Re-considering participation in social media designs

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ABSTRACT
This short paper reports from a museum innovation project using small-scale design experiments with mobile and social technologies to explore the participative museum along the Akerselva River in Oslo. We reflect upon what insights social media requires for design to engage people in participation in public and urban settings. The paper focuses on the micro-level of engagement in these media, and asks how a focus on language, semiotic and social practices may represent new possibilities for PD processes, using these media as design tools. It suggests that perspectives from cultural studies can be adapted to stage social media-based participatory design processes to reach communities that are dispersed over time and space.

Author Keywords
PD through social media, cultural heritage, distributed museum

ACM Classification Keywords
Design, Human Factors, Languages, Experimentation

INTRODUCTION
PD has recently drawn attention to social media as an opportunity and means for engaging users in distributed public contexts and spaces (Lievrouw 2006, Clement et al 2008, Brereton and Buur 2008, Lindström and Ståhl 2010, Reyes and Finken 2012). Social media is considered to change the conditions for user participation in eg. service development (Johnson and Hyysala 2012) as it places participation as both the means, and the outcome, when designing venues for usable and meaningful interaction and participation (Lievrouw 2006). Social media affordances support design processes “in the wild” (Diettrich et al. 2002), creating seeded opportunities for including communities and their external sources in design-in-use (Hagen and Robertson 2010). Meanwhile, these technologies bring forth a complex context that makes traditional approaches and methods challenging; (Kurvinen et al. 2008), therefore requiring a re-conceptualisation of design to include processes of radical change rather beyond single development of innovative products (Bannon and Ehn 2012). The positioning of design as providing democratic entry into innovation, corresponds to design now serving as a feature capable of opening up spaces for empowering users to question democratic futures and empowering one’s own capacity (Botero and Saad-Sulonen 2008, Di Salvo 2009, Björgvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren 2012). As social media use increases in various fields and in various forms, this position calls for reflexive explorations in PD addressing its use (Suvi and Karasti 2014).

From a media perspective it has been argued that community groups as well as cultural and political activists use social media for bottom up and radical media agendas. Design is required to foster participation (Lievrouw 2006) through connectivity and affiliations that link users to each other and to pertinent information resources. Mainsah and Morrison (2012) argue that this takes design beyond social tools and into agency and cultural expressions that a cultural studies perspective may provide.

Cultural studies construes culture as practices of meaning making that are not only shared but also involves contrasts, resistance, oppositions and tensions (e.g. De Certeau 1984). It focuses on how visual signs; images and semiotics make meaning by both resembling and by differing the things they refer (Hall 1997, Hebdidge 1979). Visual signs and representations in this way are relevant for understanding a communities’ cultural expression with social media in PD processes and the perspective on how people participate in cultural activities to build identity through creating tensions and oppositions to peers, context or environment remain relevant. This engaged focus of cultural studies aligns well with contemporary PD emphasis on mediated practices. (Bannon and Ehn 2012).

Sensitivity to the micro-level of participatory processes, may reveal how the situated and participatory practices of people may affect performance in design (Light and Akama 2012). This includes the semiotic level of cultural expressions. To be able to engage people by way of social media, designers need to understand the way they appropriate and appreciate social media in their everyday life. This is a methodological design issue of both pragmatic and semantic character, asking how to then make designate the object of the design into a public thing (Ehn 2008). Understanding how participation in social media can develop into participation in PD processes is two-folded:

1. Re-thinking participation and performance in design.
The designer-user relationship changes when existing
platforms of social media are used to do design directly, in and through the social settings of everyday life (Halse 2008). Intervening in social media-based communities requires a reconsideration of the relationship between designers in the project, and the “designers” in use. In our design experiment reported on below, a cultural studies focus on tensions and contradictions framed our design approach to performative interventions that would then contradict and breach ongoing practices. Breaching experiments were originally used to study social reactions to unexpected behaviour in social systems; introduced by Garfinkel as conscious disruptions and contradictory actions into everyday rules and norms. While this method mainly has been used in sociology and psychology, it has also been a method in technological innovations where absence of existing practices requires design to illuminate potential practices (Crabtree 2004). The potential of breaching for designers would involve interfering and interrupting the social and cultural practices of social media usage, to understand potential possible use.

2. Semiotics of participation. However, for designers to breach within social media-based communities a sensitivity to ongoing social and cultural dynamics is required. Cultural studies helps create a focus on performances with semiotic and visual languages by which meaning in these online communities are made. By engaging people through breaching their cultural practices, this semiotic language becomes a tool for facilitating users engagement with the design processes.

PD IN DEVELOPING THE DISTRIBUTED MUSEUM

Earlier participatory design approaches have been used to involve visitors and communities in museum exhibition development (Taxén 2005, Salgado 2009, Smith 2013). Aesthetic PD approaches have been suggested to explore engagement in exhibitions (Dindler and Iversen 2009, Smith 2013), focusing on how to achieve a deeper understanding of visitors’ motivations for engaging in activities in the museum. Meanwhile, the gap between new institutional practices of mobile and distributed museums (Bautista and Balsamo 2011), the participatory museum (Simon 2010), current museum, library and archive commons-based projects using web-based hybrid databases (Colquhoun and Galani 2013) or mobile photo-sharing for visitor engagement (Hillman, Weilenmann and Jungselius 2012) require new methodological approaches to understand emerging social media-based practices of memorizing, identity, place making and belonging (Giaccardi 2012, Stuedahl 2011, Stuedahl 2009).

Central to this is the development of methods that reveal how museum content may initiate reflection and questioning among visitors. This goes beyond curation of an exhibition into exploring how to foster participation in encounters between museum content and people in everyday situations. PD approaches may be a way of anticipating and envisioning this use before actual use (Ehn 2008), as a procurement process of developed platforms or services for distributed museum communication.

Our research was related to the Akerselva Digitalt (ADI) project led by Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology, focusing on creating a location-based mobile guide for communicating industrial history of the Akerselva river in central city of Oslo. The museum wanted to communicate content from their online portal on industrial heritage with a special focus on the Akerselva River as a starting point for the industrial development of Norway. The aim of the project was to explore possibilities and limitations of how the guide could be developed into a social platform that would engage people along the river who would not enter the physical museum. The design team decided upon exploring people’s existing social media practices related to the river, and conducted several design experiments reflecting on how people’s digital literacies require new design thinking (Lowe and Stuedahl 2014, Smordal, Stuedahl and Sem 2014, Stuedahl and Lowe 2013). In the following we will focus on the experiments undertaken with the photo-sharing platform Instagram.

The experiment with Instagram was divided in two; a digital part lasting one month, exploring the online dynamics of followers and commenting, and a physical part by way of an installation staged to explore the relation between the digital and physical context for use. We focus here on the digital experiment. The experiment was documented in several ways; comments and responses from followers on Instagram, observations and subsequent interviews with followers conducted over Instagram, and notes and photos documenting our discussions.

We created an ADI user profile on Instagram to explore how the museums photographic material from the factories and industrial production could relate to peoples current representational practices of photography, hashtagging and commentary related to the river. Instagram was in this way both design material and active space for participatory research on peoples potential engagement with museum content in distributed contexts. We posted approximately 44 museum images with supplementing text during September – October 2012. The profile gathered 122 followers.

RE-THINKING PARTICIPATION

The breaching design activities had to follow the rules of Instagram practices of publishing, liking and following – and could therefore only exist as interventions that disrupts with ongoing practices through the introduction of surprising and thought provoking content, text and images. Instead of merely publishing historical archival photos, we decided to choose photos that contradict the everyday activities along the river.

Instagram practices can be understood as imagery, photographing and making of representations as a tactic to construct meaning by combining authoring and spectating (de Certeau 1984). The digital imagery in Instagram brings in a potential tool for people to redefine and reconfigure through an uncoupling of the physical place. These complex imagery practices of reproduction and altering, formed the basis for our design breaching by manipulating museum photos that both resemble – but
also contrast – existing Instagram practices to build a distinct identity profile for the museum.

Peoples publishing on Instagram streams represents a given design space that we had to understand in order to build a profile for the museum via the same signs and visual markers as other peer profiles. But intervening into users existing practices of Instagram with the museum content also required us to have a clear aim and goal for why the images were published, and how they related to the different streams, how the postings related to the identity of the profile – and why the profile should contradict the stream.

Posting images that run counter to practices on Instagram, involved sensitivity to the aspects of visual communication that cultural studies brings forth. To conceptualize the design, we pursued the notion of design as a set of performative explorations that explore cultural practices in ethnographic ways through breaching with contrasts and contradictions on everyday practices to envision future ones.

We realized that this turned the question of participation in the design project on its head, oblige us to think of ourselves as participants in the design space created by users. This role shift framed our methods in the design process as ethnographic experiments where the knowledge and understanding emerged in the encounters and disruptions. For example, to determine what extent we should manipulate the museum photos to make them fit in or stand out from the other images, we had to observe the individual streams and capture their meaning. Or, to understand how distribution of the same image with multiple hashtags would boost the connectivity and also give character to the image, they were grounded in relationship to the diverging themes. In this way we could manage the longer-term process of building streams and groups of followers that could respond to our design inquiries.

SEMIOTICS OF PARTICIPATION

The historical images in question were provided by the museums involved in the project. In Instagram this became the design material that used to translate and connect to the institutional metadata of the museum as well as with the existing folksonomies that were connected to the river on Instagram. Mixing folksonomies with the structured metadata of an institutional classification system has become a major discussion, as institutional cultural memory content then mixes with the social processes of online communities (Trant 2009, Dalton 2010). It is in this mixing of semiotics of curatorial content with everyday amateur content that lies a challenge for participatory engagement in Instagram.

The museum content had to relate to practices of hashtagging, but needed to retain vital information from the archive to be meaningful. The right choice of hashtags for an image could potentially provoke and direct a followers reflection onto historical issues. This required a translation of archival information into text, signs and hash tags. Each published photo contained excerpts of the museum archival information including the year the photo was taken, the name of the photographer and the name of the photographed person, if the archival information allowed so. If the photo had locational metadata, we created hash tags based on these as well. We also added a sentence or a prompting question relating the historical information to the present day, which became a point of tension.

The choice of hash tags assigned to each museum photo connected social place-making practices of Instagram to historical sites and narratives along the river. It was a strategic decision to poignantly address reflections upon the specificity of place, while at the same time being flexible to work at location unspecific designations (Wasserman 2011). We decided on a multifaceted clustering of hashtag tags, to shape multiple variables of place in Instagram labeling. All photos were tagged with the #akerselva hash tag, that we had identified as the main stream connected to the river. In addition, clusters of hash tags that drew attention to other themes related to Akerselva history was added, such as “#seilduken” one of the main factories – or a historical phenomena such as “#children labour, #politicalprisoners” or more contemporary themes such as “#pussyriots, #osloactivism.” The composition of each hash tag cluster was a matter of connectivity and reconfiguration of the mediated content to make it relevant for the social practices in various streams.

The social semiotic power of the hashtags on Instagram affects users engagement with the photos from the museum. Defining the features for contributions required a design sensitivity that was deeply informed by knowledge of the social and semiotic character of peoples’ publishing practices on Instagram. And thereby on the cultural structures of visual signs and images that participation on Instagram is dependent on.

This social semiotic aspect of social media was not the only a matter of observing and analyzing peoples practices, the methodological breaching activities using hash tags and creating prompts for people to participate were also a matter of design facilitation.

CONCLUSIONS

To engage people in participatory design by connecting to their cultural practices, design researchers need to be aware of this ambiguous and multiplicity of cultural shaping of identity, shared values and belonging. This is compounded within settings where the intention may be to develop relationships outside of well-defined practices.

Figure 1. @akerselvadigitalt shared museum images of the industrial history of the river on Instagram streams. The most popular stream, #akerselva, gathers people in sharing natural, social and culinary experiences at locations of Akerselva.
This makes apparent the need to involve theoretical perspectives and conceptual tools that support the understanding of the everyday practices in design. The application of a participatory research approach to explore distributed museum communication within a social media-based community requires a design sensitivity towards the located, situated and particular, and sometimes contradictory, practices of Instagram users. Perspectives from cultural studies have helped us to understand cultural practices as ongoing and ambivalent processes of negotiation, not just entities nicely packaged in routines and conventions. Cultural practices consist of fabrication of differences, contrasts, resistance, oppositions and tensions where semiotic activities both mimic and contrast the activities of others. This is how engagement in active sense-making takes place.

The focus on cultural tensions helped us to question the assumption of the participants and their participation in PD when entering into everyday activities and settings. Defining designers as participants alongside users practices, and not the other way around, lead to re-conceptualizing the designers-user relation and thereby the methods used. It was not simply about engaging users into design activities. It was about how designers could perform activities that would engage users to join, understanding individual users, and the underlining ambiguity by which cultural processes are characterized.

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