
Documenting Journalism Design

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Abstract

A PhD project at the University of Queensland has used Research Through Design (RtD) to address a journalistic dilemma. The research was carried out by a journalist-designer and was documented via recordings of interactions with developers and users. This provided evidence of reflection-in-action and deep craft in the design process. A journalistic process of information synthesis was also at work. The Documenting Design Research Processes workshop offers an opportunity to explore these themes through deeper analysis of transcripts.

Author Keywords

Design; interaction design; journalism; Research Through Design.

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H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

The question of how practice-led research generates knowledge is an issue in design, but also in journalism,

where debate about the legitimacy of practice is more recent and less developed.

Where designers have developed research frameworks [10,14,18,19] and proposed various intermediary forms of knowledge [4,11,13], in journalism there is a view that practice-led research should produce theory [3] or test theoretical concepts [16]. Niblock's practice-first approach aims to advance knowledge about practice, and a journalistic artefact is considered the key output. However in this approach, like many in design, there is a lack of clarity about the form new knowledge should take. Some argue that practice-led research should be thoroughly documented [5].

A PhD project at the University of Queensland has used Research Through Design (RtD) to address a journalistic dilemma. The research has been carried out by a journalist-designer and was documented via recordings of interactions with developers and users. These recordings were later transcribed and reveal how "reflection-in-action" [17] and "deep craft" [1,2] influenced the design process. As a result, designed artefact – the NewsCube – embodies both design and domain knowledge.

NewsCubed

The NewsCubed project used RtD to push journalism practice in a new direction and make a creative leap in how hypertext might be used to tell journalistic stories. Hypertext, as a narrative device, is under researched in journalism and as a result, scholars and practitioners have failed to exploit it to tell multi-perspectival stories or enable greater audience involvement [7].

The RtD process in this project began with a contextual study [8] that led to a conceptual model: an interactive cube that enabled collaborative, hyperlinked storytelling. Sketches, low-fidelity prototypes, and stories were created [9], followed by a digital prototype, and later, a web-based beta version of the tool (available at <http://newscube.io>). Participants in the research included developers and professional users. The researcher is former journalist who used her professional skills of reporting and storytelling to gather and process research evidence.

Participants and data

As part of the research, a small development company was used to create the digital prototype. All interactions with the project manager and developer were captured: meetings and phone calls were recorded and transcribed; while emails, sketches, and other documents were retained. During the evaluation phase, interviews with professional users were recorded and transcribed, and sketches and diagrams recorded.

During transcription, annotations were made that linked discussion and design decisions to theory, practice, or related comments by others. This process was vital in extracting insight about the design process and demonstrates the role of reflection-in-action and deep craft in developing knowledge in this project.

Reflection in action

Schön's notion that knowledge is produced through action is evident in this project through later analysis of data collected during the design process. By recording discussions and interactions with the developer there was a record of how design decisions were made, and how problems were resolved.

For instance, the issue of ownership came up in the first development meeting: the developers wanted to know who “owned” a NewsCube. Sketching was used to work through the “life” of a story and this process was captured via audio recording and photographs of the whiteboard sketches. Later, when working with the digital prototype the possibility emerged for the NewsCube to be reporting tool as well as a storytelling tool. This insight came as a result of creating content for the prototype and talking through that process with the developer. Again, this interaction was recorded so its value was not lost in the throes of designing.

Transcribing recorded interactions played an important role in capturing data for later analysis and reflection. This was also valuable in identifying the role of specific domain knowledge in the design of the artefact. However, there was a parallel journalistic process at work: that of information synthesis. The process of identifying key quotes from interviews and integrating them with other evidence is part of journalistic storytelling and it was a practice the researcher relied on in making sense of the design process.

Deep craft

Arthur [1,2] has identified “deep craft” as “a set of knowings” that inventors bring to innovative technologies. Deep craft plays a role in redefining, which is the “the expressing of a given purpose in a different set of components” [2]. In the context of the NewsCubed project, deep craft helps explain the influence of journalistic values on the design artefact.

Journalism is a practice with strong underlying values: these include news values and core tenets of practice. News values determine the worth of journalistic stories

and include the power elite, celebrity, magnitude, bad news, among others [12]. Core tenets are values such as public service, objectivity, immediacy and ethics [6] and these underpin journalistic practice.

This “journalistic thinking” drove the early development of the NewsCube prototype and is evident in the design process. Issues around control and workflow, for instance, were often addressed by reference to the conventions and constraints of journalistic practice eg: dealing with truth and legal issues.

Feedback from professional users also revealed journalistic approaches to organising content, attitudes to reader involvement in stories, and the newspaper-like tactility of the interface. The ability for the designed artefact to probe practice revealed how the NewsCube prompted reflection by users on their current practice and gave them ideas about how to transcend established way of working [15]. This suggests that tacit knowledge on the part of the designer and the users can become part of the knowledge developed through design research.

Workshop participation

The NewsCubed project demonstrates how a journalist-oriented researcher has deployed, documented and evaluated design techniques to extract knowledge about the future of interaction in a specific domain.

While the project followed a RtD framework, it was informed by the knowledge and practices of another domain. It was the processes of information synthesis, including data capture and transcribing, combined with design artefacts, and deep craft that enabled much of the knowledge embedded in and produced through the

research to be realised. In this case, the researcher approached data capture and analysis in a journalistic way: it was her professional orientation.

There is scope to better understand the role of domain expertise in a design process is. Transcripts and examples of information synthesis will form the data for the Documenting Design Research Processes workshop with a view to considering the value of journalistic techniques to design.

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