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Reflecting on our experiences with preparing visual storylines for practice

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Abstract: Visual storytelling is regarded as a powerful method to communicate with multiple audiences. As part of the RiverCare communication project, we explored the perceived usefulness of – and engagement with - storylines on river research for water professionals. To ease understanding, attract and trigger online interaction we prepared these storylines mostly using the ESRI StoryMaps, but also with open source tools. We started from the results of usability research with 44 focus group participants from research and practice, about the content and design of these storylines. Here, we reflect on our experiences as members of the editorial team and draw five conclusions, also useful for similar communication efforts. First, the focus on a project manager audience requires giving concrete examples of the management application. This is better done by preparing the content both with the researchers, whose results are communicated, as well as a project manager representative. Second, the storyline parts should combine an engaging sequence that highlights the research benefits and the remaining challenges with typical story elements such as a protagonist, a problem statement and a take-home message. To this end, including personal elements/experiences behind the research in the form of a picture, video or characters was useful. Third, drafting the text and visuals is often a challenging task for researchers when defining what to include or not. Inspirational examples with do's and don'ts can be useful for reviewing and iterating the content. Fourth, the latter is the most time-consuming step. Therefore, a multi-disciplinary team was valuable to the design process so that the content is easier to follow for professionals that are not familiar with the specific details. Evaluating and sharing is often a forgotten but necessary step that can be done by for example using the storylines before a meeting to discuss the research application

Keywords: narrative visualization; usability evaluation; environmental management; science communication