EXPLORING HOW TECHNOLOGY ENHANCES INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION IN HUMANITIES RESEARCH

Dr Anna Khlusova from King's College London

Exploring How Technology Enhances Inclusion and Participation in Humanities Research

Digital technology can open up interesting possibilities for research, by enabling new public engagement initiatives and allowing researchers to easily reach out to countless individuals worldwide. Dr Anna Khlusova at Kings College London recently carried out a study commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Institute, investigating the impact of digitalisation on public engagement in humanities research. As part of her study, she analysed data gathered during three online initiatives, which were designed to promote public participation in research.

In the uncertain and peculiar landscape produced by the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of digital technology has become even more crucial and pervasive, allowing people to work, learn and communicate with others from the safety of their homes.

With more people working and studying from home, academics have been forced to explore new ways of conducting studies, gathering evidence, collaborating with other researchers, and disseminating their research to the public. Digital technology has thus become an invaluable tool to collect data and encourage public engagement in academic research.

Dr Anna Khlusova, a Lecturer at Kings College London, recently carried out a study commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Institute, evaluating the potential of digital technology to increase public engagement in arts and humanities research.

The main objective of her study was to better understand the implications of replacing in-person public engagement initiatives with virtual events. She hoped that her

work would shed some light on how digital technology can be used to communicate humanities research to the public in ways that are engaging and interactive.

In her article, Dr Khlusova explores some of the challenges that academics might face when using digital platforms to communicate their research to the public and initiate conversations about their work. She also offers practical recommendations that could inspire a more effective use of digital technologies for public-facing research activities.

Before the internet existed, public engagement activities were limited to conventional communication channels, such as books, print publications, broadcast media, public lectures and academic events. However, researchers

can now also reach out to individuals worldwide through a broad variety of online platforms, including social networking sites, streaming services, and video conferencing platforms.

In her article, Dr Khlusova focused on three online engagement initiatives devised at King's College London – an online conference, a series of online workshops, and a large-scale digital project incorporating activities aimed at delivering alternative cultural experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For each of these case studies, Dr Khlusova interviewed the main project organisers, as well as other individuals who helped to plan or implement the events. She also reached out to organisers of the UK's national festival of the humanities, the Being Human Festival, to discuss their digital strategies and contingency plans. All organisers completed a project evaluation form and took part in an interview, where they shared their experiences and reflected on the outcomes of their events.
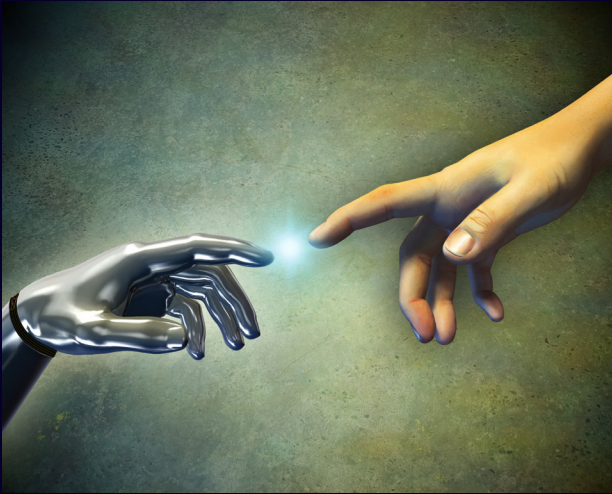
In addition to conducting interviews, Dr Khlusova attended and actively participated in online meetings where organisers hosted public engagement activities. She also asked the organisers to share their opinions about how the initiatives they designed could be improved.

Dr Khlusova gathered a vast amount of interesting feedback and observations. Firstly, most of her participants said that digital technology allowed them to reach larger audiences in different places worldwide than those they would have reached through face-to-face events. Many event organisers also felt that virtual events allowed for greater flexibility in terms of schedules and time commitment on behalf of the attendees.

The first virtual event she analysed had a far higher attendance rate than the organisers had originally anticipated, with approximately 1600 people joining the event. Interestingly, the audience was also more diverse, and included many undergraduate students, non-expert members of the public, creative industry practitioners, and community partners.

For the second and third case study, namely the online workshops and broader online engagement initiative, attendees came from mixed backgrounds and different parts of the world. This enabled cross-cultural discussions and debates, while also raising the global profile of the events.

In addition to widening the reach of academic events, many organisers said that the use of digital technology as a tool to increase public engagement was cost-effective, as it reduced the costs and efforts typically required to organise in-person events. In fact, compared

Finally, many of the participants who took part in Dr Khlusova's study reflected on how organising online public engagement initiatives had forced them to re-think their previous academic practices and supported their professional development.

Dr Khlusova also summarised some of the key challenges associated with the use of digital tools to increase public engagement and offers recommendations for how researchers can use these tools most effectively.

The challenges highlighted by organisers include issues with institutional practices, such as the use of Microsoft Teams for large-scale events, confusion resulting from the digital literacy of participants, and difficulties associated with communicating in online environments. For instance, event organisers felt they had to invest significant efforts in managing the technology they were using and ensuring that attendees retained both their concentration and engagement during talks or discussions.

Based on the findings, Dr Khlusova outlined a series of recommendations that could support institutions and academic event organisers in achieving meaningful levels of public engagement online. For instance, she suggests that institutions should train researchers on how to create effective online public engagement initiatives and should invest funds in digital public engagement activities.

In the future, Dr Khlusova's and the Arts and Humanities research institute's work could inform the development of more effective online engagement initiatives aimed at disseminating humanities research or initiating conversations between academia and the public. Overall, her findings highlight the potential of digital technology as a tool to communicate academic projects to numerous individuals worldwide, particularly during the current global crisis.

to online conferences or workshops, in-person events require significant amounts of logistical, financial, and administrative planning.

The feedback gathered by Dr Khlusova suggests that online events can also enhance inclusivity and facilitate interactions or collaborations between people from different backgrounds, especially small online group discussions or workshops.

Some of the event organisers interviewed by Dr Khlusova emphasised the value of free online tools to enhance online discussions and brainstorming, such as *Padlet* and *Miro*. *Padlet* is an interactive online notice board where participants can post discussion notes or resources, while *Miro* acts as an online whiteboard where event participants can add digital sticky notes, as well as other texts, voice notes, and video chats.

The information gathered on *Padlet* and *Miro* during online group discussions can ultimately help to revisit some of the key highlights of a virtual event after its completion or to evaluate its impact.

This SciPod is a summary of the article 'Public Engagement in the Digital Environment: Opportunities and Challenges for Arts and Humanities Researchers'. Available at www.kcl.ac.uk/research/public-engagement-in-the-digital-environment

You can also visit the AHRI website for more information on work that they are doing: www.kcl.ac.uk/ahri

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