

## Safe for Whom?: Censorship and Safety on the Reality Storytelling Stage

Sarah Beth Nelson

In my dissertation research I am investigating how community forms around Atlanta's reality storytelling event Carapace as well as the information practices of this community. In this poster I present how Carapace balances the concept of "safe space" with the raw, uncensored, and sometimes challenging content of the personal stories told there.

I am learning about this community through ethnographic observations (attending the monthly Carapace shows) and interviews. So far I have completed 6 of an anticipated 15-20 interviews. Recent research in the fields of communications and library and information science has described "safe spaces" as places where people are physically safe (Chancellor, 2017; Wexelbaum, 2016), and places (real or virtual) where individuals are safe to share their views with like-minded others (Bond, 2007; Keenan & Darms, 2013; Workman & Coleman, 2014). Questions remain around balancing safety and free speech. Carapace is meant to feel physically safe to both storytellers and audience members. It is also a safe space for the storytellers to say whatever they need to say, allowing them to tell very personal stories on difficult topics. However, this license given to storytellers means that audience members sometimes find themselves feeling uncomfortable. Moments of discomfort may arise for the audience while listening to stories of physical and sexual abuse, drug addiction, discrimination; or stories they just don't like. It goes strongly against the norms of this community for the audience to give unsupportive feedback (e.g. heckling). Carapace mitigates the relative lack of safety of the audience in a couple of ways. The event takes place in a bar, a public place where audience members can come and go with little disruption to the event. Furthermore, as Carapace is an open mic event, audience members have the opportunity to become storytellers. This research is important to the national storytelling community, which has been driven largely by storytelling festivals since the 1970s. These festivals prioritize audience comfort over freedom of expression, placing the burden on the storyteller to keep the audience safe (Harvey, 2008). Schools, libraries, and other places where public speaking and discussions occur will also benefit from these findings by evaluating the relevance of these practices in their own settings. It is impossible to guarantee the complete safety of both speaker and listener. Making the listeners safe silences some stories that need to be told; and prioritizing the speakers' safety runs the risk of making listeners uncomfortable. However, the example of Carapace shows that audience discomfort can be minimized without censoring the speaker.

### References

- Bond, B. J. (2007). Out online: The content and context of gay teen chat rooms. Presented at the NCA 93rd Annual Convention, Chicago, IL.
- Chancellor, R. L. (2017). Libraries as pivotal community spaces in times of crisis. *Urban Library Journal*, 23(1), 1–15.

Harvey, H. B. (2008). On the edge of the storytelling world: The festival circuit and the fringe.

*Storytelling, Self, Society*, 4(2), 134-151. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41949007>

Keenan, E. K., & Darms, L. (2013). Safe space: The Riot Grrrl collection. *Archivaria*, 76, 55–74.

Wexelbaum, R. (2016). Assessing safe spaces for digital scholarship in the library. *LIBRES: Library and Information Science Research Electronic Journal*, 26(1), 14–30.

Workman, H., & Coleman, C. (2014). “The front page of the Internet”: Safe spaces and hyperpersonal communication among females in an online community. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 29(2), 1–21.