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"People Inside": Creating Digital Community Projects on the *YARN* platform

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Abstract:

In this chapter, we discuss our engagement with public communities on the AHRC-funded *YARN* project (yarncommunity.org). Reflecting our learning from various co-produced community projects that created and applied *YARN*, we consider the conceptualization of its "publics" in terms of the communities' co-creations in the project, as well as the meanings and practices of documenting, remembering and disseminating the communities' histories and heritage. We also examine the approaches to co-production and digital design that produced the platform, and reflect on what we have learnt about collaborative digital design, partnership working and producing effective tools for community use. In the process, we interrogate the meanings and practices of research at the convergence of digital community and public engagement in terms of considering the "people inside" the project.

Keywords:
YARN; digital community project; interactive narrative; co-design; co-creation; community-based research

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Introduction

> *As technology companies tout their inventions as having Intel* inside*, or being data-driven, we loved saying with confidence that YARN was story-driven with People Inside.*

> ~ Imran Ali (2021)

We have taken inspiration from Imran Ali's characterisation of the human element that was central to the process of co-producing our *YARN* platform. The notion of "People Inside" drove our creative and intellectual processes, and built the conceptual foundations of two formative projects as delivered by a team of researchers at the Universities of Leeds and York, and led by the first author between 2013 and 2018. The two projects explored the potential of online digital storytelling and value of co-designed digital research tools with a range of diverse communities. Both projects were funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The first project, *Pararchive: Open Access Community Storytelling and the Digital Archive* (2013–15), explored digital tools, archives and storytelling. The second follow-on project, *Digital Community Workspaces: Delivering Impact through Public Library and Archive Networks* (2017–18), sought to apply the tools and develop impact directly in local communities through local library and archival hubs. It particularly focussed on marginalized, isolated and underrepresented communities.

The inspiration for both projects came from previous research with communities involved in the 1984–85 Miners' Strike.[1] As part of that research, the first author worked with the BBC's news archive to produce counter-narratives that provided community perspectives and insights missing from the main corpus of the archive (Buchanan and Bastian 2015; Popple 2015). These stories were produced as a total of ten short self-directed films.[2] Everyone realized that these films represented an important set of practices which demonstrated both the desire and innate capacity of communities to take control of their own histories and challenge dominant narratives and media stereotypes (Flinn 2010; Ridge 2014). However, the opportunities to do so were limited and privileged as filmmaking was only available to a core number of participants. What was needed was a set of digital tools that could provide the whole community with similar opportunities. Such tools would afford them the opportunity to bring to bear ideas of local identity and democracy, community histories and specific issues around gender and media practices. For instance, *We Are Women, We Are Strong* (2009), examined the experiences of women involved in the Women Against Pit Closures movement. The lacunae of such tools also represented the community's desire to respond to top-down depositories of narratives, such as the BBC news archive, and postulated a new counter-archive of digital stories and testimony. As Caswell notes, a move towards the community archive comes from the need to make archives "for the people, by the people, that often eliminate the traditional middlemen of the professional archivist and university or government repository" (Caswell 2014, 32).

The first *Pararchive* project (https://pararchive.com/) enabled the researchers to co-design and implement such a set of community digital storytelling tools. Through a series of iterative learning through practice and co-production workshops, the research allowed project partners to co-design a digital resource for users to tell their stories and create new collaborative archives (Popple and Mutibwa 2016). This resource was launched as *YARN* (www.*yarn*community.org) in 2015 and further developed in the *Digital Community Workspaces* project in 2017. The *YARN* project partnered with four public library and archive organizations based in the Isle of Bute in Scotland and York, Leeds and Wakefield in England to engage their local communities in digital projects with local cultural heritage resources. *YARN* has consequently also responded to a variety of community needs and institutional aspirations, including difficult self-identified issues such as local history work, genealogy, co-working, publishing, and working with disadvantaged and hard to reach audiences, as well as with "hidden" or degraded digital resources. The outputs manifested as a range of stories published on the *YARN* platform which reflect not only a community's ties, but also its cultural identity, histories and heritage. The platform has subsequently been adapted and adopted by a range of community projects and ongoing AHRC funded research to provide bespoke resources for co-produced research.[3]

In this chapter, we will discuss and reflect on our engagement with and consideration of the communities with whom we worked across these projects. In particular, we will focus on the process and reflections of involving the community in research across two main thematic strands:

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[1] See the AHRC funded project *Open Archive: The Miners' Strike: A Case Study in Regional Context –* (AH/H500030/1).

[2] Branded as *Strike Stories*, the films can be accessed at https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/media/dir-record/research-projects/356/strike-stories-opening-the-archives-on-the-miners-strike-1984-85.

[3] See for example *Fabulous Femininities* (https://fabulousfemininities.co.uk/) and *Impacts of Covid-19* (https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/the-team/covid-19-research-project/).

(i) engaging and working with the community as part of a research "public" to create a platform suited for them; and

(ii) creating a resource with and for the community that interweaves the logics of database and narratives to best meet their needs and support their unique modes of engagement and storytelling.

Through these reflections, we hope to add two corresponding strands to the conversation. The first is a demonstrated approach to community research and engagement with them. The second is to illustrate the vacillation of a digital tool between its functions of storytelling and repository and thinking through what that ambiguity implies for communities with unique needs and means of engagement.[4] Weaving lessons from the two strands, we will also present an experience-based toolkit on researching with communities which reflects the lessons of our engagement, including problems and their solutions. We hope the toolkit will benefit other researchers on community-based projects.

Co-creation and Engagement: Diverse Communities on the Research Projects

The first aim of the *Pararchive* project was to get a foundational sense of what communities wanted and needed for their research/storytelling practices, and to understand the best means of achieving a co-produced specification for the platform (Lambert 2013). We wanted to eschew established design studio approaches to client-led development and evaluation and innovate honorific methods of working together (Kimbell 2015). As lead designer Imran Ali noted, co-production was about turning such principles on their head and designing for small and intimate sets of groups on a case-by-case basis. The resulting aggregation of models, principles and practices would then be used to orchestrate the final digital resource. As Ali (2021) noted:

> *YARN* was a step change for our company in how we'd usually conceive of a digital product. Though we're very familiar with co-design practices and creating architectures of participation, they're generally conducted at a scale of millions of users and usually remotely and as abstract personas.

In the course of our research, there was an implicit recognition of the varied and often contradictory needs and frameworks that needed to be addressed. Unlike a commercial approach to digital design, *YARN* users were putative clients and not excluded from most of the developmental stages of digital innovation. In the standard design studio model, the usability and iterative testing and evaluation phases come much later in the process, with the often-untested assumption that such tools are easily translated, scalable and operationalized for commercial contexts (Kerridge and Michael 2018). However, more recent critical commentaries suggest otherwise (Tsing 2004; Tsing 2015). Moreover, specific socio-cultural contexts need to be foregrounded and tested. One size does not fit all. The specificity of what we were going to produce together had to be reflective of all partners, and thus sensitive and reflexive in nature.

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[4] The platform acts as a repository of the text and links produced by the user but does not act as a formal archive for digital objects. It works on hyperlinks to content.

The rationale of our approach was based on a primary recognition that the idea of community is a complex and non-homogenous entity – a moving and unfolding set of "publics" who coalesce around contexts of location, affinity and challenge. No one community is alike, and we wanted to draw on a pluralistic range of contexts, traditions and expertise. Our sense here of the diversity of community or publics similarly resonates with others' views and definitions. For example, Warner (2002, 10) writes of how a public "is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one's disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology." He thus recommends adopting a strongly historical approach to understanding the public and the "preconditions of its intelligibility" (2002, 9). In more nuanced terms, Delanty (2010) highlights ambivalence in the idea of community between the local against the universal. In a more traditional sense, the community exists as the bonds which unite particular, immediate social relations (Tönnies 1963). Yet in "other and more post-traditional forms," community pushes "an expression of global humanity" (Tönnies 1963, 5). As such, our approach to our communities similarly took on these tensions in covering the diverse values and contradictory temperaments inherent in its concept. As a result, we were conscious that our engagement with and designs for them also as a whole has implicit ethical and operational consequences (Denison and Stillman 2012).

To incorporate a broad range of experience, digital literacies and practice traditions from each group, we adapted an Action Research-based methodology (Burns 2007; Hacker 2013). The resulting variant, Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR), is founded on an iterative series of engagements with partners to undertake four steps (see also Popple and Mutibwa 2016). The first involves discussion of the research itself, inviting participants to identify what they want from the process (in terms of tools, functions and needs); frame the important questions; and consider what they want to work on (see Fig. 1). The second involves making with developers and designers (modelling; specification writing; prototyping). The third is a reflective stage where what has been achieved in step two is considered. The fourth is a planning stage that leads into the next iteration of the cycle (Fig. 2). The cycle can be repeated a number of times to refine and develop ideas as well as build consensus about the value of the tool and its functionality. Hence, the core processes were aimed at involving all partners in ongoing iterations of research questions, ideas and practical explorations of storytelling, research traditions and possible digital models.

[insert Figure 1]

[insert Figure 2]

The process of listening and cycles of mutually beneficial exploration centred on action research models fostered a core process of learning through collective "doing." Being able to participate in the production of a specification for a digital platform developed skills and confidence. Its iterative process allowed for ideas and learning to run at a mutually defined rate. The CBPAR approach also established equanimity within and between participant groups, and allowed parallel paths to be followed (Kindon et al. 2007). At all stages, we were guided by the sense that we wanted to avoid the imposition of a hierarchy in working sessions in the collective research team (Janes 2015). Our developers noted how they stepped back rather than controlled or managed the process or dictated the output. They saw themselves as facilitators rather than instigators. As Ali (2021) notes:

With *Yarn*, we had the privilege of working with just dozens of people, whom we could understand as whole people, not just personas and archetypes. Listening to and hearing their fears, hopes and aspirations, inhabiting their lives with them gave us a new and very human design material… people.

The CBPAR method also allowed us to reflect on the scale and dynamics of the groups with whom we were working. It enabled us to challenge a commercial "imaginary" with the multiple realities on the ground and in sync with the intent to evolve tools and approaches that were applicable across a range of contexts and could meet multiple needs. The action research-based approach meant that each of the partner communities was focused explicitly on their own interests and needs. For example, one group based in and around Stoke-on-Trent had a strong interest in the pottery industry that had dominated their city. It had left a legacy of industrial pride, aesthetically beautiful artefacts and ongoing pollution and health conditions. Calling themselves Ceramic City Stories, in participating in our projects they wanted to focus on these aspects of their history, drawing on their own knowledge and experiences. They possessed their own archives, but also wanted to link with national collections such as those curated by the Science Museum. As a result, we were able to apply for separate funding to follow this specific interest and work with the Science Museum to provide access and to build experimental digital models of the stores that communities could visit remotely.[5] That follow-on project, *Science Museum: Community-in-Residence*, thus allowed the group to address their specific concerns, follow their passions and build their own projects in parallel to our research (Mutibwa et al. 2020). In that respect, our CBPAR approach led to developing communities' confidence and spurred additional activities as the groups evolved and deepened their individual interests, and eventually enabled them to work outside the main strands of the projects.

Similarly, our partners on the Isle of Bute developed interests out of our projects in local heritage, as well as the broader economic regeneration of the island's tourist economy and the role of digital infrastructure to enable connectivity and foster online activities. To investigate more on the roles of digital infrastructure, adoption and literacies, we secured funding for a complementary project called *Island Stories* (2014) to explore perceptions of the island's digital infrastructure at that time and the central role of heritage as part of a regeneration strategy (Duffy and Popple 2017). The *Island Stories* project was also revealing in highlighting the difficulties of engaging every participant in common purpose projects. It showed the breadth of interests and personal motivations for taking part. As part of a survey conducted during the project, all 57 respondents said they were interested in local heritage – seemingly an indicator of common purpose. However, when further asked about their specific interests, the same sample identified a total of 31 unique foci. This breadth of interests clearly signalled the individuated investment in the locality as a source of inspiration, and further evidenced the capabilities of digital resources to resolve and allow individual as well as collective projects.

We further realized that participation was often contingent on specific needs related to the interests and expertise of partners. As Paul Duffy, our community organizer on the Isle of Bute noted, "only half of the research topics studied as part of the project became digital *YARN*s, with the other

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participants choosing to disseminate their stories through traditional formats and forums" (Duffy 2020, 60). Many of these were digital platforms such as Facebook which was dominant on the island. This realization disrupted our sense of what the issues with digital inclusivity fully entailed, and that self-exclusion was a factor we had not considered. The lesson here was thus for us to listen and not presume that certain practices might be preferable.

What emerged from these experiences out of the two projects were a series of individuated foci and approaches, independent iterations and different models of doing things that were used to build and test the digital platform. The insights were so rich that we could not incorporate all of them into prototypes. Rather, there was a collective recognition that we needed to boil down the various features we felt important to develop. For example, whilst some participants were using other forms of digital platforms to distribute their research and stories, others keenly felt that they did not want the platform to resemble social media. The compromise was that stories could be tweeted following publication. Copyright was another important theme that permeated projects and played out through discussion and modelling. There was a strong feeling that people did not want to lose control of their own material, and simply give it away online. Similarly, they wanted to be able to use other people's content without fear of breaking copyright. We reconciled these two concerns by deciding not to build a repository as part of the platform. Instead, the platform would feature hyperlinks from other hosting sites to aggregate online content. In so doing, we also recognized a compromise that meant stories and research were ephemeral and subject to loss as they depended on the stabilities of the original hosting sites.

Moreover, on one hand, explorations allowed for multiple iterations of the research questions through a range of expanding projects – the more partners, the more input. On the other hand, we had to accept a competing plurality of opinions and recognition that user-centred design is honorific but risky. The range of opinions, different needs and conflicting positions on issues such as ownership and control certainly complicated the developmental process. However, in a community context it is demonstrably a moral and ethical imperative to embrace complexity and recognize that not everyone can be satisfied (Banks et al. 2013).

Our experiences of working with partners in Stoke-on-Trent and on the Isle of Bute are emblematic of the many communities we worked with on the projects, and illustrate the specificities of each's context, tradition and set of needs and aspirations. They do not represent finite or definitive lessons in how to proceed, but add to the sum of knowledge on how to approach community-based digital projects. The underpinning platform was thus both the product of collaboration, and a resource for future collaborations crossing communities, individuals and organizations. Indeed, one of its ongoing aims is to continue to foster genuinely meaningful relationships between institutions of all scales and the general public and engender a series of ongoing projects and dialogues.[6]

Storage and Narrative: "Publics" globally across the digital database

The *YARN* project's second major aim of engaging with the publics was to create a *grassroots database of narratives*. In this sense, the public become both producers and custodians, as reflected

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[6] Some of these projects have had global reach, for example being involved in hosting community research filmmaking from an ongoing participatory arts project around preparedness for earthquakes in Chile. For an account of the research undertaken as part of the NERC *Seismic Cities* (2018) project in Chile see Popple (2019).

in its central tagline: "Make, share and connect stories with things on the web" (Fig. 3). Hence, the *YARN* resource is, firstly, a storytelling *tool* as a processual platform with prompts on its interface for the user to build their narrative, and which enables uploads of text and media onto the Web. At the same time, the resource is also an organized *database* that contains the community's collection of stories and digital media, searchable through query fields of projects, contributors, times and media assets.

[insert Figure 3]

YARN thus converges two key and competing forms of cultural expressions: *narrative* and *database*. On one hand, they stand across contrasting binaries: one ancient, the other relatively recent; one of symbolic systems of writing and the image, the other of the computer; one ephemeral, the other for the futurity of reference and search. But they are also reconcilable: both are cultural forms with which to present models of each community's world; both give voice to their stories and lives. The idea of the "public" which the project serves thus interweaves between the community that tells, creates and leaves traces of their existence and belonging; and the community which refers to, searches, consults and retrieves the building blocks of the community's narratives, histories and memories as their collective stories. The illustrations through *YARN* and implications of such imbrication will be discussed throughout this section.

This convergence of database and narrative in relation to new media is not new. The database features in much of new media, starting from CD-ROMs as storage media to webpages as collections of disparate elements, such as text, images, videos and hyperlinks. However, online databases, by being relatively more accessible, have also begun to adopt collective storytelling, aligning with other common digital practices such as remix, mashups and fan fiction. Recent examples of online storytelling databases include Cowbird (https://cowbird.com; still accessible, though now inactive and no longer accepting any more contributions), which holds a self-proclaimed "87,891 stories on 28,107 topics from 14,574 authors in 186 countries." Most are vignettes of text and images which the viewer selects and navigates at will. Another example is the Atlas of the Civic Imagination (https://www.ciatlas.org/). Its website invites the sharing of stories and experiences: "Our goal here is to *make the stories that inspire the imagination visible* and through this encourage conversation, creativity and action." [Emphasis added.] Both examples are not only databases in terms of structured and searchable collections. They are also collections formed by the public as internet users who subscribe to the collections' aims and contribute their labours to it – indeed, bringing it into existence – while at the same time used as a storytelling tool. The databases' aims tend to be noble and idealistic. Cowbird self-bills as a "public library of human experience"; the Atlas springboards off its mother project, the Civic Imagination Project, and asks for contributions to "[tap] the civic imagination," or "our collective vision for what a better tomorrow might look like" so as "to bridge perceived cultural gaps between diverse communities." Wrapped in this rhetoric of "public library" and "collective vision" is likewise the competing, yet paradoxically complementary, logics of narrative and database – of story and collection – which weave through their warp and weft.

Democratization of culture in the participatory nature of digital interactivity thus overarches the twin logics of narrative and database. Mainstream and mobile Internet access further extends interactivity to the wider Web-using public. What emerges is not only a user's unique formation

of a story, but also potential for civic engagement and persuasion (Nash 2014). Interweaving between database and narrative is thus also the politics of participation which colors the notion of the public: they are not only creators and producers with agency, but also the complicit drivers of the ideology of interactivity as the politics for change.

Turning to *YARN*, we now describe two contrasting engagements with partner communities who worked with us on the project as illustrations of its competing logics of database and narrative. The first is the project team's engagement with the Chinese community in Leeds as a sub-project to build on existing local history resources held by Leeds City Library and Archives. The aim was to develop new user communities within Leeds drawn from isolated or hard to reach groups. Leeds is home to one of the largest Chinese populations in the UK: 1.5% of all Chinese people in the UK live in Leeds, compared to 3.4% in Manchester as the city with the largest proportion (Gov.uk 2020, np). However, by the Leeds City Library's own admission, the community is not very well represented in its archives. This is despite the UK registering high growth rates of different kinds of Chinese migrants. These range from students in UK higher education to "highly skilled migrants" who enter the UK under its points-based system of border control to high-net-worth, central-London-residing individuals. The motivation of engaging with this community via *YARN* was to give the community a space for representation, and for *YARN* to be a tool for its stories. Our primary community partner was the Leeds Chinese Community School (LCCS), where we held two *YARN* workshops for their members to share stories on living in Leeds or the UK.

Notably, the community did not extensively adopt *YARN* as a storytelling tool, so not many stories emerged from the community on the platform. Rather, *YARN* developed for this community in two other ways. Firstly, the Leeds City Library deposited onto *YARN* a number of media assets, such as scanned photographs of historic playbills which alluded to Chinese events and culture at Leeds. Examples include "Chinese Entertainment" consisting of juggling, acrobatic tricks, fire eating, and advertisements of Chinese comic opera and magic shows. Scans of census records, some from 1911, were also uploaded with highlighted notes of Leeds Chinese residents' details, such as their occupations, birthplace and age. Historic photographs, particularly of Chinese businesses in the city, were also posted, alongside comments by Leeds residents relating their memories of those businesses, such as meals at restaurants. The logic of the resource as a depository here is clarion, particularly in terms of widening accessibility to these records out of the Leeds library, which are otherwise visible only on a physical visit to its archives.

Secondly, stories which we did succeed in soliciting from members of the LCCS proved to be fleeting. Brief accounts were given on how current community members stay in touch with their families in China; some concise stories were also offered on how members' families had arrived in the UK. Other stories took the form of brief comments and observations, such as this one by a resident: "My Dad's takeaway was closed on Sundays and the community used to get together. It feels like everyone knew each other back then" (http://yarncommunity.org/stories/585). Other comments noted how "Leeds's Chinese community lacked cohesion and a sense of shared identity when compared to other Northern cities such as Manchester and Liverpool." While these observations might not appear to be in the form of a conventional story, we also take for these purposes Georgakopoulou's (2017) argument of how "sharing stories out of the moment" – in terms of small, fragmented, open-ended tellings – may become what she calls, albeit in the context of social media, the taking of a narrative stance. Nevertheless, even in these fragmented, stance-

like instantiations, the stories were not formally documented or recorded on the *YARN* resource. Ultimately, their stories at the workshops were collected by the researchers and logged onto *YARN* as recollections related to them. Longer stories and accounts via interviews with a few individuals in connection to the LCCS were also collected, recorded and set to a film, directed by Leeds researcher Michael Schofield, and posted onto *YARN*. In light of such use, *YARN* functioned more effectively as an archive than a tool, particularly as a live collection of small fleeting moments which proved difficult to pin down from the community, be that due to a reluctance to engage with the technology, or simply that migrants' stories, while rich and eventful, in themselves tend to be fleeting and ephemeral. After all, these are stories of journeys, and invariably about passing, transition, adaptation and assimilation.

The Leeds Chinese community's engagement with *YARN* may be contrasted against another sub-project: the 60th anniversary in 2017 of the twinning of York and Münster, cities in North East UK and North West Germany respectively. The anniversary's timing fell fortuitously at the outset of the *YARN* project. The project partner was Explore York, an integrated library, archive and museum. Our common interest was in exploring the potential of creating narratives on a digital resource out of digitized materials from Explore York collections for York communities. At this point, the *YARN* resource was still operating along the logic of the database, with concern on accessibility of archival resources for the community.

However, what emerged on *YARN* in relation to the York-Münster twinning anniversary were numerous stories and reminiscences out of the twinning, primarily from three associations: the York-Münster Association; Explore York Archives; and Rotary York-Ainsty (which was twinned with the Rotary Club of Münster St Mauritz, and therefore host to a similar UK-Germany relationship). Stories from all three sources related visits to each other's cities, and reflections on the meaning of their associations' long international and intercultural friendships and relationships. The stories were usually recorded in written text, but there were also a number of voice-only recordings. One poignant example is by Dennis Miller, a long-time York Rotarian, who spoke of his first visit to Münster with his wife, during which they received news of the birth of their first grandchild on the morning after their arrival. That day also happened to be their host's birthday. Their hosts then sang a song for Dennis and his wife at a formal dinner that evening to celebrate their grandchild's birth. As Dennis recalls, "I have no idea what the words were!" (https://yarncommunity.org/stories/479). Another lengthy story was posted onto *YARN* by the secretary of the York-Münster Twinning Association relating how they had visited Münster for the first time in 2012. It was a story consisting of many memories, personal associations (such as family connections to Germany) and photographs taken of sights in the city, such as the Prinzipalmarkt, St Paulus Dom, the townhall and the Stumble Stones to commemorate the residences of Jewish victims of the Nazi regime (https://yarncommunity.org/stories/447). Janet Robinson, another York Rotarian, described a school trip to Münster she had taken in 1960 to visit a pen-friend in Münster. Part of her story contained a remarkable photograph of the school group as assembled at York station in their school uniforms and alongside their teacher, Mrs Jones, and their luggage trunks (https://yarncommunity.org/stories/484).

In this case, *YARN* was not only a site for hosting the stories, but also a resource tool for producing them. The logic of narrative is clearly deployed here through the formation and appearance of the story in accordance with *YARN*'s narrative-specific interface. This interface specifically prompts

the user to relate their story through blocks of story "passages," including descriptions of events as well as the inclusion of media assets such as voice recording, personal photographs and text. Almost all of the *YARN* stories related on the twinning anniversary were of nostalgia and numerous personal memories, perhaps as a direct result of the occasion of its 60th anniversary. Only a couple of stories, such as those by Explore York Archives, were deposits of archival collections. One of these were scans of the first letter of invitation from Münster's *Oberbürgermeister* (mayor) through the UK Foreign Office inviting a civic delegation from York to visit Münster in May 1957. Another was the itinerary of the civic delegation from Münster to York in July 1957 (which included a visit to and tour of Rowntree's Cocoa and Chocolate Works!). Otherwise, the stories as told through *YARN* took on a narrative logic which reflected numerous personal voices, sometimes literally so in the form of audio recordings of a verbal account. The poignancy of these personal stories is resonant in conveying the sense of living memories, alive only with the people who had undergone and experienced them in their time, and which will also soon vanish with their passing. The personal voices of the narratives through *YARN* in this case thus take on an emotional heft that is larger than the story itself – the narrative here is also of life itself and the very passing of lived time in an accumulated form as accentuated by the database. These are stories with unmistakable personal resonance. Through the resources on which they were produced, these stories interweave both logics of narrative and database.

Database and narrative are thus two competing imaginations which shape and form the *YARN* resource. This contrast, in turn, reflects the encounters of the community with the digital resource in terms of how they take (or do not take) to it, as well as their engagement with their own stories as a whole. But engagement with the public humanities along these strands of logic also carries its own hazards. For instance, in terms of narrative, the resource becomes an open work (Eco 1989), whose interactive nature privileges the individual voice even as it mirrors the loss of narrative authority, such as from an institution. The result of such open-endedness is likely to be a cacophony of babel, if at least authentic in its chaos. By virtue of such engagement, the contingency and indeterminate nature of narrative might just have to be the language of the public humanities. Conversely, in terms of the database, a similar chaos appears as the vulnerabilities of a grassroots digital database are laid bare. For instance, all media assets have to be uploaded onto alternative platforms, such as YouTube or Vimeo (for videos); Flickr (for images); and Soundcloud (for sound files). This dependency also renders the assets extremely vulnerable, where links break or are taken down by the original owner or even the platform. Files are also constantly subject to copyright issues. The database of the public humanities thus also has to contend with the contingency of the ephemera that defines the digital – it is part of the nature of the beast.

Toolkit/Core Principles for community-based research

Drawing together what we have learned from these and other strands of related research, we collate here a set of governing principles based on experience that may guide colleagues in their approach to digital co-production and collaborative working. These are by no means comprehensive; we continue to learn and evaluate what we do and refine approaches accordingly. Rather, we present them as a starting point from which to develop the specific parameters of future projects.

1. **Recognize the complexities of managing relationships with the community**

Firstly, engagement with the publics in research requires skill and understanding of managing relationships with communities. Such understanding comes through negotiation and jointly evolving strategies for managing research. Methods and approaches often emerged through working together, and we learnt to adapt and respond to ideas and concerns as part of our working relationships. For example, in the early stages of research it is important to allow time for getting to know each other and hearing about the interests and traditions within partner communities. We also advocate and take responsibility for using languages of inclusion and of parity of contribution and opinion. We use language that is open and accessible, mutually determined and non-specialist. For example, we decided against the standard term "tag" on the platform as there was a sense that people wanted to distance themselves from the modalities of social media. Instead, we used the alternatively agreed term of "people" as that felt more natural. We also feel it is important to begin all projects by discussing practices and traditions, and not assume what people want or need. Recognize iniquity and be open about how far you can adjust to the partner's participations, with equal value attached no matter how partial or limited.

It is also crucial to provide resources and skills building for participants. These skills may be in digital terms, such as the workshops held on the use of *YARN*. They may also be non-digital skills, such as accessing archives and reading resources together. At the same time, engagement with the community, as much as it is about providing for them, is also about letting them have a space. As mentioned, the biggest risk we faced was pre-judgement of what our participants might want and to model idealized communities that we were going to support through a digital design and evaluation process. We were constantly surprised and occasionally confounded by our partners, and quickly learnt to be guided by them. Our best engagements with the communities came about by simply listening to them and their concerns and trusting their expertise. We stayed alert to not "governing" or imposing on them our ideas of what the project is or which directions it should take.

At the same time, it is also important to understand when to let go as communities develop in their own natural ways which may or may not be in alignment with the continued aims of the project. We learnt to worry increasingly less about the framework we had devised in the funding phase and plans of work. We certainly found this gradual release liberating, although difficult in the initial phases. Yet as we recognized and embraced the complexities of our groups, each with their own dynamics, we quickly rejected our pre-conceived ideas of community in favour of emergent ideas which began to coalesce around what was needed for the project.

In these respects, we feel it is easier to think of a complex range of constituencies or publics in terms of affinity (as based on the community's broad shared values) and interests, rather than a homogeneous notion of community. The distinction is important because it helps to better frame the motivations for engaging in projects, working together and then disengaging with them. These distinctions became apparent from the outset of the first project as the tensions between what were seen as broad community wants conflicted with individual or small group public needs, such as around political positioning or media frames (see also Bailey and Popple 2011). The means of engagement are often circumstantial, at best fortuitous and always organic.

2. **Co-produce research questions and consult on methods that are practicable**

Much of the two projects was conducted by way of co-creating the digital resource with the partner communities through workshops, as well as more formal sessions such as project meetings and conferences. Trust is critical in this process. The communities should genuinely subscribe to the projects' aims and believe they have an integral stake in them and in the achievements of the projects, rather than feel they are mere participants in the work from whom the researchers draw data. The integrity in this regard of the *Pararchive* and *YARN* projects as "bottom-up" research work was thus paramount to the researchers. It was an issue that we always took care and time to explain. The communities' feedback was also always taken seriously, as was debriefing, usually by way of a project closing conference. This is so for the communities to see and understand their impact on the project, and to reinforce trust and shared purpose.

Crucial to the success of this approach is the need for agreement on the objects of research. These discussions should then be turned into a series of core research questions that avoid isolating academic terms and that are clearly related to the methods to be used. For instance, do not talk about "data" in an abstracted research context. Rather, explain how you are going to explore the questions together, how you are going to work on the problems identified in the questions and how you are going to approach them through the activities you are doing together.

3. **Allow things to go wrong and embrace failures**

Virtually all projects will go wrong in some way. Where engagement with communities are concerned, much of that engagement may be unpredictable and subject to going astray.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that there is value in the dead ends of the project. Those dead ends will carry significance, if sometimes retrospectively. One example for us is our engagement with the Chinese community in Leeds. While not as engaged in the ways which we had hoped and anticipated, it nevertheless showed us new and illuminating aspects of the *YARN* resource. Back-up plans also help, as does a willingness to change perspective and re-view the results which emerge and the direction which the project has taken.

The key is to understand that working with publics always involves a degree of organic flexibility in terms of how and in what ways these groups engage with the research. Be open to the project's flux and flexes. The ability to commit time and sustain activities is often difficult for people, and flexibility is essential. Do appreciate that all participation is valuable.

4. **Recognize the limitations of working with large institutions in a community context**

A number of our partners for both projects were large institutions, such as the BBC and the Science Museum in London. The original collaboration had been to produce creative links to these institutions' archives, whose materials were otherwise relatively constrained on how they can be used. We were all intrigued and excited by the potential of unique stories to emerge from such institutional material.

However, what transpired were clear limitations under which these institutions operated, where decision making was labyrinthine, staff was overcommitted, and action was difficult to drive. In the end, the collaboration was considerably different from what was originally intended, which in

turn affected the scope of what we wanted to achieve on the projects. The lesson learnt, then, is to have a clear understanding of how a large partner institution works and to appreciate the limitations of working with them. Be prepared to adapt activities and the scale of the project. It is easy to get carried away with the opportunities and glamour of what can be achieved with such high-profile partnerships. Making them work practically on the ground is sometimes another matter.

5. Build trust, relationships and legacy

Of critical importance was the projects' relationships with its various stakeholders, such as project partner institutions and communities. Relationships within the research team, made up of members from different institutions, were also significant. Again, trust was paramount throughout the relationships in both projects. In trust also lay the belief that every member would make valuable contribution to the project, even if it was not immediately apparent. At the end of the day, it was this virtuous cycle of trust, value and shared purpose which enabled both projects to operate smoothly and productively. The most important element in the process of building relationships is time. These were relationships which took time, effort and engagement to build and maintain. There is no short-cut. Through dialogue, workshops, constructive engagement, verbal and non-verbal appreciations of community input and continuing conversations about the project and its aims, the researchers built the relationships of trust, ownership and belief which turned out to be crucial in powering the project and enabling the work to be done.

What was also of huge benefit to the project teams were continuing relationships and legacies which came out of it. These benefits took various forms, such as continuing collaboration. Even as we write this, members of the research team are still working with the project partners by way of other research grants and grant applications. Again, such continuation of relationships takes work and time, but as important is the fundamental sharing of purpose and beliefs from the project. Research engagement with the public thus requires this genuine communality across the work, where participation is more than just the contributions to the project but takes the form of a wider sense of shared purpose and mission.

Conclusion

As we slowly emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic and resume face-to-face research work with communities, we hope that these reflections will allow researchers to develop genuinely consequential partnerships with communities at the heart of research and its outcomes. We want this approach to drive and facilitate community research, including campaigning, innovating and using digital resources in experimental and surprising manners. In our own research, we use these lessons of community design processes to rethink what potential *YARN* has for other communities and what iterations of the platform are now possible. This is particularly important as universities seek to develop their civic missions and demonstrate the value of public partnerships (Hart et al. 2013).

There are already signs that experiences of lockdown and dislocation have engendered a more questioning and collaborative response to the ways in which we conduct digital research and how

we see our research as challenging and changing. It has certainly tested commonly held assumptions such as that research should be "digital by default" and technologically driven. When our collective experience of online communications, social and professional interactions is evaluated, perhaps we can re-set our quest for universalist and ubiquitous digital solutions and roll back to the particular and specific. We can start to really build with "People Inside."

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Figure Captions

Figure 1: Discussions with the Isle of Bute Rothesay Library community group
Figure 2: Collage of Post-It notes, workshops and sketches of discussion, planning and reiteration
Figure 3: *YARN*'s landing page