



BLOG, REFLECTIONS /// TUESDAY 31 MARCH 2020

Going Digital? A Changing the Story Position on Online Arts and Humanities Research

Written by [Lauren Wray](#) ([University of Leeds](#))

On top of the many concerns facing the wider research community at this moment in time, one key question prompted by recent Covid-19 events is ‘how do I continue to lead and support the co-delivery of innovative, creative and collaborative arts and humanities research during a global pandemic?’

A huge question for complex, uncertain and complicated times.

We’ve been inspired by the appetite and openness of the wider research community to adapt quickly and dynamically to digital platforms of engagement, not necessarily a new approach by any means, but new to many whose research involves an embodied dimension, informed by interactions in physical spaces and not cyber space.

From participating in webinars and virtual conferences, to delivering virtual workshops and exhibitions, researchers are using this time at home, a potential opportunity for some, whilst also being aware of the profound challenges and concerns this brings with it, to reflect and share learning that can enhance the design, delivery and dissemination of their research and that of others.

That is why Changing the Story has decided to host a series of short, 1-hour webinars, every two to three weeks, on issues and themes proposed as short provocations by our global research network.

We recognise that access to these online conversations is not exhaustive. Factors such as language (the dominant language of webinars being English), time zones, limited data, and access to IT equipment will come into play, but we’re electing to use this time to create space for collaborative reflection, as inclusively as possible, which will form part of Changing the Story’s wider dissemination strategy and capture the learning across the CTS projects.

This blog explores the challenges, opportunities and emerging questions identified by the Changing the Story Network, outlining our collective position on the realities of ‘going digital’ from our first webinar on 27th March, 2020.

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Framing the Issue: how do we conceptualise going digital?

The group discussed the concept of ‘Going Digital’ from four distinct points of view:

1. Pragmatic and Practical Implications

How do we practically adapt and move our research online? Is it possible to use the methods we had planned? To what extent do we need to redesign our research?

2. Our Role as Researchers

How do we adapt to the digital when there is an embodied dimension to our research, which holds such central importance? How do we



adapt to the digital when place is important to our research? What might we lose by moving online?

3. Our Participants and Co-researchers

What new opportunities does online research hold for working with young people? How do we recognise and address inequality in access?

4. Ethics and Safeguarding

How do we continue to work ethically in the face of concerns around Covid-19? How do we maintain ethical research partnerships? How do we continue to create space for young people to share their experiences safely and appropriately? How do we safeguard the wellbeing of the young people we work with and our research collaborators as we move online?

Challenges

In some ways, identifying the challenges presented by Covid-19 were much easier given the level of disruption already experienced. Some challenges were specific to individual projects, linked to the delivery of training on specific software, which was considered too difficult to do remotely and online. Others challenges were cross cutting and universal, from concerns around completing projects in the time allocated to restrictions around travel. Some specific emerging challenges and themes include:

Understanding and Establishing Boundaries

Understanding when we as researchers were communicating with our participants, co-researchers and co-creators impersonally and when it formed part of the research project was identified as a major challenge, particularly when platforms more commonly used for personal communication, such as Whatsapp, were being more prominently used in professional contexts.

The move to more online engagement also presents additional challenges and complexities around the negotiation of new power dynamics and building and maintaining equitable partnerships. Might this move encourage more place-based leadership of the research process? Or might it encourage more extractive research practices, with colleagues in the field doing the research and colleague online doing the analysis.

Negotiation

Negotiation was considered a challenge in three main ways:

The negotiation around the extent to which research is moved online. Do we take the decision to move all research activities online immediately? Do we move activities partly online in the hope that circumstances may have changed in six months' time? This decision is considered particularly challenging due to the physical dimension of arts-based research and the uncertainty around the longer-term impact of Covid-19.

Similarly, how do we negotiate new forms of exclusion? How do we motivate our participants and co-researchers to remain engaged from a distance, particularly when the attention of the world is fixed squarely on the pandemic? When the relevance of research has shifted and widened, how do we as researchers negotiate this challenge, incorporating what is happening into the research while still achieving our central research aims.

Finally, how do we negotiate the possibility that the pandemic and particularly, the language used to describe the pandemic (e.g. *war* on Coronavirus, the invisible *enemy*) might trigger past trauma, given the contexts Changing the Story projects is working in? How do we be mindful of this and safeguard the wellbeing of the people we work? This was particularly felt in the context of Rwanda, where systemic isolation was a method of practice in the Rwandan genocide and now is being deployed globally as a means of limiting the spread of Covid-19. How do we as researchers acknowledge and navigate those potential triggers?

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Opportunities

The group challenged the network to think about the opportunities the move to digital platforms might create and how online research could reinforce central Changing the Story values, including more localised, youth and community driven research. From this, three potential opportunities were identified:

Firstly, the opportunity for young people to take greater ownership of the research, creating the space for young people to shape the digital design methods used, given in some contexts, the advanced digital literacy of this generation. In doing so, this could enhance the type of research conducted, helping to build equitable partnerships from the design phase up.

Secondly, the appetite for new ways of consuming knowledge has opened up the possibility for new online content and resources that audiences are now more receptive to. Where previously publishers may not have been interested in publishing Electronic-Books for instance, the value of these resources is now recognised, widening the scope for the type of resources that can be created and distributed.

The network similarly recognised how current events have opened up new online engagement platforms, creating opportunities to gain access groups of people that previously might have been hard to reach. From a dissemination perspective, the collective move to the digital is providing an opportunity to engage with key influencers via online platforms given this mode of communication is now the new norm.

In our next webinar, we'll be exploring this further, considering how present events will change our relationship with policy, given that strategic priorities in the contexts we're working in have also changed. We'll be asking how can we use this time to exploit the digital and support young people and CSOs to engage with policy makers and the policy process, to really make the most of the opportunities identified.





We want to know from our wider network and beyond:

What adaptations are you already envisioning?

What resources have you found useful in adapting your research to the online sphere?

How can we include young people in the webinar series and enhance the visual element of interactions?

Have you found this blog useful and/or interesting? Leave a comment in the section below!

Resources we discussed:

https://twitter.com/_jleser/status/1240310808132886528

<https://twitter.com/DrAdamJowett/status/1240190672960991233>

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cIGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/mobilebasic?usp=gmail_thread

<http://kidconcepts.org/>

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