

# VIDEO SHARING AS A TOOL FOR POST-CONFLICT RECONCILIATION IN LIBERIA

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**Abstract.** For the past couple of decades, the African continent has seen the horrors of civil conflict haunt the doorsteps of many of its citizens. Worldwide efforts are underway to aid these nations in their transition to peace in all of the aspects such a feat requires. This paper summarizes our ongoing work about the role of multimedia in peace and reconciliation efforts through the design and implementation of kiosks for video sharing throughout the West African country of Liberia. The ultimate goal of the project is to support information dissemination between the people of Liberia and with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia. For this purpose, we present a brief introduction to Liberia and its recent historical background, the project's detailed objectives and challenges, our approach for its implementation and its current status.

## INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Liberia, located on the West coast of Africa, has a population of approximately 3.2 million and was established as a nation in 1847 by freed African slaves from the USA. The country is recovering from a civil war which spanned from 1989 to 2003, decimating its infrastructure and economy and displacing a large proportion of its population.

In an effort to bring Liberians together to reconcile and heal and bolster the formation of a post-conflict identity the Liberian Parliament created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in June of 2006. The commission is comprised of nine members that represent all the major communities of Liberia. Worldwide, TRCs have become essential elements in the healing of societies after periods of civil war and violence. This approach, initiated in South Africa with a TRC focused on post-Apartheid healing, is now considered a standard part of civil conflict resolution with examples occurring across the globe [1]. With a focus on "restorative justice", as compared to "retributive justice", a truth and reconciliation commission puts its energy "into the future, not into what is past. It focuses on what needs to be healed, repaid, and what needs to be learned in the wake of crime. It looks at what needs to be strengthened if such things are not to happen again," [2].

Since its inception, the Liberian TRC has been investigating the root causes of the armed conflict in an attempt to demystify some of the historical falsehoods that have been accepted as truths.

## PROJECT OBJECTIVES

In this context, our research group has set off to study how interactive multimedia technologies can help extend the reach of the TRC to encourage the spontaneous authoring and sharing of experiences through video-sharing kiosks installed, ultimately, in each of the 15 counties of Liberia. We seek to evaluate how such a project can initiate a series of public dialogs between participants in many points of the country, and how social transformations and new avenues for creation and expression inherent to online communities and multimedia could assist national reconciliation and identity in Liberia, and nations in similar situations.

From a research perspective, we are interested in studying the receptiveness and uses that Liberians give to such multimedia applications. Topics of these video testimonies can vary greatly from political to entertainment and artistic, from religious to sporting and variety, and beyond. It is our goal to support the cataloging of the video content and to develop an organized scheme for others to gain access to it.

Given the potentially harsh climate in Liberia, one overarching requirement is that the system will perform reliably and sustainability in the field. This goal is factored into all of our design decisions. Our system design must be able to withstand a harsh outdoor environment in a hot and humid climate, and include physical safeguards from potential theft or harm. In addition, we are keenly aware of the non-reliable electrical infrastructure and the associated implications on our design. Lastly, we know our system may experience long gaps between maintenance and have taken that into consideration when selecting input devices.

## **IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS**

Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach [6], our group scoped and designed the system in collaboration with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia as well as with Liberians in-country and in the diaspora. We have conducted a series of focus groups, cognitive walkthroughs, and collaborative design exercises with Liberians currently living in the Atlanta area.

A recent development of the PAR approach, Participatory Video was looked into for reference. This is a set of techniques to train members of a community in creating their own audiovisual content for gathering testimonies. Participatory Video is “a tool for positive social change, it is a means of empowerment for the marginalized and it is a process that encourages individuals and communities to take control of their destinies” [3]. The literature shows that Participatory Video has been implemented in other initiatives with very good results [4].

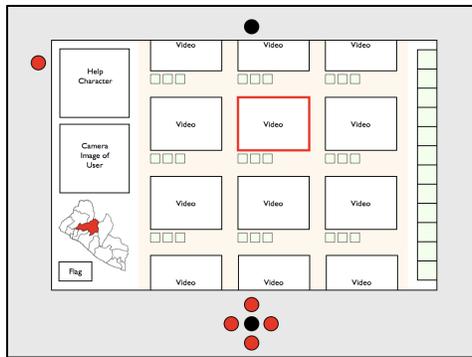
As part of this process we performed an extensive review on Liberia and all the relevant aspects that would pose requirements on our application, and built a profile on the demographics of its population, literacy, urban and rural distribution, electric and communications infrastructure, the TRC and the historic events that gave shape to the modern Liberia from its creation to the recent civil conflicts.

To identify the specific needs that our system would address, we looked into the commitment the TRC has in its mandate with gathering information and promoting reconciliation. We also designed our application as a platform for informal, spontaneous dialog as the TRC is most suited for taking formal public and confidential statements and naturalness is encouraged by not involving the user with his/her video’s categorization.

Users will be put in context about the public nature of their testimonies and the topics they can cover, by initially seeding the system with videos from a variety of sources. Audio visual cues explain how a recorded video, if approved by the user gets distributed to kiosks all over the nation. To facilitate its adoption among Liberians, we decided upon a limited feature set that included browsing through existing video content, recording a new video and playing back an existing one.

With the purpose of reaching a vast majority of Liberians and empowering them to easily create and disseminate videos, we identified several challenges in designing the physical components of the system as well as the software interface for recording, browsing, or playing videos.

Given Liberia’s low level of print literacy we have not made use of any form of written text in the interface and have relied on audiovisual cues instead. These cues are used to guide users through the content. The interface simultaneously exposes a browsing panel that contains thumbnails designed to communicate the availability of video resources to view, a panel of icons corresponding to available criteria with which videos can be searched, a live webcam image of the user (to expose the system’s video recording capabilities), a navigational map of Liberia, and an expert avatar available to provide assistance and guidance throughout the interaction.



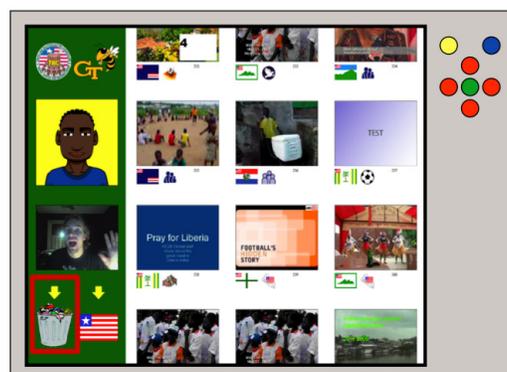
**Figure 1. Wire-frame prototype of an initial design.**

The designed system provides only a button-control system for moving the cursor, making a selection and requesting help from the avatar. These buttons are rugged and durable which also responds to some of the demanding physical requirements. We designed this simplified interface with the purpose of helping lower the initial barrier that traditional computer interfaces present for first-time users. This is relevant due to the low levels of computer literacy among rural Liberians. Additionally, we believe these characteristics will facilitate easy video recording and content browsing.

Getting past the initial hurdles to use, including lack of familiarity with the system, has raised particular design concerns. We are experimenting with “full-context video” techniques developed at Microsoft Research. In this approach we are scripting a short drama that will demonstrate the systems purpose, its use over time, as well as the particular interface components.

The software interface has undergone two design iterations based, in part, on preliminary user interviews performed with five Liberian-Americans that reside in Atlanta, GA. We were aware that life in the US changes people’s perception of computers and thus sought participants that had arrived in the States very recently. In this activity we solicited suggestions about potential modifications to the graphical cues and the interaction scheme. Additionally, we discussed potential uses that Liberians might give to our system. In the second design iteration, we performed additional evaluations with members of the same community testing a functional prototype. In this exercise, we examined further ways to explain the system to users and explored graphical cues needed for the navigational elements.

In the second design iteration, we performed additional evaluations with members of the same community that tested our first functional prototype. In this exercise, we learned about the need to reinforce the explanation of the mechanics of video recording using the audiovisual assistant. Additionally, we found that the graphical cues for the navigational elements needed to be made more explicit to the user.



**Figure 2. Second design iteration, working prototype.**

We continue our collaborative design exercise as we refine the system interfaces. Furthermore, a team of architects based at the firm BüroNY are developing designs for the physical environment in which the kiosk will be housed and protected. We anticipate deploying kiosks to Liberia in Spring 2008.

In order to observe the receptivity of the Liberian community to the kiosk system, we will be working with the TRC to pilot and study the system in-country.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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