

# *Authenticity, trustworthiness, and longevity: Centering research participants' voices in MI Diaries\**

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Michigan Diaries (MI Diaries) is a longitudinal sociolinguistic project that collects self-recordings from participants all over the state of Michigan in order to track changes in their lives and language. In order to better recruit and retain participants, “stories” – short excerpts of spontaneous speech – are selected weekly from participants' longer audio diary entries and are prominently featured on the project's website, as well as in regular emails sent by the research team to participants. This paper details the process of story selection, the types of featured stories, and the value that such work brings to community building and engagement. It demonstrates how the adherence to the project's values of *authenticity*, *trustworthiness*, and *research longevity* guides the work of honoring participants' voices, allows for meaningful interactions with the research community at large and with our participants, and ensures the continuity of the research project.

## **1. Introduction**

The Michigan Diaries (MI Diaries) project, launched shortly after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), is a longitudinal study regularly collecting self-recorded audio diaries from Michigan residents (age 3+), with plans to continue this work after the end of the pandemic. The goal of the project is to document real-time changes in both the language and social life of speakers in a broad speech community (the state of Michigan). To date, we have had over 900 sign-ups and 370+ participants who have submitted diary entries, adding up to over 3000 total diary entries and 300 hours of audio recordings. This paper highlights two aspects of the methodologies we have adopted and integrated into our

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research paradigm: (1) the continuous centering of participants' voices on the public-facing project website and (2) maintaining and promoting an online public archive to provide a curated social history of Michigan residents' lives during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Both of these are achieved by work done by the project's story team, which is the primary focus of the current paper. In what follows, we argue that the simultaneous application of these methodologies can provide the field of sociolinguistics with an effective way to engage in community building and engagement.

The MI Diaries project has developed tools that allow remote data collection from participants located all around the state of Michigan. Participants sign up to receive our weekly emails, which include updates from the project team (for example, letting participants know that we had an exhibition at a science festival), featured stories from the past week, and new prompts to help participants get started with their diaries in the current week (examples include: "When was the last time you got lost? How do you find your way?" and "What's the best thing you've ever made in the microwave? Have you ever had a disastrous microwave experience?"). Participants then self-record themselves through the MI Diaries mobile app, which is available in Apple's and Google's app stores and allows diarists to remotely record and submit audio diary entries at the time of their convenience. Self-recording is a viable method of collecting highly vernacular speech (Hall-Lew & Boyd 2020; Boyd et al. 2015), and the absence of an interlocutor may help mitigate the Observer's Paradox (Labov 1972). This methodology affords participants more flexibility in choosing when they want to participate than in-person methods can usually provide. However, the remoteness of this data collection raises new challenges for adhering to our research ethics, both in protecting the identity of our participants as well as in creating a virtual environment where they can be open and authentic. The values of the project are reflective of these considerations: *authenticity*, *trustworthiness*, *research longevity*, and *mentorship*. This paper will also discuss how the work of featuring stories from participants upholds these values,<sup>1</sup> especially the first three.

About 20-30 individuals (faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students, alumni, middle and high school student interns, academic specialists) collaborate in the day-to-day MI Diaries operations. The group is structured around different teams: the brand team (designs and researches brand image,

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<sup>1</sup> See Sneller et al. (2022) for an in-depth discussion of the ethical challenges in MI Diaries, the project's values, and how the project as a whole ensures adherence to these values.

builds brand identity,<sup>2</sup> and manages project social media), the website team (maintains and updates project website), the recruitment and community team (focuses on participant recruitment and outreach to community partners), the analysis team (transcribes incoming audio files based on FAVE guidelines (Evanini et al. 2009; Rosenfelder et al. 2014) and conducts initial analysis), the app team (maintains and updates MI Diaries mobile app) and the story team (selects, processes and features stories from diarists every week). The main focus of this paper is to provide a detailed introduction of the story team and the public archive in this project, in the hope of shedding light on the process of featuring participant voices and on the value of participant/public engagement and community building that is vital to socially-conscious linguistic research.

### 1.1. Community building and engagement

The practice of meaningfully situating a community and its interests within research is by no means novel, and has been successfully implemented in projects in health care (Kue et al. 2015; Herbert 1996; Andrews et al. 2019), education (Strand et al. 2003), linguistics (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009), and numerous other disciplines. Because of its long history, though, various ways of defining and delimiting community involvement in research coexist. Some of these involve including community members in the scientific process itself, where community insiders and outsiders work side-by-side, while others, direct community participation being for whatever reason infeasible, emphasize the broad dissemination and explanation of research results (Macaulay et al. 1999). In the current paper, we make a distinction between what we view as two mutually re-enforcing aspects of community-based research generally – *community engagement* and *community building* – and argue for the merits of both.

Our conceptualization of both community engagement and community building is in large part a product of longstanding traditions in variationist sociolinguistics. One of the most influential of these is the application of the *principle of linguistic gratuity*, formulated by Wolfram (1993) as a supplement to the community-centered and socially-conscious approach to linguistic research advanced in Labov (1982). In short, the principle of linguistic gratuity stipulates that researchers take an active interest in the well-being of any

<sup>2</sup> See Furkoti & Rechsteiner (2021) for a more thorough discussion on MI Diaries as a brand.

community under investigation, that they “(...) pursue positive ways in which they can return linguistic favors to the community” (Wolfram 1993:227). The principle can be applied regardless of community size or specificity. For example, Wolfram (1998) details various gratuitous implementations in Ocracoke, a small island community on the North Carolinian Outer Banks. Among these is the construction of a permanent exhibit at the community museum that showcases knowledge about the local variety of English. This knowledge was gathered over the course of years by Wolfram and colleagues and was then synthesized into an easily-digestible medium that community members and island visitors alike engage with. This application lies on the more specific end of the size/specificity spectrum, as it primarily affects the research community of Ocracoke. On the other end, one also sees successful applications of the principle to broader communities. For example, in April of 2022, MI Diaries – in coordination with Inquiry Arts, an organization promoting the science-arts interface – put up a “listening garden” display at the Michigan State University Science Festival, an event that showcases to the public various projects being pursued by teams across the university. In this display, a number of curated stories sent in by MI Diaries participants over the project’s first two years were played on a loop. Adjacent to this, the project had set up an area where festival-goers could sit and rest while listening; we had also distributed literature around this area that explained the project in detail and featured transcripts of the stories. Our hope with this display was to offer our target research community, which could broadly be interpreted as the whole of Michigan, the chance to engage with an aspect of our research at an in-person event, and build a sense of connectedness between the visitors and diarists from sharing the experiences of their fellow community members.

It is from these varying applications of the principle of linguistic gratuity that we draw our conceptualization of community engagement: namely, it is the practice of meaningfully interacting with a researched community (no matter the degree of its scope) in a manner that leads to the betterment of that community, often on the basis of the research being conducted. As it is defined here, the commitment to community engagement is a primarily ethical concern – it involves the acknowledgment that a community being researched has delivered highly valuable knowledge to the research team, and because of this, researchers are obligated to retribute that value back to the community in an appropriate fashion as best they can.

Whereas community engagement deals with researcher interaction with an

externally existent community (a community of practice, a town, a state, etc.), our conceptualization of community building has more to do with the group being actively formed through the act of researching. Namely, it describes the act of supporting these emergent communities throughout the course of the research being conducted, by attending to its members' well-being in an appropriate fashion, and managing its overall structure (recruiting new participants,<sup>3</sup> retaining old ones). Depending on the nature of the project, this can include to a lesser or greater extent the researchers themselves, but it is crucially comprised of the participants. This can also be considered a community of practice – but, again, this depends on the project itself, and the regularity of contact between participants (Lave & Wenger 1991). Despite any qualitative differences between these participant communities and established communities being researched, we also seek to apply the ethos of the principle of linguistic gratuity (Wolfram 1993) in the act of community building. This includes maintaining transparent research goals and methodologies, providing spaces or platforms participants can use to interact with one another (when appropriate), compensating participants for their time and effort, and interacting with participants in a culturally sensitive manner.

Over the past several decades, a good deal of research in a wide swath of disciplines has also been conducted on online communities. This line of inquiry has only intensified over the course of the global COVID-19 pandemic, as massive numbers of people increasingly turned to technology in order to participate in daily activities, including socializing (Garfin 2020). Indeed, there is evidence that the social dynamics of such communities can be highly complex and that they play a significant role in both fostering a sense of belonging as well as in the general maintenance of mental health, especially during the pandemic (Youngblood 2022; Qu & Zhang 2021), which are things one would also expect of many primarily offline communities. Given these similarities, it follows that online communities warrant similar concerns regarding community engagement and community building when they are being engaged in research in some fashion. That is – they deserve to be approached in a manner consistent with the principal of linguistic gratuity,

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that, although we are conceptualizing community engagement and community building as two independent aspects of community-based research, there is sometimes not a clear demarcation between them. For example, an act of community engagement like the construction of the museum exhibit detailed in Wolfram (1998) may also result in community building in the form of new participant recruitment, i.e., people deciding to sign up with the research project after viewing the exhibit.

regardless of whether they constitute a community being researched or one comprised of research participants themselves.

## **2. The role of the story team in MI Diaries**

### **2.1. Selecting and featuring participants' voices**

One of the primary ways MI Diaries engages in community work is through sharing the voices of diarists themselves. Numerous studies on the life histories of individuals and communities have argued for the value and benefits of being listened to (Kouritzin 2000; Hatch & Wisniewski 2002). In a project where participants record their own experiences, they are able to give an intimate account of the social history in a region in a particular moment in time through personal narratives. A potential benefit of this process is the opportunity to share their experiences and have their stories be heard and valued.<sup>4</sup> This section gives a detailed description of the workflow of how stories are selected to be featured and how it is critical for community building and engagement in a research project.

The story team of the MI Diaries project selects the weekly “stories”, short excerpts of spontaneous speech that may or may not have a narrative structure, from participants’ larger diary entries. We aim to select two stories for each age group (adults, teens and kids) to be the featured stories of the week, which are later posted on our website archive and selectively featured on our social media pages. Story selection is made possible through accessing the back-end of the mobile application, from which team members can listen to incoming diary entries, select stories from a particular file and correct transcriptions all in the same location. As diary entries come in, team members go through the transcripts, listen to each diary entry, find short snippets (roughly 1-4 minutes long), and make a record of the transcripts of the selected stories onto a shared spreadsheet with time marks indicating the starting and ending points of the story. Once a story is selected to be featured, the diary entry with said story is marked on the back-end as a “featured story” and is “hidden” so other team members will not listen through it again. Each week, one designated team member cuts the stories from the original audio

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<sup>4</sup> Not all diarists choose to have their stories shared and featured. But we still listen to and value diaries who do not have their “share” permissions on.

files, selects a neutral image<sup>5</sup> to accompany each story, and sends them to the team for review before they are featured on the website and in the weekly emails.

We are mindful of our responsibility to the community that comprises the narrators and listeners of these stories when engaging in story selection work. Oftentimes, this story selection process requires team members to navigate the balance of being trustworthy in ensuring participants' anonymity while being faithful to people's authentic experiences. We take measures such as redacting any information that can be potentially linked to the identity of an individual (such as names of people, places and events) and avoiding stories that expose participants to derision or reproach. We regularly hear from diarists about their joyous moments in life, such as a wedding or a graduation, as well as moments of hardship, such as the passing of a loved one, mental health struggles, medical conditions or unemployment. We take care to not feature such personal stories that can cast our participants in a bad light and are careful in framing stories that are potentially triggering or traumatic. Meanwhile we remain cognizant of the fact that people's experiences are not all rosy and positive, especially during a time of isolation and change, and the selected stories are reflective of this reality. In addition to protecting the identity of our participants, we take care to be inclusive to a variety of voices and experiences. Although our participant pool is skewed white, female, and millennial, we strive to ensure the representation of different groups and experiences in the stories we select and feature.

The selected stories of the week first appear on the landing page of the project webpage and remain there until the next week's stories are published. Visitors to the website can click on a selected story and are sent to a separate page featuring the story's written transcript, the playable audio file, and an image that represents the story's content. After stories are featured during a particular week, they enter into the project's archive, an online collection of stories from our participants going back to April, 2020 that serves as a useful way to get an overview of our participants' experiences over the course of the project. The archive is publicly accessible through the main project webpage

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<sup>5</sup> The image selection also reflects our project values. We select images that are maximally inclusive by making an explicit effort to not feature people if possible. Anyone who is listening will thereby be more able to see themselves as the protagonists of that story. By not featuring individuals of a particular gender, race, or ethnicity, it also avoids misrepresenting our diarists in these images.

and is licensed for non-commercial use.<sup>6</sup> For example, members of the media have used selected stories in reports and podcasts about MI Diaries.

## 2.2. Types of stories

When deciding which types of stories to feature weekly on the MI Diaries website and in the regular emails sent to participants, there are several different considerations that must be kept in mind. As expounded upon in Sneller & Barnhardt (in prep), a primary concern of the MI Diaries project is the elicitation of a wide range of speech styles; these data are then systematically analyzed and an accurate picture of community norms, and potential changes in those norms, can be triangulated (Labov 1972). Because the project does not currently implement the more “formal” aspects of the sociolinguistic interview – i.e., reading passages, word lists, etc. that are used to elicit more drastically careful speech (Meyerhoff 2016:434-435; Labov 1984:33) – we use prompts that vary widely by topic in order to capture a range of speech styles (Labov 2002; Mazzaro 2005). Compared to more careful speech, vernacular speech, the language one acquires during childhood (Labov 1972:208; Becker 2017:102), is maximally systematic. More importantly, it most closely approximates “the language used by ordinary people in their everyday affairs” (Labov 1972:69). Consequently, we place a high degree of importance on the vernacular and try to elicit speech that is as close to it as possible.

In eliciting speech that approximates the vernacular as much as possible, the project often constructs prompts in an explicit effort to encourage the recounting of *narratives of personal experience* (Sneller & Barnhardt in prep), as it has been shown that people’s speech is very close to their vernacular while doing so (Labov 1984). These narrative responses differentiate themselves from other types, such as pseudo-narratives, in that they focus on a specific temporally-delimited event (on this day, this particular thing happened in this way) (Labov & Waletzky 1967; Labov 2013). Another way in which the project subtly encourages participants to recount narratives in their diary entries is by featuring a high number of them every week, thus encouraging participants to submit similar types of narratives. We do not directly ask participants to do this, as it could add a layer of unnaturalness to the process and it would not guarantee elicitation of narratives anyway.

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<sup>6</sup> Following the Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike guidelines.



As mentioned above, the project is interested in eliciting a range of speech styles, and other types of responses have been shown to stratify upon this basis – for example, soapbox responses (those that engage with opinions held by the speaker or with germane topics) have been shown to result in markedly more careful speech than narratives (Mazzaro 2005). Because of this, and because we wish to faithfully represent the everyday experiences of our participants, we regularly feature stories that are not narratives. Besides soapbox responses, other types of stories that are often featured include: simple responses to prompts, pseudo-narratives (responses that describe a habitually-reoccurring action, either in the past or present), tangents (responses that take a turn away from the subject matter previously discussed), and responses about language and culture (these were frequently submitted in response to prompts asking about participants’ experiences in other parts of the US) (Labov 2002).

### **3. Discussion: Community building and engagement through stories**

The MI Diaries project’s two primary motivations for the practice of featuring stories weekly are (1) an eagerness to foster connections between the diarists themselves, as well as between diarists and the research team following concerns related to community building, and (2) a sense of moral obligation to return value to the research community at large, in accordance with the principle of linguistic gratuity (Wolfram 1993). It is also a window from which the project can engage with the larger community; in fact, a related motivation for maintaining the digital archive of past stories is that we wish to provide a useful historical record of personal stories during the COVID-19 pandemic that both other researchers and the general public can reference. In this way, we wish to play a role in the cultural retention of the pandemic as a highly significant historical event, one from which lessons should be drawn and implemented.

Because there is some degree of regular contact between the MI Diaries research team and the project’s participants (Rechsteiner & Sneller 2021), we elect to refer to the community comprised of both of these groups as

the participant-researcher community.<sup>7</sup> There is also a degree of limited inter-participant contact that comprises a crucial social dynamic within this community. We receive regular comments in the submitted diaries from different participants offering commentary on the stories we featured in the previous week. For example, in September 2021, after featuring a story on a participant completing her second half-marathon, one diarist expressed their admiration of this achievement in a following diary entry. While these sorts of interactions are usually unidirectional – a diarist’s response to a previously featured story is not often selected as a featured story itself – and although diarists remain anonymous to one another, responses like these are frequent and regular, and contribute to the building of the participant-researcher community. Another way in which the story team’s work contributes to the process of community building is by relaying the accurate notion that the MI Diaries researchers are actively and regularly engaging with the diaries being sent in each week. We know that many diarists desire this. We occasionally observe comments in diaries, oftentimes from newer participants, along the lines of, “I wonder whether anyone is listening to this,” and diarists regularly express gratitude to the researchers for listening to their thoughts, usually after completing an elaborate soapboxing or narrative response. In selecting and featuring stories, we ensure diarists that we are, indeed, listening to their stories, and that we find real value in what they have to say. This contributes to diarists’ sense of purpose within the project and helps increase the level of overall participant retention and participation.

In addition to the community building aspects of the story team’s work, there are also elements of community engagement, aiming at giving back to the research community. As noted by Goodson (2012), a collection of seemingly unrelated narratives can lead to a more collaborative exchange surrounding a particular sociological event or historical pattern. The stories submitted to the project over the course of COVID-19 and post-lockdown life allow visitors to the story archive to orient their current selves and circumstances within the larger time frame of the pandemic. Participants’ stories range from not being able to find general household goods in a grocery store at the beginning of the pandemic to lamenting about lost time with loved ones two years after the start of the pandemic. In this way, the continuity of the

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<sup>7</sup> As mentioned above in section 1.1., such a group could also be considered a community of practice. However, because there is virtually no degree of regular face-to-face linguistic contact between the participants themselves, the MI Diaries participant-researcher community does not fall under this categorization in any meaningful capacity (Lave & Wenger 1991).

collection contributes to the historical record of the pandemic, and builds a picture of how the research community has changed and adapted to ongoing circumstances. Since the initial launch of this project, the larger social community has experienced multiple historical events, ranging from the impact COVID-19 has had on all Michiganders (especially on minoritized individuals and underrepresented communities in general) to the surge in action in the summer of 2020 relating to the Black Lives Matter movement and the struggle for racial justice. More recently, we have received stories commenting on the regionally atypical EF-3-level tornado that caused loss of life, injury, and destruction in Gaylord, Michigan on May 20, 2022. By selecting and highlighting stories about such historical events, the story team takes on the responsibility of creating a curated social history that places an emphasis on the experiences and concerns of Michiganders.

We are also conscientious about the responsibility of the platform we have developed and believe conversations can enforce a safe and informed community. By not shying away from topics that carry particular social significance, we desire to engage both our participants and the community at large in difficult conversations, which is crucial for qualitative researchers who honor the agency and voices of their participants (Staller 2014). In December 2021 and January 2022, for example, we featured a collection of stories relating to the high school shooting that occurred in November, 2021 in Oxford Township, Michigan, which constituted a moment of deep loss and pain. In doing this, we hoped to provide a platform for our participants to safely share their experiences and feelings surrounding the event, to know that others were listening to them in a respectful manner, and to encourage community dialogue, both about the shooting itself as well as related events and topics. Despite the fact that such stories are very personalized, the sentiments that diarists share can oftentimes be widely recognized and appreciated even if listeners are not affected by the related events directly.

Aside from the aforementioned benefits, featured stories can also serve as classroom material and can benefit other projects in the educational and research communities. For example, at the recent outreach event *Digital Humanities Locus*, an annually-reoccurring forum where students, faculty, and researchers share ideas and ongoing work at Michigan State University, multiple research teams shared projects that take and build upon the work that the MI Diaries project has done. Polio & Brown (2021), for example, created a website for TESOL educators that utilized stories from the MI Diaries project to illustrate colloquial American English in an ESL classroom. We

welcome and encourage the application of work that the story team has done in other projects, especially those that are poised to tangibly benefit their communities.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper offers a detailed account of the role of featured stories in the MI Diaries project and the considerations we take in centering participants' voices in sociolinguistic work. Various types of stories from different age groups are selected weekly to be featured on the website and recorded in the publicly-accessible project archive. The paper discusses the application of the *principle of linguistic gratuity* (Wolfram 1993) in story selection work for meaningful community engagement and building, two aspects of community-based research the MI Diaries project regards as especially vital. It also showcases how the values of *authenticity*, *trustworthiness*, and *longevity* guide our work in this project. Specifically, we desire to project authenticity by giving participants a platform to share their thoughts and experiences, trustworthiness by remaining discerning of the types of stories we feature and ensuring we never bring harm to our participants in doing so, and longevity by continuously engaging our participants and the larger research community of Michigan in a process of experiential exchange. The selection and featuring of stories is not only a way to foster interaction between participants, between researchers and participants, and between the research team and the larger research community, but it also constructs a historical record of the time in which this project is situated. We hope this discussion can prove useful for future work aiming to foreground and critically engage with the relationship between researcher, research, and community.

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