Digital Motivation: from Inclusion to Engagement

Ann Light
Northumbria University
School of Design
ann.light@northumbria.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

We use the description of a research workshop exploring methods of digital engagement as a reflective device for considering what is important in working with people to include them in a digitally mediated society. The "Inspiring Digital Engagement Festival" (IDEF) featured socially engaged art practices. Meaning, motivation and a sense of agency became key themes, as did a critique of 'inclusion'.

Author Keywords

Relevance, meaning, digital inclusion, engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

British people increasingly use digital tools for everything: to find jobs, tell stories about ourselves and others, socialize and shop conveniently. We use social media to define who we are and find that using these tools can change how we relate to each other as well as with whom we connect. Given this ubiquity of mediation, there are economic and moral grounds to ensuring everyone sees the potential of the Internet and related technologies. Everyone should be able to make an informed choice about the tools to use and what choices mean. All should have a sense of the evolving role of technology. Yet such themes reach beyond the remit of digital inclusion as it is handled by policy and public services, where emphasis is upon access and skills.

The "Inspiring Digital Engagement Festival" (IDEF) was launched as part of research into digital inclusion, following an early finding that little innovation and variety existed in formal digital inclusion training. It gave professionals taking a novel approach to inspiring interest in digital tools a platform to meet and share methods and ideas. Topics included design and use, across screen and tangible interfaces, for marginalized and/or hard-to-reach groups, from *Facebook* to the Internet of Things.

2. DIGITAL INCLUSION

Digital inclusion is seen as a necessary condition in Britain. Local authorities are adopting a 'Digital by Default' policy of service provision, meaning that it will be harder to pay

rent, summon social services, renew licenses and so on, in a face-to-face capacity. This requires citizenship with online competence. Historically, resources have been put into providing access to the Internet and skills training [7]. But research suggests factors such as confidence and income affect take-up [10]. Lack of interest and perception of relevance affect adoption for older people [1]. Not least, many of the ~9M UK non-adopters value direct encounters more than the convenience of online exchange. Removing barriers is not enough. 'Digital inclusion is a combination of motivation, access and skills, and it's the first that's hardest to achieve,' says UK Online's Milner [9].

2.1 Motivation

Research exists into motivational factors (eg [3]), but rather less is known about these than other aspects of inclusion. One reason for this is the idiosyncratic nature of interest(s). [4] show that big events can trigger motivation for getting online, but, clearly, these cannot be relied on as part of a strategy. Social barriers to learning skills may override motivation to experiment, though [2] suggest that much informal learning of online skills is conducted for developmental rather than economic reasons. Finally, we note that once someone starts to use Internet resources, more potential uses become apparent to them.

3. INSPIRING DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Digital Inclusion in South Yorkshire (DISY) [5] looked at four councils' provision for bringing non-adopters of the Internet towards use. It also studied how digital inclusion work was experienced by providers and recipients, going beyond statistics to look at take-up by hard-to-reach groups. It became apparent that motivation was not addressed by standard training, so tailored ways of motivating people to experiment with digital tools would be needed to involve many remaining non-adopters. Would selected socially engaged artists offer a source of inspiration, given their imaginative uses of content and practices that brings media into every-day life (eg [8]). Could they offer new means of enfranchising groups overlooked by centralized tactics?

IDEF ran in Sept 2010 in Sheffield with 18 organizations giving workshops and/or talks. Artists included Heads Together; Virtual Migrants; folly; Co-Lab; Benedict Phillips; Tenantspin and cSPACE*. People's Voice Media, the Community Media Association, ArcSpace, and Access Space* brought a media focus. We distinguish these personalized approaches, calling them *digital engagement,*

since this stresses reciprocity and active/creative agents; and it avoids binary categorization in a developing ecology of interrelated digital tools/media.

3.1 Themes
All agreed: 'To benefit from the talents and contributions of all citizens, a 'bottom up' as well as a 'top down' approach is necessary. …change needs to be something which is done *with* people rather than *to* people.' [6].

The meaning of digital activities provoked much debate. Adrian Sinclair of Heads Together showed how a comment page on *Meltdown**, a website about Yorkshire's closing metal foundries, had been appropriated by ex-workers to keep in touch, sharing news of funerals (and so on) eight years on. In line with *DISY* findings, *Facebook* proved a big motivator harnessing existing links to friends and family, but contributors recounted more diverse internet use, such as self-publishing of autobiographical accounts; blogging to unite a community, making your own computer from recycled parts; and shooting video. They showed how such activity had motivated statistically low adopters (refugees, homeless people, people with mental illness), allowing for self-expression, creativity and sense of achievement. The work, though labour intensive, had inspired others to join in and with 100% attendance during a project and impressive post-project use, the implication was that investment in such learning might be the only way to convince some harder-to-reach groups that these tools have relevance.

A second theme was the low aspiration of much inclusion work. Are we encouraging people to engage with state-of-the-art activity like geo-caching and co-design or giving a 1990s version of technology? If the latter, then inclusion is to some second-class state without the more inspiring uses digital tools now offer. This was equated with giving old desktop computers to developing regions of the world. In both cases, many of those not using computers do use phones, so 90s tools are particularly ill-suited for them.

4. IN CONCLUSION: METHODS, MEDIATION, METRICS
The discussions at IDEF raised many familiar practical problems: Can such inspiring practice scale? How far is sure-handed facilitation and leadership (ie stewardship) essential to producing such effects? Is it appropriate to expect such involved practice to conform to public sector metrics? Can it serve policy and local providers if it resists measurement by statistics? And, crucially, who pays for it?

More globally, discussion produced a critique of inclusion, both as practice and a way of conceiving of such action. *Digital inclusion* is a term that is applied by those with the task of ensuring that all citizens of a defined region can access and use digital services. It has a shifting meaning because circumstances (eg Digital by Default) and means of access (eg data on phones) change. However, it remains a policy term and does not capture the experience of (not) using the tools. Few feel included in *society* because they

are texting or have signed up to *Twitter*, although many have a feeling of being included or left out of friends' social activity. It is this latter feeling that has real bearing on willingness to try new forms of connection. By contrast, people do feel engaged, or not, by activities that digital tools enable, distinct from the relations that ensue. It's a small distinction but crucial in gauging experience, in thinking about motivation and in designing the learning interactions to motivate those people who need a more personal approach than much provision allows for.

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