, and I had one person opt out, which was fine. Another participant confronted me for claiming names are "low stakes." They talked about the difficulty they had getting family members to call them by their chosen name and how they would not share their dead name with us. They were happy to share their chosen name with us and thanked me for the opportunity to do so.

This exchange clearly revealed some discomfort, not just on my part, but from other participants: we all wondered how this challenging moment would pass. I needed to lead humbly and vulnerably for everyone in the workshop. I thanked the participant who had called me in for sharing their experiences with all of us and helping me understand that names are not low stakes for everyone. The tension broke. Everyone in the room understood we could learn from this experience together and move forward bravely. In response to this feedback, I have changed how I frame the name story introduction. I now acknowledge that names can be fraught and emphasize that participants should talk about a name they want to share with the rest of the group, whether that is a first, last, given, chosen, or nickname.

In this situation, someone belonging to a marginalized group acted the most bravely in speaking up, even though they surely realized it would be an uncomfortable moment for everyone, and

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we had not explicitly established that challenges would be welcome in this space. I am glad that as the facilitator, I was the other most uncomfortable person in the interaction. I had not offered brave space ground rules, but I could model what acting bravely, as someone who unintentionally caused harm, looked like.

I have never witnessed a storyteller being removed from a reality storytelling show for using hate speech. Most reality storytelling show hosts assert openly or privately that they *would* remove someone from the stage or venue for this offense. Perhaps I have not observed it because hate speech at reality storytelling shows happens infrequently. Ex Fabula has demonstrated that they are willing to call in those who unintentionally cause harm with their speech. I have personally experienced being called in by a participant while facilitating a slam storytelling workshop. In both cases, it seems promising that these conversations are taking place, but more up-front management of expectations may have made the conversations easier when they came up.

Discussion

Creating and Holding a Brave Space

Many reality storytelling shows are similar to Ali's (2017) type of brave space offering some ground rules, but no discussion or ability for participants to help create the rules. Given the performance format, this makes sense. Some reality storytelling shows give no explicit ground rules and may even claim they do not censor storytellers or have any rules. However, even the producers of these shows will say they will step in in the case of hate speech.

These show producers do not view an intolerance of hate speech to be at odds with free speech. They want storytellers to have the freedom to use profanity and discuss adult topics but assume that everyone knows hate speech has no place at these events. This makes sense in connection with Brison's (2021) observation that hate speech can make minority members "less, rather than more, likely to express their ideas" (p. 112). Minorities are welcome at reality storytelling events. The producers, especially those with no censorship and no rules, really do intend to allow as much speech as possible and exclude only speech that would inhibit other speech.

Without stated ground rules, reality storytelling shows may appear to be the types of brave spaces Palfrey (2017) describes: environments that "approximate the world outside" (p. 21). However, these shows may not comprise the same diversity of people that participants would encounter at their local park, grocery store, school, or library. Reality storytelling shows tend to skew liberal, which could form a safer space in which attendees feel secure that at least some of their views will not be challenged because other attendees share similar views. Like the enthusiast car restorers (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017; Lloyd & Olsson, 2019) and Shakespearean theater professionals (Olsson, 2010), a common activity brings reality storytelling participants together. The shared interest in telling and hearing true, personal stories provides a level of comfort.

This research shows that reality storytelling is already making its way into public libraries, certainly in the form of storytelling workshops for all ages. Beyond this study, I have attended some open mic events at libraries with a reality storytelling feel aimed at teens and adults. Libraries can, then, take note of these lessons when planning storytelling programs and perhaps when planning other programs that encourage participants to talk with one another.

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Potentially brave spaces such as library programs and K-12 or higher education classes will typically have more ability to create and agree upon ground rules. Relying on the relative safety of the people who happened to come together in a particular space is probably not a good idea. Still, it could be worth discussing what views and attitudes various groups may have in common—just as not all differences are visible, neither are all similarities.

Spoken or unspoken rules mean nothing if they are not enforced. When Masunga et al. (2013) updated their code of conduct for the second POC in LIS Summit they included "the consequences for those who engage in harassing or discriminatory behavior as well as a mechanism for grievance reporting" (Masunga et al., 2023, p. 24). Although the need for enforcement at reality storytelling events appears to be rare, we have much to learn from the times when it does and does not happen. Maintaining a brave space during a breach of norms usually does, and probably should, fall to a leader figure and is likely easier when participants understand the nature of the brave space. If libraries adopt norms to promote a brave space, they will need to consider how they address violations of these norms.

In the example from Moth Atlanta, those perceived as leader figures did not intervene in the storyteller's offensive story. The host appears to be a figurehead for the show and typically manages the energy of the room between stories. This is the person that attendees might expect to step in. However, the producer, who usually sits on stage but does not talk during the Moth show, holds more power and arguably greater responsibility for what happens during the show. Understandably, a host might hesitate to act in an especially difficult moment and wonder whether this is someone else's job.

This is why it is notable that McGee, and not the host of Ex Fabula, took on the responsibility of calling in the storyteller who had used ableist language. The host is another volunteer who makes the show possible, probably not someone who signed up to lead a challenging conversation. As Executive Director, McGee has a greater responsibility for upholding Ex Fabula's values and taking on the uncomfortable moments that hold Ex Fabula as a brave space. Similarly, in a library setting, a staff member, volunteer, or hired performer, may not be the best person to respond to a breach of norms. It could be reasonable to have a librarian in a managerial role on hand to step in as needed.

In my example from the slam storytelling workshop, I was responsible for responding because a participant confronted me. I was glad, though, that as the facilitator, I was the one who was challenged rather than another participant. My neglect of explicitly establishing a brave space already led to one participant having to act bravely without knowing whether their contribution was welcome. As a facilitator, I had the power and responsibility to transform this into a learning moment and model a brave response. This was easier than if I had had to moderate a challenging conversation between two participants. Contrasting with my recommendations in the previous paragraph, I felt okay about responding myself and had no expectation that a librarian would step in. This was partly because I had encouraged participants to be more open, vulnerable, and brave due to the nature of the workshop and mainly because I was the person who had transgressed and wanted a chance to respond. I recommend to others and my future self that librarians talk with presenters and performers before a program occurs to discuss how they might work together to uphold a brave space.

The leader's responsibility is to facilitate a conversation between participants when harm occurs. Palfrey and Minow (2019) give the example of responding to microaggressions as a school

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administrator, mediating between one person who has been made to "feel like they are racist" and another person for whom "the impact is very real" and exhausting (p. 30). It may be clear that an administrator, teacher, or workshop facilitator is an authority figure responsible for responding to conflict. However, we see from the reality storytelling examples that responsibility can sometimes be unclear. If there are multiple people involved in the production of an event, they may not agree about who should respond, especially if a situation comes up that they had not planned for. It may also be tempting for leaders to allow other participants to respond to harmful speech, like the Moth storyteller getting feedback in the form of low scores from the judges. This could be seen as a natural consequence or part of the learning experience. Silence from leadership, though, gives the impression that the event or institution approves of, or at least will not speak out against, this type of behavior.

Even in the relatively positive examples of holding brave spaces from this reality storytelling research, we see that more could be done to set participant expectations. In the workshop setting, I could have led a short conversation on brave spaces and asked the group to help create ground rules at the beginning. At Ex Fabula story slams, hosts could say a little more about the consequences of intentionally or unintentionally violating the rules. They could inform attendees that your views may be challenged, not only by hearing stories told by people different from you but by a direct response to something you said during your story. The brave space literature can continue to grow with more discussion around sharing consequences and setting participant expectations. In addition to co-creating rules of engagement, I suggest that a group include plans for how they will respond to breaches of the rules and who holds the responsibility for responding. I also suggest that facilitators explicitly explain why different people might feel uncomfortable. For example, Pawloski (2019) says that "white students" are afraid to say the wrong thing and "walk on eggshells" (p. 69). Pawloski actually wants the white students to speak their truths so that those views can be confronted, which is also likely to be uncomfortable. Pawloski reminds us, though, that "[f]or … students of color, there is no such thing as a safe space to begin with when they are in mixed company" (2019, p. 69). It should be clear that everyone in the space may need to be brave.

Doing Something to Each Other

Writing about oral communication, Ong (2008) says that "chirographic cultures regard speech as more specifically informational than do oral cultures, where speech is more performance-oriented, more a way of doing something to someone" (pp. 173-174). In our text-heavy digital culture, especially interacting with information objects that are separate from people, such as books or YouTube videos, it is easy to view communication as simply sharing information. I attended oral storytelling events in this study, and much of the literature on brave spaces refers to face-to-face oral interactions such as classroom discussions or conferences. With this orality, we return to the truth that when we communicate with another person, we *do something* to them. Ong describes orality as "agonistic" and situating "knowledge within a context of struggle" (p. 44). Being uncomfortable together in a brave space and challenging one another's ideas are struggles. Oral conversations are especially well-suited to playing these struggles out.

Ong (2008) posits that some examples of oral combat include riddles, bragging, insult competitions, and portrayals of physical violence in oral stories. I would add jokes to this evidence: jokes are a highly oral art form that often hinges on an insult or makes the listener groan. We know that words, including insults and jokes, can cause harm, but we should not swing completely to the other extreme and ask that words have no impact or only impart good feelings.

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Could we embrace the agonistic nature of oral communication and enjoy a brave verbal challenge as much as a riddle?

I will admit that for myself, the knowledge that my simple words can have any impact on another person sometimes feels completely overwhelming and like too much responsibility for a mere mortal. And yet, accepting this responsibility is a key element of participating in a brave space. Arao and Clemens (2013) urge us to own our intentions and impacts. "This language acknowledges that intention and impact matter. It also makes clear that the impact of our actions is not always congruent with our intentions" (pp. 145-146).

Based on my reality storytelling research, although agonistic, the impact of our words does not have to be agony. Stories can be heartwarming, funny, poignant, or just entertaining. True, personal stories often make listeners feel less alone in their life struggles (Nelson, 2019). Let us own our positive and negative impacts and acknowledge that even when challenging conversations feel bad, they can ultimately do good. It is not all about being uncomfortable! Attendees come to reality storytelling shows because they want to. Many pay money to be there. Brazill's (2020) education students want to "create Brave Spaces in their own classrooms" (p. 64). Overall, the ways in which we exchange knowledge and vulnerability with one another in brave spaces are worth doing.

Although *doing something* to another person by talking with them is very much in line with the nature of orality and orally situated brave spaces, it is reasonable to believe that we also impact others with our words when we are not speaking face-to-face. Furthermore, brave spaces can exist when community members are not collocated or participating synchronously. Future research could dig deeper into the creation of brave space in online classes and online communities. This kind of research may also inform our understanding of how the impact of our words on one another is changed or not, beyond the oral medium.

Limitations

The American reality storytelling movement consists of numerous shows, including national shows like The Moth, and small local shows in only one location. Although I have attended multiple shows in different cities and have traveled to various regions of the United States, I could always learn more by visiting another show in another town. Finding shows to visit has been challenging as there is no guide to American reality storytelling shows. Local shows usually only draw locals and have no reason to advertise to a national audience. I have either heard of a show due to my storytelling connections or searched online to learn whether any shows are in or near a particular city.

As I mentioned earlier, it can be challenging to ascertain who is *not* at an event. It is even more difficult to ask someone who is not there why they are not there. Although I can start formulating ideas about who comes to reality storytelling shows and why, I am still determining why others may feel uninterested or unwelcome.

Reality storytelling shows may share a similar interest in offering a brave space with other types of human gatherings, such as classes or library programs, but also have differences. The lessons learned from reality storytelling could be more extensive in their generalizability to other areas.

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Conclusion

Reality storytelling shows demonstrate some practices around creating and holding a brave space that may translate to other brave environments. Using these shows as an example, we can see the importance of leadership accepting the responsibility of holding the space, being explicit about consequences for transgressing community norms, and managing participant expectations. When we communicate, we do something to one another and can own those impacts.

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