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Making Digital Technology Research Human: Learning from Clowning as a Social Research Intervention

[Sviluppare Digital Technology Research Human:
Imparare dal clown come intervento di ricerca sociale]

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ABSTRACT

EN There have been calls from technology researchers in the field of Human Computer Interaction for a shift towards people-centered digital technology and service design. Such a shift becomes increasingly important as digital mediation is woven into interactions across all spheres of an individual's life. Here we reflect on what academic researchers in the field of digital technology design learned about the process of participant engagement in field research by working with a team of healthcare clowns. Observing the playful, humanistic engagement approach used by the clowns, the researchers saw that people felt noticeably at ease talking to a clown and that this influenced the amount and quality of the data gathered. In this article, we describe the participant engagement approach, present the observations of this approach in practice and reflect on potential lessons to be learned for digital technology research.

Keywords: Clown, trickster, humanistic engagement, participatory research

IT Ci sono state richieste da parte di ricercatori di tecnologia nel campo dell'interazione uomo-macchina per uno spostamento verso la tecnologia digitale centrata sulle persone e la progettazione dei servizi. Tale cambiamento diventa sempre più importante in quanto la mediazione digitale è intessuta di interazioni in tutte le sfere della vita di un individuo. Questo articolo porta una riflessione su ciò che i ricercatori accademici nel campo del design della tecnologia digitale hanno imparato a conoscere il processo di coinvolgimento dei partecipanti nella ricerca sul campo lavorando con un gruppo di clown sanitari. Osservando l'approccio di coinvolgimento giocoso e umanistico usato dai clown, i ricercatori hanno notato che le persone si sentivano notevolmente a proprio agio nel parlare con un clown e che questo ha influenzato la quantità e la qualità dei dati raccolti. In questo articolo, descriviamo il coinvolgimento dei partecipanti, presentiamo le osservazioni di questo approccio nella pratica e riflettiamo sulle potenziali lezioni da apprendere per la ricerca sulla tecnologia digitale.

Parole chiave: Clown, imbroglione, impegno umanistico, ricerca partecipata

Since the turn of the 21st century, as in many societies, the UK has seen a dramatic growth in the digitalisation of public and civic services (Cabinet Office, 2013) this in turn is part of a wider shift towards digitalisation in all spheres of an individual's life. Understanding how the shift towards digitalisation affects an individual's lived experiences requires a type of research engagement that is firmly people-focused (Vines et al, 2013). Such research engages with people to develop a shared understanding of the individual and the collective transformations that digitalisation brings. In this article, we report on a collaboration between digital technology design researchers and clown educator and performer, Freya Stang and was funded through a UK research project called "Visualisation and Other Methods of Expression" (VOME, 2012), a technology project that examined the digitalisation of public and civic services and the information that communities and individuals were prepared to provide and share with and through such services. The collaboration explored ways of reshaping research participant engagement in response to the difficulties that the research team had experienced when trying to obtain a detailed understanding of how digital technologies and services were experienced in everyday life (Coles-Kemp & Ashenden, 2012). A recurring theme throughout the VOME studies was the integrated nature of both personal and civic interactions and how an individual's sense of safety and security came not from the security of the civic interaction but from the security of their personal relationships.

The clown-led engagement gave focus to participant engagement practice. Engaging research participants in field research includes the invitation to engage, the explanation of the research and the initial conversations that situate the subsequent research data gathering activities. This paper presents observations on aspects of research engagement practice learned during this collaboration.

1. Background Literature

For many societies, digital services are replacing existing person-to-person services, such as tax collection services, refuse collection service and town planning services. Le Grand (2003) describes this change as a move towards a more market-oriented method. At the same time, how we relate to each other and the ways in which we build and maintain our social and personal relationships are also increasingly digitally mediated. Such digitalisation can have unintended adverse consequences for communities and individuals (e.g. Kleine, 2009 and van den Hoven et al., 2015). The implications for interaction are explored in human computer interaction scholarship (Dourish et al., 2004; Cranor & Garfinkel, 2005; Sasse & Flechais 2005) and a growing interdisciplinary community of digital civics scholars and critical social theorists has given particular focus to the question of how digital technologies and services might be designed to improve social and political outcomes (Dow et al. 2018; Olivier & Wright, 2015; Vlachokyriakos et al., 2016).

Understanding the social, economic, political and human impacts of digitalisation requires a social research dimension to the technology study. Social research focuses on asking what social issues are present and why they are occurring (de Vaus, 2001). There are different types of social research design – for example longitudinal, case study, experiment (de Vaus, 2001). The research methods within a research design, including participant engagement methods, are often re-designed as a part of digital civics scholarship (e.g. Rossitto et al., 2017) in order to obtain a closer, more detailed understanding of the impacts of new and existing

technologies on everyday life. For example, Dunphy et al. (2014) identified the importance of considering how the methods of engagement shape the nature of the interaction with research participants and, therefore, the types and qualities of data that are elicited as a result. The creative arts are often included in such method re-design drawing on techniques such as theatre, film-making and collaging. Participant engagement in academic research does not often take a prominent role in research design (Chavez, Cotner, & Hathaway 2017; Arcury & Quandt 1999) with the deep participant engagement techniques embedded within ethnographic studies being a noticeable exception. Participant engagement is more typically framed in terms of the representativeness of the participant sample or the demographic selected (e.g. Robson 2002), not in terms of either the methods used to achieve engagement or their impact on the quality or types of data collected.

Creative arts not only offer potential input to research method design but also a means of critiquing a particular social and technological context. Social theory scholar Foster (2015, p.1) explains that “the arts enable an examination of the everyday in imaginative ways that draw attention to the cruelties and contradictions inherent in neoliberal society”. This quotation highlights the important critical role of the arts when exploring the impacts of the design and deployment of digital technologies and services. Gentle and playful critique is an important means of encouraging a constructive and inclusive dialogue of change. In the study reported in this paper, the clown’s capacity for comedy (Berger, 1997) and the ability to adopt different roles of the jester (Janick, 1998) created a space in which researchers could reflect on and critique their own practice. Clowns and fools have historically served an important social function (Coburn & Morrison, 2013) and the trickster figure can gently and playfully bring out the tensions and flaws in scientific understandings of the lived experience (Hyde as reported in Foster, 2015). Hynes (1993) maps six trickster characteristics and several of these characteristics, particularly the situation-inventor, are deployed in the study described below to both enhance engagement practice and to critique traditional research participant engagement methods. The study sheds light on how the research design for studies that explore the social, economic and political impacts of technology design might learn from this critique to offer a stronger and richer connection between researcher and participant, particularly in short-term studies that take snapshots of digital practices and perceptions.

2. A Weekend in Middlesbrough: Study of a Red Nose Research Design

This collaboration between clowns and researchers began in 2010 and delivered four studies over two years. The studies were exploratory and focused on the broad research question of how people use digital services in their everyday lives. Each study also explored the question of what information people share and protect in this digital context and the roles of relationships in these sharing and protection activities. The second study took place over a weekend in Middlesbrough in the North of England. The theme for this study was secrets and the main research question was “What secrets do people keep on-line?” The research data was gathered in recordings, observations, drawings and written responses. These responses created a visual and an auditory collage on the theme of lived experiences of identity, privacy, trust and security in a digitally-mediated society (see Figure Three for an example of the visual collage). Middlesbrough railway station was selected as the space for the engagement due to the broad cross-section of people who pass through that space.

3. Study Design

The role of the clown in the study was to engage research participants and the red nose clown was used to do this. Engagement activities included: host the event, interact with people as a friend, introduce the collage activities and act as a researcher by talking informally with people around the research themes. The clowns, led by Freya, discussed and reflected upon the research theme and ethics of the proposed collaboration before agreeing to design and perform the activities. The study centred on the provocation of asking participants to talk about what they kept secret on-line and the secrets they actively sought on-line. The study explored with participants the ways in which information was both kept private and shared and the blurred boundaries between these two states. Once the clowns had engaged the research participants, participants were encouraged to choose two out of four possible activities to complete the study:

- Activity One: Participants have a photograph taken of themselves that reflect the persona they like to portray on-line.
- Activity Two: Participants draw the persona that they like to present on-line.
- Activity Three: Participants write answers to four questions about the secrets they keep and seek on-line.
- Activity Four: Participants talk to the sound doctor character who in recorded conversations with participants asks the four questions set out in Activity Three to develop the auditory collage.

In return for taking part, participants received a £5 voucher to spend in the railway café. For many, this was a free hot meal and participants saw great value in the voucher. The study was granted ethical approval by the research institution and implemented the institution's research procedure for data gathering and management. During and at the end of the study, the clowns and researchers discussed potential ethical issues with the gathered information and jointly took decisions about the appropriate course of action.

4. Design of Engagement Interventions

Engagement with participants was initiated using a range of interventions devised by the clowns. In addition to the red nose clown, a small team of performers using themed character interactions drew in and engaged with people. Full masks, commedia half masks, eccentric clown characters and corporeal mime were chosen as the forms of expression. Full masks created different identities – the performers each went out as several different characters by changing masks and the shape and state of their bodies, mirroring how the same person can use different identities on-line. The characters with half masks spoke and made comments on the other performance interactions used in the engagement. These half-masked characters were acting in the genre of buffoon by laughing at human behavior – particularly directed at the stupidity of the red nose clown or the eccentric characters. This half-masked character used wit and pointed satire in relation to the changing identities of the full mask characters.



Figure one: Freya as Red Nose Clown Margareth

The engagement interventions that the clowns developed were, in part, a trickster response to their observations of academic practice. In their observations, the clowns took interest in how researchers gather data and were fascinated by the enormous ‘tardis’- like worlds academics hold inside their heads. At the same time, clowns found the academic phrasing of research questions and the remote and distanced identity of the academic comically ridiculous. The engagement design particularly drew on the trickster characteristics (Hynes, 1993) of: situation-inventor, shape-shifter and ambiguous and anomalous. The clowns inverted situations by changing the open space of the railway station into a safe space where participants could talk about their on-line practices and behaviors. The clowns also used this characteristic to invert the hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant. The clowns used a shape-shifting capability to deliver interventions as both clown and researcher as well as to alternate between different on-line personas and behaviors. For example, one of the performers had a suitcase full of her own secrets that she shared with the railway travellers. Those she spoke to would often tell her which secrets they would not want to share with others on-line. Other performers acted as a live notebook, upon which people could write or draw. These interventions also used the trickster characteristic of being both anomalous and ambiguous to create a connection with participants that was simultaneously private and public.



Figure Two: Clown Character - The Sound Doctor

5. Reflecting on the Engagement Design

During the study, both clowns and researchers noted observations and reflections about the effectiveness of the clown engagement interventions, the reactions of the participants during those interventions and the qualities of the data gathered. Once the study was completed, the researchers and clowns discussed their observations and reflections. In the following two sections, we present the observations and the conclusions from this observation and reflection process.



Figure Three: Clowns, Out of Character, Discuss and Reflect Upon the Visual Collage

6. Findings – Engagement Observations

Clowns and researchers observed that participants responded well to the creative playfulness of the clown interventions and that by responding to the playfulness, the anxiety that is often felt about research participation disappeared. This freedom from anxiety combined with the shape-inventor characteristics of the intervention fostered a sense of safety that enabled people to express issues that mattered to them and consequently stories were discovered of isolation, loneliness and identity conflicts as part of the stories of everyday technology use. For example, one group who was living in a homeless hostel, came to the station and contributed by telling stories of their journey to societal marginalization, the isolation they felt and the hopes and aspirations for the future that they had.

The researchers observed that an enthusiasm for the study was generated during the engagement interventions and that the anomalies, ambiguity, fluidity and the playfulness of the clown interventions stimulated participation. Participants consistently chose to take part in all four activities instead of just selecting two as required. The researchers also observed that participants exercised considerable control over what they chose to disclose and where they chose to disclose it. For example, some participants gave very specific instructions as to how their photograph was to be taken, with one participant requesting that only the back of his head featured in the photograph to reflect the on-line anonymity that he tried to create.



Figure Four: Participant Using a Back of the Head Shot to Convey On-line Privacy

The clowns also observed that working in such a large and public space demands a great capacity of listening, sharing of humanity, improvisation and as well as a focus on the recording of comments, data and stories. The contents of the visual collage re-enforced the humanity theme and contained many mundane examples of how participants felt they could both hide and expose details about themselves on-line. It was noticeable that these examples placed a greater emphasis on managing personal identity and relationships with others rather than on protecting on-line financial or administrative transactions. This focus was further amplified in the contents of the auditory collage and serves to highlight that an individual's sense of safety and security comes more from personal relationships than from secure interactions with bureaucracies. This is an important observation because it sheds light on how e-safety messages for civic services might be framed in order to have the most relevance and impact. When comparing the two collages, the researchers observed there was a difference in the quality of personal information. The contents produced solely in the visual collage was more factual whereas contents initially produced in the auditory collage was more reflective. The auditory collage contained deeply personal stories that reflect how conflicts and concerns relating to trust, identity, privacy and security in personal relationships are shaped and amplified through digital interaction.

7. Discussion

Our observations and reflections lead us to argue that the process of participant engagement warrants careful consideration. Both the volume and richness of the data was surprising to the researchers. The deeply personal stories that were revealed to the clowns indicate that the clowns were, in some way, trusted. The attentiveness of the clown, the medium of the interaction between participant and clown and the space in which that connection is situated would seem to contribute to this trust building. In their reflections, the clowns suggested

that the clown philosophy of being in a state of non-perfection allowed participants to feel that they too could be honest. For example, there is no 'right answer' when interacting with a clown. The clowns also suggested that many people feel that they are of a higher status than that of the clown, as the clown seems to be sillier than how they perceive themselves to be. Although it is not necessary for a clown to wear a red nose; the red nose opens the face of the bearer and helps to communicate the clown state of innocence and humanity.

The significance of non-verbal communication and the open state of non-perfection combined with the trickster characteristics re-shaped research participant engagement. If research engagement techniques embraced the non-perfect nature of interactions and attention is paid to the corporeal aspects of research engagement, this might result in a research dialogue that is not scripted by social norms and expectations of the researcher-participant interaction, resulting in a more free and richer production of data. The use of trickster characteristics and corporeal engagement might also be used to stimulate participation and generate an enthusiasm that carries over into the wider study participation. Such characteristics may be particularly useful for studies where there is less time to develop connections between participants and researchers.

8. Conclusion

This collaboration between digital technology researchers and healthcare clowns' sheds light on the often-overlooked process of research participant engagement. In particular, the results of the collaboration indicate that the engagement process can be effective in building a connection with participants in fieldwork settings where snapshots of digital practice are collected. The non-verbal communication and state of non-perfection principles that underpin clowning were felt to be important in this connection building. The trickster characteristics of ambiguous and anomalous, situation-invertor and shape-shifter contributed to this connection building and to the generation of a positive and energetic interaction. These principles and characteristics should be explored further when designing the participant engagement process in the digital technology research context.

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Biografie

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Lizzie Coles-Kemp has a BA Hons in Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies, an MSc in Information security and a PhD in Computer Science. Lizzie is currently a Professor of Information Security at Royal Holloway University of London. Her work is grounded in sociological understandings of information security; she is a qualitative researcher who uses creative engagement methods to explore everyday practices of information production, protection, circulation, curation and consumption within and between communities.

Freya Stang

Freya Stang is a clown educator and performer. Freya works across genres and has a firm base in movement theatre. She devises original theatre and works with both classical and modern text. Freya first trained at the Desmond Jones School of Mime and Physical Theatre and then studied the theatre pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq at Helikos International School of Theatre Creation in Florence. She has also studied and performed Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekov at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.