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Beyond the food bank: using digital technologies to escape food poverty

Communities and Culture Network+ Interim Report

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Introduction

Stoke-on-Trent, like many other areas of the country, is experiencing increasing levels of food poverty. This project explores the role that digital technologies can play in helping people to avoid and/or escape this situation. Conscious of the digital divide, which means that those most in need of the information and support made available digitally, are often unable to access it, the project takes as its starting point the experiences of those who have used or are using food banks. Working in collaboration with the community outreach department of the New Vic Theatre, New Vic Borderlines, the project uses cultural animation methodologies to encourage participants to identify relevant issues for research from their own experience. The project aims to identify some of the problems and issues that contribute to people falling into food poverty and encourages them to explore the ways in which digital technologies might be used to support them as they seek to escape from it.

The project works closely with bITJAM, a digital technology company, the Trussell Trust group of food banks in the Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-Staffs areas, other independent local food banks and other parties who provide food to people in need. The project comprises visits to food banks and two cultural animation workshops followed by an IdeaLab.

Aims

- To explore with food bank users and volunteers the experiences of food poverty and food bank usage
- To identify the contributory factors that lead people to food poverty
- To explore the potential for cultural animation methodologies to develop applications of digital technologies which overcome the digital divide
- To explore the ways in which digital technology may be used to assist and support people who experience food poverty

Progress

We initially focused on developing relations with the food banks, both with the volunteers and the guests.

Activities included:

Principal Investigator visits to a number of food banks during their opening hours;

Observation of volunteers meetings and training sessions

In conjunction with New Vic Borderlines, we ran a series of experiential workshops in the majority of food banks in both the Stoke-on-trent and Newcastle-Staffs areas. While waiting for their food parcels, guests were invited to view an art installation developed as part of a related grant on

communities in crisis, i.e. the tree of life, and add to it by contributing a leaf, bug or bird.



Fig 1: The food bank 'tree of life'

The leaves added to the tree identified what was important in the guests' lives and what they valued most at that particular time in their lives. The bugs referred to the problems/crises they had encountered resulting in them visiting the food bank while the birds identified hopes and aspirations for the future. This activity encouraged guests to share their story in a non-intrusive way and at a pace that felt comfortable.



Fig 2: Activity with food bank guests, personal experiences are recorded on the leaves, bugs and birds and added to the tree

Workshop 1

The first cultural animation workshop was held in January 2015. This full day workshop was run by New Vic Borderlines and was designed to explore the reasons behind and the experiences of food poverty. Participants, who included volunteers and staff from food banks and food bank guests, worked in groups in a series of creative activities to explore these issues and reflect on their own experience.



Fig 3. Workshop 1 activities

Participants

Participants from the following organisations attended the first 'Beyond the food bank' event.

Newcastle-Staffs food banks (volunteers and guests)
EngAge 50 + (community group)
Stoke-on-Trent food banks (volunteers and guests),
1000 lives (Community group).

Preliminary analysis

We held a number of meetings to analyse and reflect on the data collected and on the strengths and weaknesses of the cultural animation approach.

Strengths of cultural animation:

- Builds up trusting relationships between participants by inviting them to work together in activities which may be new to them but which draw on their life experiences
- Dissolves hierarchies: commonsense, expertise, practical skills are valued in equal measure and each participant contributes to the process according to their own abilities and agendas
- Rapidly identifies and engages with the yawning gap between “official” strategies for dealing with food poverty, and what people actually say they want and explores new ways of communicating across this gap

Challenges of cultural animation:

- How should we orchestrate multiple voices/acts in an inclusive/democratic way while assuming the authorial position as academic investigators?
- How should we translate some of the bottom-up ideas into digital format in a way that resonates with the participants’ understanding of technology?

Next steps

Workshop 2 has been scoped and planned and this will be followed by an IdeaLab. Workshop 2 will focus on envisioning and creating futures in which food poverty has been eliminated. The IdeaLab will focus on exploring the ways in which digital technologies might be utilised to create and support the desired future.

Dissemination

- Presentation at CCN+ annual event in Leeds, December 2014
- Invitation by Stoke-on-trent food banks to discuss the project with a film company (Sixteenfilms) who were researching the areas of welfare/sanctions/food banks.
- We have been successful in our application to run a special session on food poverty and cultural animation techniques at the CMS (Critical Management Studies) conference in Leicester, July 2015
- We are developing a project website that will serve to disseminate to a wider audience
- We have been invited to exhibit our research process and outcomes as part of ‘Look and Look Again: Keele’s community based research’ exhibition, hosted by ArtsKeele and the Community Animation and Social Innovation Centre (CASIC) in October, 2015, as part of the international launch event for CASIC.