

NOT-EQUAL

EPSRC NetworkPlus: Social Justice through the Digital Economy

Project Final Review Form

Please submit this form within one month of completing your project to notequal@ncl.ac.uk.

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Lead Applicant (PI): Joanne Armitage	Co-Investigators (names and organisations): Helen Thornham (UoL), Chris Birchall (UoL)
Email address: eenjla@leeds.ac.uk	Supporting Partner(s): Space 2, UK; Espacio Nixso, Argentina; MedialabMx, Mexico; C-Innova (aka Diversa), Colombia
Job Title: Lecturer in Digital Media	Project Title: Equally Digital, Digitally Equal
Department: School of Media and Communication	Project Reference Number:
Organisation: University of Leeds	

1. SUMMARY

Please outline the research challenge and question your project aimed to address, in less than 100 words.

This project was interested in exploring how community technology and arts groups were responding to the shift online caused by the pandemic. We worked with four groups across Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and UK to discuss their work and reflect on how the pandemic shifted what was possible within their work and how their practices had adapted. Through this, we developed methods for sharing approaches, experiences, and practices.

2. APPROACH

Please provide a summary of the approach of your research project, including any deviations from your work plan, the reasons for this and how you addressed any issues.

At the start of the project, we conducted interviews with groups to talk with them about their work,

As soon as we started the project, we felt a shared sense of fatigue around platforms. We also got a sense of the multiplicity of different platforms that groups were using for various aspects of their work—slow, fast, formal, informal, social, and professional. Space 2 had built an online exhibition space for sharing work and some of the community projects that they hosted shifted to Zoom. At the same time, they were still using email and voice calls for direct contact, and there was increased pressure from local government to rapidly digitize. Espacio Nixso were



communicating with each other across multiple platforms at the same time whilst producing their toolkits. WhatsApp for quick chats, emails for longer discussions, Instagram for sharing content. Here, technology was being used according to task and speed. C-Innova had also built a platform for their projects but as a site of connection rather than exhibition, but had resorted to nominating community leaders, sending them phones, and communicating through them with WhatsApp.

With the added pressures of isolation, digital technologies were understood as another layer of frustration to practice: they were being primarily understood in relation to the labour they entailed and in turn, that labour was becoming insurmountable when juxtaposed with immediate needs for connection. This is to say that what we had imagined to be an autoethnographic toolkit—a seamless app where people could share media content would clearly become another layer of imposed labour. Instead, we spoke with the groups and asked how they might like to share reflections with us. They chose email and Google Drive folders and scant scraps of thoughts, feelings and experiences dripped through over the following months. What we noticed through this is that adding data collection to our work together, even as critical, reflective, and creative, became a method of accounting that on top of existing digital work.

From this, it became clear that the lively and valuable parts of the collaboration were our monthly discussions. We worked with the groups to develop monthly tasks that were led by each collaborator. Together we used this task to generate reflections. We would meet, discuss the task, share the materials we had produced and record our conversations. These meetings were the richest part of our collaboration and have formed a central part of our work moving forwards. Sharing our work through our voices became the richest way to share experiences, concerns, and express solidarity. We then looked at developing small tech prototypes to amplify the voice. These were designed by Espacio Nixso and we built them with a poetry group in Leeds, 'Voices Heard.' The megaphones we built were used at protests in Buenos Aires. Through the process of building the tech, we had conversations with the group that covered topics such as gender equality in the home, local (to Leeds) protest and civil right movements and mental health. We found that building the prototypes from Argentina presented some challenges—sourcing and finding matching components, developing instructions, and communicating abstract concepts. Further to this, the build of the tech was demanding in terms of the detailed nature of the work, the time and experimentation needed to get it right. Whilst the circuits were the first prototypes with the group, it became harder to create time to produce the final designs. When the task moved from, explore this new concept to make it robust, interest waned. This revealed something about the nature of co-production work—our expertise and time were needed to enable the technologies to materialize in a usable form—Joanne spent full days soldering everything together.

Like the video conferencing technologies, we have all become accustomed to—cracking, disconnecting and distorting voices—the megaphones disrupted the voices of poets we worked with. Before they were housed in their bottle enclosures, the poets kept on accidentally producing feedback. The first speakers that we bought to use in the megaphone, made our voices unrecognizable and were noticeably quiet. The megaphones as a technology of communication limited the poets—they had to speak slower, louder clearer. It had to be held close to their mouths. They created a performance 'Just say No' around it—where they used megaphones to shout an emancipatory "No!" to statements they stood against. Instead of being a way to amplify voices, megaphones became tools through which to explore and examine protest by sharing clear, direct, and political chants.

This collaboration ended with the group performing a poetry piece with the megaphones that drew on our conversations at Rivers of Light in Gipton Leeds. This event was hosted in Leeds but broadcast to our collaborators in Latin America. Here the voices of residents of one of Leeds most deprived areas echoes through a live stream and into the workplaces of our collaborators.





Rehearsing for Rivers of Light, Leeds 30 November 2021.

3. ACTIVITIES & OUTPUTS

Please list any outputs from your project to be entered in the Not-Equal Researchfish submission. These include events, publications, workshops, webinars, invited talks, media coverage and tools (please include links to open source, git-hubs if relevant) that have resulted from your project.

Please include the following for each entry:

Title: Rivers of Light

Date: 30 November 2021

Type of Event: Public Performances

Number of People Reached: 100

Primary Audience: People living in East Leeds

Key Outcomes/Impact: Project work shared, conversations with community groups to further work.

URL:

British Council Application, led by Space 2 with University of Leeds, Espacio Nixso and MediaLabMX

Peter Sowerby Foundation

April 2021- April 2022

Successful award led by Space 2 with Helen Thornham & Joanne Armitage exploring citizenship, community, and technology

Megaphone prototype used as a connection across time and space, collaborative builds sharing etc.

Project website (sorry some content still needs to be uploaded; we have an RA working on this!):

<http://eenjla.leedsnewmedia.net/ed-de/>

4. INSIGHTS & IMPACT

Please describe the findings of your project and their significance in relation to potential or actual social impact.

This project enabled and supported community organizations to continue to work with communities in need during the pandemic and reflect on how wider political and social change generates new directions, practices, and insights. The community in Leeds all expressed important impact around shared practice and collaborations, widening scope and perspectives and supporting positive wellbeing. Space 2 as an organization led two further grant applications (one successful, one in review) which took up the methods of engagements, technologies, and collaborations across space and time which we explored as practice and as process.

Technologies – not just our voice megaphone but also small sensory physical projects were exchanged as live tangible objects, eroding and benign, rebuilt through iterative cycles around the globe. Through these exchanges, we explored the deterioration of physical computing objects through time and space as we communicated more rapidly: technology became - like the WiFi connections – unstable and frustrating. Far away from the conception of technology as facilitator. Instead, it was the shared narratives and practices that were paramount: basic interaction and communication around how each of us was living, working, and surviving fed into our wider conversations around sustainability, bodies, tech, and health.

5. REFLECTIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Please list the key highlights from your project, summarize any lessons learned from this work and outline any future directions or plans to continue activities beyond this project.

This project cemented the existing desire to work together and to continue to explore how we might do that. The British Council application is a £75k project enabling live and remote collaborations around a shared installation and event. Through this, we have found ways of working together and generating materials whilst apart.

Instead of technologies of communication enabling practice or facilitating new ways of working, they always worked as a means or necessity. Whether working hyper-locally or globally, all groups were using technologies in ways that frustrated and constrained the possibilities of what they could do. Technologies only became enlivened and enabling when they were interacting with bodies in space—through our monthly experiments and sharing of prototypes. Our dialogues as a group around technologies only became exciting or enlivening when considering their possibilities in relation to bodies and space. Video conferencing technologies acted to facilitate these conversations—however at the same time they added a considerable amount of frustration and uncertainty to our dialogues. From this we come to a place where the pandemic has forced us to work in these unusual ways and this is what is limiting practices. Technologies themselves are just for now a layer of complexity in this that we try and mitigate rather than naturalize. At the same time through collaboration, co-production and sharing our experiences, we take up the possibility of building alternative technologies together. What mattered most by a long-shot was how this collaboration generated a sense of mutual solidarity, togetherness, and feeling-heardness.



Collaboration never really happened through technology platforms—collaboration happened through on the ground activities and were disseminated and shared through these technologies.

We are hosting a workshop in Leeds in March/April to explore these issues further hopefully in person, but online if circumstances change. Here we will take themes from the project and together examine ways we can take key issues and concepts further forwards.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this form, please contact notequal@ncl.ac.uk

