**CARLETTI — Exploring**

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**Exploring Community Engagement in the Design of an Online Archive**

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This paper presents the socio-technical implications of designing and deploying an interactive, community-driven, and community-contributed archive.

In 2015 the Theatre Royal Nottingham (UK) will be celebrating its 150th anniversary, having first opened its doors in September 1865. This is a major landmark for Nottingham and the ideal time and catalyst to explore the venue’s past and engage the city and its residents with its performance heritage. At present, there is a large amount of records available related to the history of the Theatre Royal Nottingham. However, an archive has not been developed yet, and there is the need of establishing a system to organise the records and ultimately make them accessible to the public and the researchers interested in exploring them. This archive will allow understanding, preserving, and enriching the history and the integrity of the Theatre Royal, and constructing the memory of the building by creating a bridge between information and the community.

Building an archive is considerably expensive, and it requires a significant amount of time and human effort (Poole, 2010). The maintenance of the archive resources in the long term implies additional investments, and therefore sustainability becomes a key issue. It is then vital to ensure that such effort in financial resources, time, and research is balanced with the public and community engagement. In the research library and archive sector, it is reported that at least £130 million of UK public money has been spent in digitisation in a decade (Bültmann et al., 2005). Despite the significant expenditure, it is hard to find ‘evidence of use’ of the digitised resources (Warwick et al., 2008), and research shows that about one-third of the digital resources in the humanities are not accessed (Warwick et al., 2006).

To improve the balance between available digital resources and access by the public, cultural institutions are progressively exploring alternative paths of involvement of their audiences in the use and appropriation of their on-site and online assets. In this framework, models of public participation have been identified (Simon, 2010), and crowdsourcing-based initiatives have been classified (Carletti et al., 2013; Oomen and Aroyo, 2011) to provide insights into the nature of those emerging relationships. The participatory culture—nurtured by the Web 2.0 expansion—has amplified the scope for diverse collaborations between organisations and the public and, at the same time, raised audiences’ expectations to have an active role and to become ‘prosumers’ (producer and consumer), rather than simply consumers of cultural activities.

The technological infrastructures are at the core of those new collaborations. The value of involving the public in the design and development of interactive systems is widely acknowledged, and a rich literature on participatory design has been produced by the Human-Computer-Interaction research community. However, it is essential to acknowledge that participation goes beyond the involvement of the participants as informants in design. Participation is an ongoing engagement and should aim for learning and long-term empowerment of the people involved (Dearden and Rizvi, 2008). Community participation in the design of interactive systems can represent the first step to assure a dynamic and permanent commitment in the deployment.

With this sociotechnical scenario in mind, we launched a participatory design process involving the Theatre Royal audiences to elicit their relationships with the archival materials, as well as suggestions for the development of the interactive system. Three focus groups were planned and designed to investigate audience engagement with physical and digital archival resources, and to inform the design of an online archive. When the Theatre Royal opened the call for interest, almost 150 people expressed their intention to participate in the focus groups. This overwhelming and unexpected response was interpreted as a clear sign of the will of the people to be involved actively in the ‘life’ of the Theatre. Due to logistic constraints (e.g., time, space, budget), we were able to involve 38 people in the three events targeted, respectively, at theatregoers under 26 years old, theatregoers over 26 years old, and nontheatregoers.

In the three focus groups, we addressed two main questions:

1. How do we design and promote audience engagement with cultural resources?

2. How do we design interactive systems entailing the collaboration between cultural institutions and their public?

For the focus groups, intersubjective meaning-making tasks were designed to experiment how to engage the different target groups with the physical and the digital resources. Different levels of engagement were observed during the three events. Engagement was observed in terms of spontaneous or incited interaction with other people and/or the archive, time spent interacting, and additional interactions not expected and/or requested by the facilitators. Based on our observations, four critical activities were also identified to create, manage, and display a collaborative online archive:

1. Developing a suitable database structure.

2. Digitising the archive and storing data in a suitable format.

3. Interface development.

4. Curating experiences.

Through a rapid prototyping technique, Chronopticon, a timeline prototype, was also developed in response to the public feedback on the design of an interactive system for the Theatre.

The focus groups revealed that there is space and interest both to design on-site and online interactive experiences, thus offering alternative and personalised ways to access archives. There is also scope to develop innovative tools designed for audience engagement, as well as co-constructed with the public. The design of the database and the framing of the community participation seem to represent the critical factors to focus on and to curate. When initiating a co-created project, it is central to ensure the long-term public engagement with the resource, as well as its maintenance. Involving the community beginning with the first phases seems to be a potential solution to address the sustainability concerns. Besides that, the experience and knowledge of local communities constitute an important part of the sense-making process of archive materials.

In this paper, we present the results of this pilot project, and recommendations to translate the findings into future actions to design and develop a community-driven and community-contributed archive.

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