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Amplifying Relationships through Place and Locality in the Design of Local Government Digital Services

Abstract This paper presents an action research service design project that took place as part of the Public Collaboration Lab (PCL), a one-year, AHRC funded research project between Camden Council and Central Saint Martins (CSM), University of the Arts London. The project focused on the Council's Home Library Service (HLS). With UK central government reducing budgets for local authorities, and increasing pressure from societal challenges including an ageing population, the HLS offered a speculative design space to reconfigure possible co-designed service futures. Visual ethnographic processes, framed within anthropological concepts of locality and place, traced the routes travelled and the interactions that were enacted between the HLS team members and its housebound readers, revealing the hidden nature of the relationships and knowledge that existed across the borough. I conclude that as governments look to reconfigure services – and often do so using abstract policy language – new frames of understanding of locality and place must be explored to deliver digital solutions that amplify the social and cultural dimensions that constitute a community.

1 Editorial note: while the body text conforms to U.S. English, all project titles and institution names adopt British English where appropriate.

2 Adam Thorpe, Alison Prendiville, Sarah Rhodes, and Lara Salinas, "Public Collaboration Lab," abstract, in *PDC '16: Proceedings of the 14th Participatory Design Conference: Short Papers, Interactive Exhibitions, Workshops–Volume 2*, ed. Claus Bossen et al. (New York: ACM, 2016), 80, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/2948076.2948121.

3 Prime Minister Tony Blair and Minister for the Cabinet Office, *Modernising Government* (white paper, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1999), 6, available at https://ntouk.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/modgov.pdf.

4 Patrick Dunleavy and Helen Margetts, "*Design Principles for Essentially Digital Governance*" (paper presented at the 11th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA, September 2015), 3, available at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64125/1/Essentially%20Digital%20Governance.pdf.

5 Victor Pestoff, "Co-production, New Public Governance and Third Sector Social Services in Europe," *Ciências Sociais Unisinos* 47, no. 1 (2011): 15, available at http://www.redalyc.org/html/938/93820778003/.

Introduction

The Public Collaboration Lab (PCL) was a one-year, AHRC funded collaboration between Camden Council and Central Saint Martins (CSM), University of the Arts London,[1] with the aim to investigate the "potential for, and value of, strategic collaboration between design education and local government."[2] Within its research agenda was an open service design brief to review the Home Library Service (HLS), with the proviso that technology be considered in the service solution. In this article, I present research that uncovers and articulates tacit values and knowledge that make the HLS much more than a book delivery service. By using design and visual ethnographic processes, and anthropological notions of locality and place—in the context of a service design framework—the HLS reveals itself as a locus of important relational activities. Once discovered, these hidden values and this knowledge offered an opportunity to co-design and transform the HLS through a digital platform, affording a new, longer-term wellbeing and independent living care service based on the personal interests of the service recipients. More widely, if relational digital services are to address highly complex and entangled social issues such as ageing communities, new conceptual frameworks are required. This article suggests options that help developers of such services better understand the centrality of place so that we may translate and amplify relationships between service provider and recipient in developing online solutions.

I begin by explaining the drivers of change for UK government services, and the government's adoption of design methods and practices to address the multilayered, interconnected challenges facing many local communities. I draw on the literature from political science, policy, and public management to situate the HLS service design project as an exploration within a lab environment. After a brief description of my methodology, I offer an anthropological framing of the service design process through reference to the key concepts of place and locality, both of which guided the visual ethnographic work I undertook during the discovery and defining stages of my research. After this, I explore opportunities presented by digital technologies to enhance human relational elements; especially what they were able to contribute to the digital common platform that was part of the final service concept. I go on to present and analyze the service design concept itself, which I use to address the abstract language typically used in government to describe new types of transformative digital services. I conclude by formalizing these frames as a means to guide the development of relational digital service designs that address complex community challenges.

The Changing Nature of Government and the HLS

As one of the collaborative projects undertaken by the PCL, the HLS reflects the current interest of western governments and local authorities to explore the application of design in public sector innovation. It also demonstrates broader government agendas that emerged at the end of the twentieth century. In 1999, the "Modernising Government white paper"[3] suggested that public services could be improved by focusing on users rather than organizational structures and realizing opportunities to apply new technologies to make government simpler and more accessible. Concurrently, increasing social and economic pressures facing the welfare state meant that the UK Government shifted from the New Public Management model originating in the 1980s, that, according to Patrick Dunleavy and Helen Margetts, "emphasized disaggregation of large-scale departments, increased competition within the public sector, and the incentivization of public officials along business lines, to a New Public Governance Model."[4] For Pestoff,[5] the New Public Governance paradigm has at its core the co-production of services that utilizes