

Co-designing newcomers archives: discussing ethical challenges when establishing collaboration with vulnerable user groups

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ABSTRACT

Living Archives is a research project exploring the roles of archives in a digitised society. Together, with the Malmö City Archives, we initiated a project aiming at prototyping co-archiving practices for young newcomers, to contribute to a newcomers archive. The project emerged as a reaction to the situation in 2015, where 162,877 people sought asylum in Sweden. In response to this situation the Malmö City Archives is organising activities to welcome and help integrate newcomers. This paper however, doesn't focus on the design proposals prototyped as part of the project, but on ethical challenges when collaborating with vulnerable user groups. Before starting the research process we attended a seminar to discuss our ethical stand. We also revisited the ethical standards in research, as well as papers on ethical considerations in design research. Nevertheless, in encountering the youngsters we realised that we were not adequately prepared. To think about ethical standpoints in theory is one thing, but what happens in situ is something else. In this paper we highlight our personal experiences in our first meetings with the user group. We discuss the complexities of establishing collaborations with vulnerable groups, to avoid a naïve view of what such projects, and collaborations require in terms of time and resources. Given the current refugee situation and the potentials of design actions to tackle major societal problems, it is likely that many design researchers will be engaging with these issues, thus these discussions are required.

Keywords

co-archiving practices, newcomers, ethical challenges

Exploring Archiving Practices in A Turbulent World

Living Archives is a research project at K3, Malmö University exploring archives and archiving practices in a digitised society from a range of perspectives. One of the aims is to research, analyse and prototype how archives, for public cultural heritage, can become a significant social resource, creating social change, cultural awareness and collective collaboration pointing towards a shared future of a society. In collaboration with the Malmö City Archives, Living Archives initiated a project aiming at exploring and prototyping alternative collaborative (co-)archiving practices, inviting young newcomers to Malmö to generate archive material for the official city archives – a newcomers archive. The basic idea was to prototype alternative forms of archiving practices for involvement of more varied voices in documenting Malmö, from their unique and personal outlook, and thus create a better understanding of the perspectives of the “other”.

The project emerged as a reaction to the current world situation. The crisis in Syria and the wider region has had a sizeable impact on the number of people seeking asylum in Sweden, rising to historically unprecedented levels. In 2015, 162,877 people sought asylum in Sweden, which represents a significant increase on previous years (The Migration Agency, 2015). In response to this situation Malmö City Archives, as part of Malmö City Council, are currently organising various activities aimed at welcoming and integrating newcomers to Malmö. The aim of the City Archives is to document Malmö, share information about Malmö's history, and common cultural heritage. They are also tasked with documenting and recording Malmö's contemporary life, including situation with newcomers' to the city.

Research Focus and Aim

Seven interaction design master students at School of Arts and Communication (K3), Malmö University, were invited to contribute to the project. During a 10 week course they prototyped a series of co-archiving practices, aimed primarily at opening the archiving process by creating practices that invited more people to contribute with material for the archives. The intended user group was unaccompanied young newcomers, aged 15-18 years. The students moved beyond words, and pictures by involving others senses and elements such as humour, smell, face and voice expressions. This resulted in two design proposals: “Mosaic of Malmö” and “Designing an archiving practice using comedy for the newcomers”.

The aim of this paper is not to present the two design proposals, but to reflect upon, and share ethical challenges faced when establishing collaboration with vulnerable user groups. The aim is not to produce a collection of practical guidelines, since there are already useful examples to be found (see e.g. DU, 2012; Light and Akama, 2014; Robertson and Wanger, 2013). Instead, our aim is to highlight some of our personal experiences in the role of designers, and reflect upon our first meetings with the vulnerable young adults, human to human. We refer to our user group as a vulnerable since they are in a particularly exposed situation in life, arriving in Sweden on their own to seek asylum. They live together with other young newcomers in hostels provided by the municipality, or with host families. In 2015, 35,369 unaccompanied children sought asylum in Sweden (The Migration Agency, 2015).

Methodology, Research Process and Setting

The methodological approach applied by the interaction design students was participatory design (PD), so prototyping and design interventions were part of the research process. Their activities were conducted in real-world settings, inviting the user group to be part of a co-design process, which are central principles of PD. Instead of designing for the users, the designers and/or researchers work with the users in a process of joint decision-making, mutual learning and co-creation (Simonsen and Robertson, 2013).

The first challenge encountered when initiating the research process, was the difficulties in making initial contact with potential participants. Contact had to be attempted via the municipality (as “gate keepers”, given the vulnerable nature of participants), an invitation was sent to a large group of people potentially interested in taking part in the project. However, only two individuals (both males) responded. One of the initial respondents brought a friend, thus increasing the total involved in the project to three participants. Besides a possible lack of interest in the project, another potential reason behind low levels of engagement might also be a poorly designed invitation, that failed to properly target the young newcomers specifically, but rather focussed on their caretakers. A further complication that arose with this initial contact was a lack of a communication strategy at the municipality. This meant our invitations were lost in the mass of information being distributed to this group. Malmö City was aware of the problem, and was in the process of developing a new communication strategy that would facilitate easier contact in the future with this particular group.

Prior to starting the research process all interaction design students, and researchers were invited to participate in a seminar to discuss ethical issues surrounding the up-coming project. We discussed our individual ethical standpoints, and revisited the “Ethical Standards in Research” formulated by the Swedish Research Council (2011), as well as reading various papers on ethical considerations in design research (Light and Akama, 2014; Robertson and Wanger, 2013). Ethical guidelines and principles, unsurprisingly, do not cover all eventual situations. Many guidelines are designed specifically not to be too detailed or prescriptive, and to encourage and foster ethical practice within the design process.

Facing Ethical Challenges in a Real-World Context

Besides the two design proposals expanding the idea of what a city archive might constitute, other, possibly more significant learning outcomes were drawn from the meetings with the user group themselves, which this paper focuses on. We realised that in encountering the youngsters that we were not adequately prepared. To think theoretically about ethical practices is one thing, but what happens in situ is something different.

The introduction meeting was carefully planned with the aim of creating a convivial space. We didn’t put focus on backgrounds, instead we introduced the project, the university, and interaction design as a research and study field. The participant that attended the first meeting also presented himself. He didn’t say anything about his past, and we didn’t ask. In hindsight it felt disrespectful to not broach the very reason he was invited to participate, his background, and the fact he was a young refugee seeking asylum in Sweden. Evaluating the meeting we realised we didn’t ask about his past due to trepidation at what we might unearth. With the possibility, and high degree of probability, that he had fled terrible conditions; and was in the process of establishing a new life in an unknown, and unfamiliar part of the world, divorced from his normal support networks, such as friends and family. Inadvertently we chose not to engage in a potentially uncomfortable discussion. Upon reflection this had more to do with our own fears, but also the very real problem that we were not trained in how to deal with such traumatic, and potentially distressing conversations. We have been unable to discuss the meeting with the participant to ascertain his experience, meaning this important perspective is missing from our analysis.

Another noteworthy insight expressed by participants is that they found it stigmatising to be categorised as refugees, and preferred to be referred to as newcomers, just as any other teen arriving to Sweden would be. As emphasised by the interaction design students, they were not only newcomers, they were also teens with full lives, and their identities were not defined by any one facet. Ultimately the interaction design students felt they were complex to work with because they were unpredictable teens, and hard to arrange appointments just as any other young person living a full life of activities and excitement.

Learning from Previous Design Research and Other Disciplines

Design research literature that discusses ethics in PD contexts, has mostly focussed on the political motivation, and the ethical standpoint that those effected by design ought to have a say in the design process and in joint decision-making. The focus has been on the overall belief that inviting the user “into the design of invisible mediating structures around them” (Light and Akama, 2014, p. 153) will result in more sustainable solutions, a more democratic future, and is thus the right thing to do ethically. Of less concern is how to handle the actual meetings with individuals, who in many cases are resource weak stakeholders or vulnerable user groups, as they were in our case. One approach suggested by Bannon and Ehn (2013) to meet the challenge of establishing collaborations with stakeholders and navigate power

relations is “thing”, described as “socio-material ‘collective of humans and non-humans’, through which ‘matters of concerns’ or controversies are handled” (Light and Akama, 2014, p. 152). A thing is a meeting between designers and stakeholders, including material objects, such as various workshop materials. Things ought to support the establishment of long-term relationships where continuous co-creation can be realised. From this perspective design is seen as a relational activity where time is a crucial factor. The PD process is not foremost about designing products and systems, but about designing conditions for building social, dialogical relations and creating structures of care (ibid), which is a perspective on design moving from “projecting” to “infrastructur-ing” (Björgvinsson et al, 2012).

Even if PD practitioners can handle the art of setting up a structure for inviting young newcomers to start a collaboration, the situation relating to power and fear is more complex than pure power dynamics. As designers we often step into unknown domains, or are required to handle new situations; but reality bites, when it comes to building social and dialogical relations, it is not always as simple as the theory suggests. Designers ought to see what can be learned from other disciplines that work with vulnerable groups, and what coping mechanisms exist for handling difficult discussions, and managing our duty of care towards vulnerable participants. Suggested disciplines to explore further might be migration research, and psychology specifically empathic studies. Unfortunately, in this paper we don’t have the opportunity to dive into these fields and explore how they could play a role in PD.

However, learning from empathic studies we may take the first tentative steps in exploring the difference between empathy and sympathy, and the subtle differences in relation to our work. Empathy is increasingly recognised as an important in the design process (Kouprie et al, 2009). The ability to observe, understand and predict the behaviour of others, or how they might respond to situations, or stimuli can be useful in developing design solutions. In many respects it could be argued that empathy is a key component of PD, when you consider that it is centred on contextual inquiry, aimed at observing, engaging and mutual learning and development (Spinuzzi, 2005). As such, given that the empathetic process itself involves a sense of intuition based on mutual understanding via a connection to the other, which enables us to consider and predict behaviour and motivation (Bowlby, 1982). However, psychological definitions of empathy require an understanding of the other person, or persons. Essentially without understanding, the ability to place yourself in the experiences of others is lost. In this situation you are not being empathetic, but rather are being sympathetic (Gruen and Mendelsohn, 1986).

Clearly in retrospect, and in reflecting upon our meetings with the young newcomers we realised that we lacked understanding of the situation the young newcomers were in. We were simply acknowledging their emotional hardships, and of the two options, of either choosing to ignore those out of fear of causing offence, or offering emotional comfort and assurances we ended up choosing the first option.

Two Scenarios in Future Design Projects Involving Newcomers

Our project was planned and set up with the good intention of involving and engaging young newcomers. However, in hindsight we realised that to truly show a “regard for the other is the central principle for dialogue ethics, requiring that one see one’s self in the place of the other” (Robertson and Wanger, 2013, p. 68). Intuitively our first meeting felt wrong, but in situ, being there we could not have acted differently because we simply didn’t dare to unpack the full story, and didn’t have the tools to do so. We postulate that establishing collaboration with vulnerable groups not only demands long-term engagement and time, but also a deeper understanding how to unpack and meet personal stories with empathy and support, rather than sympathy. It is highly difficult to share personal traumatic histories, in hour-long meetings, more time is needed, and time is often not on our side.

In future PD projects involving vulnerable user groups, there are, as we see it two possible scenarios. The first is to not acknowledge the limitations of a designer to handle sensitive matters, but ignore the users’ backgrounds and to engage as you would with any other participant, even if that intuitively feels wrong from a humanistic stance. The second scenario is to acknowledge the limitations of designers, invite ethical expertise from other fields, and go for an open and truly inclusive, but much more complex approach, daring to unpack personal histories, even if they are tragic. As already put forward, we unconsciously chose the first scenario, which in retrospect was disrespectful and wrong. Given the current refugee situation, and the potentials of design actions to tackle major societal problems (Ehn et al, 2014), in all likelihood many more design researchers will be engaging in this field. Future work must acknowledge the complexities of establishing collaborations with vulnerable groups and avoid a naïve view of what such projects and collaborations require in time and resources.

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