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Evaluating trespass prevention: working with young people as co-researchers and filmmakers on a railway safety project

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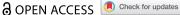Ryan Josiah Bramley [iD][a], Marion Oveson[b] and Aneesh Barai [iD][a]

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ABSTRACT

Recent attempts have been made by Network Rail and the British Transport Police to discourage young people from committing 'railway trespass' – the dangerous act of illegally gaining access to live railway tracks. Whilst public safety campaigns have a long history in the UK and beyond, little research has been dedicated to a better understanding of how young people engage with this media. This article reflects on *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* (2021), a project which involved a small group of Further Education (FE) Media Students as co-researchers exploring railway trespass prevention. The young co-researchers co-produced a new evaluation toolkit, as well as creatively exploring themes of railway trespass through documentary interviewing and filmmaking. Presenting our critical reflections on the process of working with young co-researchers on this project, we argue for the broader adoption of an adaptable and iterative approach to meaningful engagement with young people in relation to contemporary social issues.

Introduction

Railway Trespass is the act of illegally accessing a railway track, embankment, or other prohibited railway property. Whilst the UK has often been regarded as having the 'safest railway in Europe' (RSSB, 2019, p.i), recent analysis by the UK's Office of Rail and Road found that Britain ranks 8th in Europe for 'passenger safety risk' and 4th for 'trespasser safety risk' – despite the nation's railway system still being regarded as the best for overall safety risk (ORR, 2022). Indeed, there was an increasing trend of reported trespass 'events' in the pre-COVID-19 era (RSSB, 2019, p. 40); the reported increase of trespass events by '40% to 50%' from 2014 to 2019 was significantly larger than the 6% increase in passenger numbers reported during the same period (Pennie et al., 2021, p. 3). Railway trespass also carries with it a significant financial cost; according to Network Rail (2019), 'the total performance delay costs associated with trespass and vandalism amounted to £55 m' during 2018/19 alone. In other words, even when a railway trespass 'event' does not result in an avoidable death, it still has significant repercussions for both the railway industry and the wider economy.

In this context, young people have been identified as a demographic of concern. A study commissioned by rail operator LNER (2021) found that one in four young people (aged between 12–17) knew someone who had committed the crime of railway trespass, whilst the largest increase in trespass events during July-December 2021 being in the under 18s age category, with 2,087 child

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

trespass incidents recorded in just six months – 'a 40% increase on the same period in 2019' (Rail, 2021). Railway trespass is a growing phenomenon in the UK, rather than a trend in decline. As a direct response to this, the *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* 2021 project was developed: a UKRI 'National Productivity Investment Fund' initiative which sought to generate a robust evaluative framework, to assess the impact of Network Rail's anti-trespass media campaign work on young people's attitudes and behaviour towards railway trespass. The *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* project was a collaboration between Network Rail; the National Railway Museum; a further education institution, Barnsley College, based in the North of England; and colleagues from the School of Education – which is part of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Sheffield (UoS).

This article presents a critical reflection on our original approach to working with Young People as both Filmmakers and Co-Researchers, drawing on both our own experiences of running the project workshops and selected extracts of what our young co-researchers told us during the process. Whilst young people have been increasingly mobilized as co-researchers in social research projects (see Cullen et al., 2023; Willumsen et al., 2014), discussions around 'purposeful [co-] researcher roles' are often orientated around how young people can meaningfully contribute to academic knowledge production (Watson & Marciano, 2015) – or how they can add credibility to the research (Given, 2008) – rather than the ways in which young people can benefit from, and be empowered by, the co-researcher experience. We therefore posit this article as a justification for more creative and innovative approaches (such as participatory filmmaking) to working with youth co-researchers, and as a direct response to a recent call from Parry et al. (2020) to acknowledge youth media production as having social empowerment, rather than entrepreneurship, at its core.

We use this article as a platform to encourage the creators and disseminators of youth-centric public safety communications to view young people less as recipients of the messages that they send, and more as discussants. Indeed, *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* is a modest yet substantive antidote to a notion recently posited by Bowman – namely, that 'society tends to perceive young people as subjects of political engagement more than agents of change' (Bowman, 2019, p. 299). By providing young people the opportunity to co-produce (and to a lesser extent, *lead* certain parts of) this research project, our reflections on working with young people as *co-researchers* rather than research participants speaks to 'the advantages of engaging young people and gaining their perspective "at first hand"' (Smith et al., 2002, p. 193).

Contextualising railway trespass and anti-trespass rail safety campaigns

Railway trespass prevention in the UK is a pressing issue. However, there are contemporary disputes in the research as to whether a greater knowledge of the risks of railway trespass actually correlates with a decline in trespass incidents. Silla and Kallberg (2016) make the assumption, based on their study of the effectiveness of providing a 45-minute lesson on railway safety to 8–11 year olds (in Finland), that the greater young people's knowledge of the risks of trespass are, the lower the potential for fatal trespassing incidents (p.13). However, Ryan et al. (2018) assert that safety measures effective in reducing incidents within a certain demographic may actually have the adverse effect in other contexts. To demonstrate this, they give the example of 'a verbal warning of the approach of a fast, non-stopping train'; whilst this 'could reduce the number of accidental events at a station', it would simultaneously 'increase awareness of an approaching train for suicidal people' (Ryan et al., 2018, p. 1434). Similarly, Havârneanu highlights that the use of 'CCTV combined with public address-system-announcements' in the UK has generally been less effective amongst adults than children (Havârneanu, 2017, p. 1083).

In Algie and Mead's opinion, the use of ' traditional approaches to rail safety' over time - including 'educational messages, slogans encouraging personal responsibility, [and] adopting warning-, fear-, and shock-based messaging with confronting imagery that focused on deaths or maiming that resulted from such risky behaviors' - has seen people becoming 'desensitized'; their target audiences 'often ignore them' as a result (Algie & Mead, 2019, p. 96). In contrast, the 2012 *Dumb Ways to Die*

campaign, created by Metro Trains Melbourne (Australia) 'in response to concerns about the number of passenger-related accidents on and around its train platforms', attempted to make 'the behavior of being safe around trains attractive' to its young target audience (Algie & Mead, 2019, pp. 95–99). Despite being 'the third most shared ad of all time' worldwide, Algie and Mead argue that the campaign's creativity may well have 'overpowered the main message [. . .] which is safety around trains' (Algie & Mead, 2019, p. 97). Indeed, the four young participants of our own fieldwork study at Barnsley College - who all fit within *Dumb Ways to Die*s original target age demographic – were already familiar with the campaign, but expressed surprise when we informed them that it was a public safety campaign aimed at young potential railway trespassers.

In terms of contemporary railway trespass messaging, the main focal point of the 'Evaluating Trespass Prevention' project was Network Rail's most recent media campaign, 'You Vs Train' (2018–2022). Launched by Network Rail and the British Transport Police, 'You Vs Train' comprises short films (1–3 minutes each) which adopt a variety of distinctive film styles but are connected by the campaign's strapline: 'Everyone loses when you step on the track'. We were particularly interested in how our Young Co-Researchers' engagement with this public safety campaign affected them. Without being drawn too much into the debate over whether interpretations of 'affect' should be inclusive of feelings and emotions (see Dernikos et al., 2020, p. 5), we defined affect in the context of the *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* project as 'a gap between *content* and *effect*' (Massumi, 1995, p. 84; emphasis in original). The notion of affects as 'the forces (intensities, energies, flows, etc.) that register on/with-in/across bodies to produce and shape personal/emotional experiences' (Dernikos et al., 2020, p. 5) also helped up to conceptualize precisely what the Young Co-Researchers were being asked to evaluate. In a similar vein, the overview document for 'You Vs Train' (Mitchell, 2020, p. 5) describes the campaign's alignment with the idea that 'emotion trumps logic' in relation to railway trespass:

> To educate the target audience about the dangers of the railway we need to pull on emotional rather than rational thoughts and use these to drive our educational messages home. (Mitchell, 2020, p. 5)

The first 'You vs Train film', **'Tom's Story'** (Network Rail, 2018), is a dramatic reconstruction of a real-life trespass incident in 2014, where 16 year-old schoolboy Tom Hubbard – who is also shown in real-life with his mother at the end of the film – was electrocuted on top of a disused train and suffered life-changing injuries. On-screen text towards the end of the film confirms both how, and how badly, Tom was electrocuted: 'In 2014, Tom Hubbard was struck by **25,000 volts** [. . .] The current jumped from power lines he didn't even touch' (Network Rail, 2018, 01:13; emphasis in original). **'Tegan's Story'** (2020) also depicts another real-life, non-fatal trespass event that took place in 2018, but in a documentary-style video which features an interview with Tegan Stapleton herself, as well as real-life CCTV footage of her trespassing at Bournemouth Train Station – before being treated by emergency services personnel after being electrocuted by the electrified 'third rail'. Unlike the other three films, 'Tegan's Story' does not use on-screen titles to convey the specific dangers of railway trespass, relying instead on Tegan's own account.

'Dan's Story' (You Vs. Train, 2019) tells the fictional tale of a young boy who is also electrocuted by the 'third rail' after trespassing on the railway to get to a nearby skatepark. The reasoning behind depicting the dangers of the electrified third rail for a second time (in addition to 'Tom's Story') is revealed by the film's closing message: 'If you're not hit by a train, the **750 volts** from the electrified **third rail** will leave you with catastrophic injuries' (You Vs. Train, 2019, 01:04; emphasis in original). **'Parallel Lines'** (2021), the fourth film, illustrates another fictional trespass event from the perspective of both the teenage male trespasser, 'Dean', who encourages his friend 'Ash' to cross over a railway track; and an unnamed driver who is operating the train that nearly hits 'Ash'. Whilst 'Dean' recounts the events in a relatively light-hearted fashion – 'no harm done, right?' (Parallel Lines, 2021, 02:49–02:52) – the train driver, who does not speak in the film, is visibly distressed by the near-miss.

The film closes with the on-screen message: 'Even if you're not harmed, you could end up causing pain and suffering to others' (Parallel Lines, 2021, 02:59).

The primary goal of the *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* research project was to explore the perspectives of young people in relation to what forms and content of anti-trespass media messaging – including 'You vs Train' - appealed most to them. Young people are considered a demographic of concern for railway trespass incidents in the UK, but have rarely been given a voice in academic discourse around the efficacy of railway safety.

Adopting a youth co-researcher model

First and foremost, we are keen to state what our approach was *not*. This project was not Participatory Action Research (PAR) – or Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR), as PAR with young people is often referred to (see Ballonoff Suleiman et al., 2021; Ozer & Douglas, 2015). Whilst we were still hoping to 'effectively engage youth in social change' in this project (Ballonoff Suleiman et al., 2021, p. 29), the problem to be addressed was not identified by the young people themselves – a central tenet of YPAR (Ozer, 2017, p. 174) – but rather, something that both the key stakeholder (Network Rail) and the research institution (the University of Sheffield) wished to explore. Nonetheless, we were keen to prioritize 'the quality of the participation' over 'the proportionality of that participation' (Mcintyre, 2008, p. 15) – an important consideration given that we only effectively had a couple of months to work with the young people for this project; it would have been unrealistic to have pursued a YPAR approach in this instance.

Instead, we have characterized the young people working with us on this project as '(Youth) Co-Researchers', a term which continues to gain popularity in contemporary social science research (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Quimby et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2002). Our four Youth Co-Researchers were compensated for their time and expertise – both of which were given generously during what was their summer holidays, or rather, their 'free time' (see Bergström et al., 2010, p. 187). This was done to ensure what Bradbury-Jones and Taylor regard as 'an ethical obligation that [the young people as researchers] are treated fairly' (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015, p. 167), and took the form of what we believed the young people would appreciate most: an incentive to participate (i.e. paid lunch from a local vendor of their choosing) and compensation (i.e. an end-project voucher).

The project was multi-stage, including presenting a literature review to Network Rail, analysing archival material at the National Railway Museum (undertaken by Barai and Bramley), and bringing all that context to bear when reflecting on the most recent anti-trespass material, and how it could be evaluated. To develop the evaluation toolkit, the young people watched the latest material and reflected with Bramley and Oveson on questions that could be developed and refined to evaluate them. Supported by Bramley, they also created their own film footage relating to rail safety and interviewed research participants and project stakeholders (such as key figures in Network Rail, people who live near stations with high incidences of trespass, and a rail worker) about their recollections of anti-trespass material, and reflections on rail trespass. This filmmaking component of our project aimed to enable the students to access practical filmmaking and interviewing experience and training in a professional research environment. The Young Co-Researchers, as digital media students at Barnsley College at the time of the project, already had skills in creating film, but less experience in interviewing people on film, and no experience in conducting interviews for research. This article focuses on seven workshops that we undertook with the Youth Co-Researchers, and on the principles and practicalities of working creatively with young people as co-researchers.

We hope that the quality of the young people's contributions to this project – especially in the form of the responses they gave during our participatory workshops – illustrate that meaningful engagement with young people in relation to contemporary social issues can be achieved in a relatively short period of time, so long as the approach to that collaboration is both iterative and flexible to change. One of the key aims of the *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* project was to create an

Evaluation Toolkit for Network Rail, which could be used to assess which elements of the campaign strategies and messages are particularly effective at changing attitudes – hopefully leading to changed behaviour (i.e. a downward trend in youth trespass incidents and fatalities in the UK). We felt the best way to develop this questionnaire would be to co-edit the questions with the Young Co-Researchers, making them as clear and relatable to the target audience as possible. Our 'Evaluating Trespass Prevention' research project was iterative in the sense that we asked our young co-researchers to watch a series of railway trespass prevention films one by one – asking them to fill out the latest draft of our Evaluation Toolkit Questionnaire after each viewing, as well as informing us how the questions and their wording could be improved. For example after Workshop 1, we removed the question 'What is [the film's] purpose?' from Version 1 of the Evaluation Questionnaire, as our young co-researchers felt the question was unnecessary; they felt it would be obvious to a young person that the purpose of any of these films was to prevent people from committing the crime of railway trespass. Additionally, our young co-researchers thought that the Evaluation Toolkit participants should be asked what they had 'learned' from the process; the question 'Did you learn anything from watching this film?' was added to Version 2 of the Evaluation Toolkit at their request.

The project was also flexible to change; rather than telling the young co-researchers from the outset how many workshops we would be doing with them – something that would be almost impossible to know for sure – we asked them at the end of each workshop how many more sessions they felt they needed to complete both the Evaluation Toolkit and their filmmaking project. When they said 'yes', we organized a date/time that would best suit them; as doctoral researchers in the write-up stage of our respective theses, we (Oveson and Bramley) had the capacity and flexibility to accommodate the young co-researchers' requests. By the end of Workshop 6, the young co-researchers felt they would only need one more session, 'Workshop 7', in order to review the film footage they had captured and the Evaluation Toolkit they co-created.

Being able to work with young people as filmmakers as well as co-researchers was an original approach to meaningfully involving them in the research, and even enabled them to take a leading role in the project at certain key moments – even though they were not the target interviewees themselves. Rather than being asked the questions, the young people we worked with devised their own questions, effectively setting their own agenda for the project. It should also be noted that the fieldwork for this small-scale project took place during June-July 2021, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though it was possible to engage in face-to-face research with participants again at this stage of the pandemic, the 'socially distanced pandemic context' made the challenge of 'building trust and nurturing close collaborations' all the more difficult (Hall et al., 2021, p. 2). Indeed, the arrival of COVID-19 (and the various measures put in place globally to limit the transmission of the coronavirus) forced researchers to adjust their participatory methods (e.g. moving participation from face-to-face to online) during lockdown (see Sattler et al., 2022) – resulting in a perceived reduction or loss of 'openness and equitability' in some cases (Hall et al., 2021). In our view, these ongoing events made engaging with young people in a respectful and meaningful way even more important.

Working ethically with young people as co-researchers

The fieldwork we undertook involved seven half-day workshops with four work placement students from Barnsley College, as well as their Placements Tutor, Alex Dixon. Barnsley College, located approximately 15 miles away from the University of Sheffield, was logistically a convenient fieldwork location for this project. Students at Barnsley College are expected to undertake a number of work placement hours alongside their further education studies; being able to set up our project as a work placement opportunity allowed the students' time with us to be counted towards this quota. Following Barnsley College's work placement procedures, we submitted a short placement advert which was distributed to all students in the college's Media &

Photography department. We specifically chose to advertise this placement opportunity to Media & Photography students only, as both we (the researchers) and the Placements Tutor felt that these students would benefit the most from a placement that offered film and media production opportunities. We held a brief interview with the applicants (again, as part of Barnsley College's placement recruitment processes) and subsequently offered the placement to four students. Working with Barnsley College was also geographically justified: several train stations across South Yorkshire – not just Barnsley, but neighbouring stations at Sheffield and Doncaster as well – are regarded as national 'hotspots' of railway trespass activity (Network Rail, 2019). Indeed, an article posted by the local 'Barnsley Chronicle' online newspaper in April 2021 – just one month before the participatory phase of the *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* project began – warned readers of 'a surge in young trespassers "dicing with death" on Barnsley's rail network' (Timlin, 2021).

At the young people's request, we will refer to our four young co-researchers by the pseudonyms 'Larry', 'Henry', 'Ben', and 'Tim' throughout the remainder of this article. While it is unfortunate that we did not have any gender diversity in the recruitment of the co-researchers, in some ways this is apt, because boys and young men are statistically much more likely to have trespass fatalities than girls and women (see Waterson et al., 2017). Three of our co-researchers (Larry, Henry, and Ben) were on the College's Film and TV course (all 18 years old at the time of the project) whilst Tim was studying Broadcast Journalism (16 years old). We were granted ethical approval from UREC, the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee (application number 040949), and written informed consent was obtained for each participant (including written consent from Tim's parent/guardian).

All seven workshops took place face-to-face at Barnsley College between June-July 2021, and adopted the following iterative approach to our main research tasks:

- Viewing previous anti-trespass campaign materials – especially videos (see below);
- Developing an evaluation tool for anti-trespass campaigns;
- Conducting and filming interviews with partners and members of the public.

Oveson was primarily in charge of facilitating the focus group discussions and gathering the corresponding data, whereas Bramley – as both an academic and the project's filmmaker-in-residence – oversaw the interviewing and filmmaking components.

During our seven half-day workshops at Barnsley College, we recorded specific discussions between ourselves (Bramley and Oveson) and the Young Co-Researchers – who were always informed before we turned the audio recorder on. We wanted to capture interesting comments and feedback from the young people, without making them feel like absolutely everything that they said was being observed and, ultimately, analysed. In this sense, we were influenced by the notion that recording devices are '*epistemic agents* which make a difference in the making of the data' (Caronia, 2015, p. 143; emphasis in original). In some cases, this resulted in us taking the audio recorder off the workshop table altogether; 'the presence of the audio recorder, whether turned on or off, is such that the participant's circumspection means that something might not get said at all' (Rutakumwa et al., 2019, p. 578).

We recorded the entirety of our first two-hour group reflection session (on the anti-trespass campaign films the young people had watched) during the first workshop on 22nd June 2021; we did not record the young people's initial thoughts on each individual film that they watched, to give them the space and time to discuss this with us (and each other) 'off record' first. We also recorded our hour-long group reflection session during the seventh and final workshop on 15th July 2021. These recorded reflection sessions loosely followed the format of a focus group: Oveson and Bramley moderated by raising a series of points for discussion (e.g. going through each of Network Rail's recent 'You Vs Train' films one by one), and the young people shared their thoughts in-turn. This part of the project positioned the young people we worked with more as participants than co-

researchers, but we felt that a focus group would be the best way to ensure as full a participation as possible, whilst adhering to our own 'aims and objectives' for this funded research project (see Bagnoli & Clark, 2010, p. 114). The focus group setting allowed the Young Co-Researchers to set their own agenda, too; for example, the facilitator-led discussion about the 'You Vs Train' films as a whole was quickly steered by the young people towards one film that particularly stood out to them.

There were other limits to how far our co-research with young people for this project could go. For example, we could have asked the young co-researchers to help us select and analyse data from their discussions with us, instead of just doing this ourselves. However, we were mindful that a significant amount of additional time and resources would have been crucial to this, particularly in building their confidence with data analysis approaches (see Coad & Evans, 2008); the young people had given us enough of their summer holidays already, and had asked for us to make Workshop 7 our last, so we collectively decided against this. Indeed, we saw our data analysis work as separate from the main benefit of the research engagement to the young people, which was developing their creative filmmaking and interviewing practice more than it was about undertaking a formalized piece of research.

Evaluating trespass prevention with young people as co-researchers

The importance of affect in trespass prevention media

The first focus group on 22 June 2021 was guided by the Young Co-Researchers towards films in the 'You Vs Train' series that particularly stood out for them. What emerged from this discussion appeared to reinforce Network Rail's idea that emotive anti-trespass messaging, rather than logical arguments, are the best way to discourage young people from railway trespass. For example, Ben felt that 'Parallel Lines' (2021) was 'the most clever' of the films in the way it represented two narratives simultaneously (i.e. the trespasser and the train driver), but added that the film:

> . . . was more about the feeling of being sorry than the feeling of being scared. It makes you feel more sorry for the people dealing with it, than scared that it could happen to you.

Similarly, Henry told us Tegan's Story was '. . .more like a tragedy, a survivor's story. . .it helps you to sympathize with her'. Asked if he thought that the other three videos were also tragedies, Henry explained:

> . . .maybe not on the same level as [Tegan's Story], because with her, it looked like she had no idea that the 3rd rail was even a thing. It looked like she was crossing that rail completely unaware that there was an electrical danger. Meanwhile, with some of the other [films], [. . .] it was presented as though their ignorance was their undoing. [. . .] Because of their ignorance, fate decided that they deserved it.

Asked whether they saw themselves in any of the videos, the Young Co-Researchers gave a mixed response. In response to our question, 'do you see yourself in any of these films?', Larry and Henry both said 'no' – adamant that they would never trespass and would therefore never find themselves in any of these situations. However, Ben spoke of the importance of young viewers of You Vs Train both 'seeing themselves in the kid' (e.g. Tom in 'Tom's Story'), adding: 'they might not be as bothered about [. . .] risking their own life, but when it's showing the mum's point of view, it's showing that they're also upset by it – it's not about you being some sort of hero'. Tim also opened up about how he might have responded differently to the films had he seen them at a younger age:

> When I was younger when I didn't know very much about about trespassing on railways and things like that. But now I do. So in the past, I might have seen myself in that situation, but not anymore.

In general, the young people felt that the films which included survivors speaking as well as those that focused on the emotional impact on the loved ones of victims were most powerful – again reinforcing Network Rail's notion that emotional public safety messaging is more impactful than logic-centred messaging. Responses which support this claim included: 'I thought that the fact

[Tom's Story] showed his mum helped it emphasize the impact, because you don't want to make your mum sad' (Larry); 'I do feel sorry for the train driver [in Parallel Lines]' (Henry), and 'I felt a bit sorry for the guy being peer pressured [in Parallel Lines] because he was just being forced into making a mistake' (Tim) – all of which illustrate a significant empathetic response. Whilst the affective quality of each film stayed with them, shock did not appear to be an important factor for any of the Young Co-Researchers when watching the 'You Vs Train' films – despite 'Tom's Story' showing a boy being electrocuted to the horror of his friends, and 'Tegan's Story' showing footage of Tegan's real-life electrocution burns and scars. Henry felt that Parallel Lines 'was suspenseful, but not shocking'; likewise, 'with Tegan's story, I wasn't shocked by it – more so, I was saddened by it'. Larry agreed, saying, 'none of them [the films] shocked me'.

Whilst we do not present these responses as being fully representative of young people in the UK, we found this focus group discussion particularly insightful in terms of how young people might be affected by anti-trespass campaign messaging and imagery. Fascinatingly, we see a trend in their responses of caring more about their emotional impact on other people than on their own sense of loss or pain, in a manner that aligns with Havârneanu (2017)'s 'pro-social' approach. There is a nuanced expression of affect here: they appear to be more engaged with empathy, an affective resonance with the impact of trespass on peripheral characters, rather than a simple self-identification with the people who trespassed and suffered because of it. Indeed, many of the points raised by the Young Co-Researchers during this session fed into our later discussion around the phrasing of questions for the Evaluation Toolkit, which follows below.

Our young co-researchers improved our evaluation toolkit significantly

Over the course of the participatory workshop sessions, we talked through the various drop-down options for the Evaluation Toolkit questions with the students, making alterations and refining the choices, wording, and formatting as we went. In the first focus group session held on 22nd June 2023, the Youth Co-Researchers were incredibly forthcoming in terms of which questions worked and did not work for them. For example, in our first draft of the questionnaire, our first two questions were:

- What do you think this film is about?
- What is the film's purpose?

Whilst Larry 'liked' the first question, Tim felt that he could have given the same answer to both the first and second question. In light of this feedback, we agreed to combine both of these questions into one in our final version of the Evaluation Toolkit:

- What was the main message you understood from the campaign?

Asking young people to assess their own emotions was another challenge reported by our Young Co-Researchers. Our initial intention was to ask participants, 'How did the film make you feel?' However, Larry felt that 'asking someone how you feel isn't the easiest question', adding, 'you don't even know how you feel sometimes'. The agreement across the four Co-Researchers was that asking young people how they feel about a film was an important question, but that it could be framed in a different way. As a possible solution to this, Larry felt that making the question multiple-choice rather than open-ended 'could help', particularly for young male participants who may not feel comfortable with articulating their emotions. We co-edited the final version of this question, which became: 'What impact did the campaign have on you? (please tick all that apply'. As well as suggesting three potential 'impacts' – 'I was upset', 'I was better informed', and 'I was put off

trespassing' – the question also gives participants an option to select 'none of the above', or alternatively, to write an impact of their own.

Finally, the Young Co-Researchers told us that they had an issue with the word 'shock', which we originally included in the question, 'Did the information in the film shock you?' Larry thought that the word shocked 'could be changed' in the question, adding that he felt 'surprised' by some of the films' content, but 'didn't feel shocked'. In the end, we decided as a group to get rid of the 'shock' question altogether – not just because of the issues raised by the Young Co-Researchers, but because of the word's ambiguity as well; 'shock' could refer to feeling shocked, or the literal shocking (or electro-cution) of railway trespassers in the films, the latter of which we felt made use of the term inappropriate in this context.

We have far greater confidence in the final version of the Evaluation Toolkit we eventually passed on to Network Rail – having co-written the questions with the assistance of our Young Co-Researchers – than we would have had in a questionnaire that we had written on our own. Indeed, we ran through each of the updated questions with the Young Co-Researchers once more during our final participatory workshop on 15th July 2021, who gave their approval for it to be handed over. From this, we affirm and emphasize the value of involving young people in research, and particularly research that affects their own lives.

Discussion - what we learned from working with our young co-researchers

Earlier, we mentioned how the evaluation of working with young co-researchers to explore social issues is often framed in terms of academic contribution and credibility (see Given, 2008; Watson & Marciano, 2015) rather than what the young people stand to gain from agentive involvement in academic research. As a means of addressing this gap in scholarship, here we reflect on what we have learned from the process of working with a small group of young co-researchers, including what we wish we could have improved (and indeed, what our young co-researchers *told* us we could improve on). As well as outlining how we intend to improve our own youth co-research model, we hope that these reflections provide a useful and transferrable guide for social science researchers also seeking to work collaboratively with young researchers in the future.

Like any participatory research project, *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* was far from perfect. However, we were encouraged by the students' feedback in relation to what they had learned from being Co-Researchers on our project. In comments such as 'I feel like I've learnt the most from the interviews, as I've been able to get better at talking on camera' (Larry), and 'The B-roll filming was my favourite bit [...] I think it's because it's the most creative aspect of what we've done' (Tim), we see a sense of empowerment in the young people we worked with. Indeed, towards the end of our final focus group discussion on 15th July 2021, the Young Co-Researchers gave us feedback on how we (Bramley and Oveson) could have improved the participatory workshops:

> Tim: The only thing that could have been possibly even better with the sessions is, say, if it wasn't as spread out. So if it was like Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, I'd rather [have] that because then, I'm more concentrated on it. Say like last week, [if] I thought of something that I wanted to do when we came back, I had like nearly a week to try and remember it, and by then I'd forget it. Whereas if it's the day after, I'll remember that.
>
> Larry: Yeah, I think working each day would be a good idea. Because I was coming in each day anyway!
>
> Marion (Oveson): I was worried you guys would get tired!
>
> Ryan (Bramley): Same here!

We were also asked by the Young Co-Researchers how the film footage they had recorded would be used – a discussion which revealed to us how entrepreneurship and, indeed, exploitation, are often seen as going hand-in-hand with filmmaking as a practice. By the time of our final participatory workshop at Barnsley College, the young people had managed to conduct all their interviews. However, as previously mentioned, we decided not to ask the young people to edit this footage

as well, having already given up seven days of their summer holidays to work with us. In our final focus group discussion, Henry asked:

> I still don't understand where our video work is going? Like, has this whole thing been, like, an outsourced project of a larger thing, like a documentary, or something?

Bramley explained to Henry that other than wanting 'to show the people at Network Rail [...] what you've been working on' – which would likely require some light editing by Bramley – Henry and the Young Co-Researchers had done 'everything we've asked' of them, adding that the resulting product was 'as much your work as it is our own'. Indeed, the Young Co-Researchers would go on to accompany us on our visit to the National Railway Museum on 16th August 2021, where they shared short extracts from the films with key stakeholders from Network Rail. That said, the fact that Henry had assumed that the interview film footage they had produced would be 'outsourced' and subsumed within 'a larger thing' – beyond their own agency and control – spoke to broader expectations amongst young people of work experience as 'exploitative, unpaid and valueless' (O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2017, p. 446). As a research team, we could (and perhaps should) have better explained to our Young Co-Researchers earlier on in the project how the film footage they produced would be used. Without us making this clearer to the Young Co-Researchers early on, the idea that we would extract their film work and create a documentary for ourselves out of it took hold.

In our seventh and final workshop on 15th July 2021, we asked our Co-Researchers to reflect on the filmmaking process they had led on. In alignment with Parry et al.'s assertion that youth media production should be seen as more than 'simply workforce skills development' (Parry et al., 2020, p. 419), we asked our Young Co-Researchers to focus less on employability and entrepreneurship, and more on 'what they learned' through the process. Henry 'learned about [railway] trespass as a topic'; something that he had not previously encountered in formal education. Larry learned 'how to do an interview' and reflected on becoming 'better and better' at it over the course of the project. Tim already had an 'understanding' of 'the key things needed for an interview', but felt that being a Co-Researcher on the *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* project had 'developed my understanding of it' further.

Whilst we still generally agree with the assertion made by Parry et al. (2020), we believe that we should have given further recognition to the wants and aspirations of our young co-researchers from the outset of our engagement with them; if their main aspiration is increasing their entrepreneurship, then so be it. The young co-researchers we worked with on the *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* project were interested in playing a role in preventing railway trespass amongst their peers, but it would be wrong for us to assume that this interest could ever supersede their ambitions to become media professionals. After all, each of them has a long-standing interest in the media industry, given that they chose to do a further education course in Media; specifically, Film and TV (Larry, Henry, and Ben) and Broadcast Journalism (Tim). One way of formally recognizing what young people want to achieve from working on a university-led project is by drawing up an MoU, or 'Memorandum of Understanding' (Third et al., 2023, p. 41). Indeed, Bramley drew up an MoU for his doctoral research project, where he worked with a non-profit media organization that also provided media production placements to young people (see Bramley, 2021, pp. 418–421). Though we felt we had a reasonably good idea of what our young co-researchers wanted to gain from their experience of working with us (having been interviewed by us prior to the project beginning), a Memorandum of Understanding would have given further weight to their aspirations, as well as making us (as academic researchers) more accountable to them.

Conclusion

Despite there being significant room for further improvement, we nonetheless feel that the approach we took in the fieldwork with our Young Co-Researchers – working in an exploratory, informal, reflective, and creative way – worked really well. Working in this collaborative manner in both the co-writing of our Evaluation Toolkit and the undertaking of the Youth-Led

Filmmaking project meant that we were able to break down traditional barriers between 'the academics' and 'the students', helping to build rapport and lead to an openness that we believe cannot be achieved as easily by more formal approaches to participatory research with young people. No doubt one effective element to making this barrier porous was the position of Bramley as both a filmmaker and an academic, and this project highlighted how an academic with such skills can leverage them to forge connections with potential Young People as Co-Researchers in creative ways.

We hope we have highlighted how a Young People as Co-Researchers approach can be very helpful in facilitating meaningful engagement, particularly for shorter-term research projects such as *Evaluating Trespass Prevention*. Being open, flexible, and responsive to changing needs and circumstances helped us be able to adapt and led to very rich discussions between the Young Co-Researchers and ourselves – some of which we have illustrated and expanded on in this article. Embedding digital media production in the *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* project helped to provide our Young Co-Researchers with 'an important context for critical and creative engagement with the world' (Parry et al., 2020, p. 410). We hope our own critical reflections on the *Evaluating Trespass Prevention* project encourage more researchers to consider working with young people as 'agents of change' (Bowman, 2019, p. 299), and to employ creative approaches to co-researching with young people – such as filmmaking – where viable and appropriate.

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Data availability statement

Due to the ethically sensitive nature of the research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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