

## **Introduction**

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This Special Section of *Participations* originates in the AHRC-funded project “New Media, Audiences and Affective Experience”, a collaborative student-led research development within the “Digital Transformations Scheme”. Over the past few years, the project has supported the development of new knowledge and skills on research experience and “affect” on digital platforms and art interventions across a range of disciplines. The Special Issue forms part of this project by facilitating a collaboration between an early career researcher and an academic with a few years of experience in the process of academic publishing with aim of producing a themed issue of a journal that over the past years has gained increasing reputation for publishing high quality articles related to studies of cultural and media audiences.

The articles in this Special Section address questions of social, cognitive and emotional participation and engagement of audiences, users and visitors under the umbrella of the ambiguous notion of “interactivity” in various physical and online platforms. Systems and devices as well as other technologies pervade all parts of our everyday life, and it is rather impossible to view them as separate from or external to, the social world. It therefore does not come as a surprise that researchers, artists, curators, and managers, educationalists of museums and heritage sites as well as exhibition and interactive designers are increasingly interested in understanding, informing and producing unique, interactive, immersive and affective experiences. It is argued that in the given interactive environments, audiences produce, engage, curate and become part of narratives and stories.

The complexity of discussing and researching interactive experiences is also indicated on the selection of essays in this issue. This Special Section has brought together analyses from computer science, cultural studies, archaeology, digital humanities, museum studies and practice as well as interdisciplinary perspectives from media, film and biological sciences. The aim is to bring in critical considerations, research studies and articles that can

creatively enrich the discussion on the relationships between audience, cultural institutions and content and the ways in which these relationships are being influenced by the increasing pervasiveness of new media technologies.

The Special Section is comprised of six research articles and a book review. The opening article, *'Please do touch! Understanding interactivity in the exhibition space'* by Barry, explores the concept of "interactivity" by exploring its use in public discourse over the past two decades and relating it to museums and galleries in particular (Barry, 2014). The paper argues the difference of aesthetic interactivity on artworks and the one associated with digital heritage. The first appears to provoke empowerment to audience allowing them to alter the meaning and performance of the work.

Cefai's article *'The Lesbian Intimate: Capacities for Feeling in Convergent Media Contexts'* takes us to a journey on Deleuze's work on the Spinozian understanding of bodies and images analysed through the TV series *The L Word's* (Showtime 2004-9) that showcases the lives of a group of lesbians living in Los Angeles. The author is discussing the media images of lesbians that responds to—and is dependent upon its production of—capacities for feeling (Cefai, 2014), tackling the relationship of media convergence and digital economy with the transformation of sexual identities and relations with a focus on television programming.

The audience is increasingly put at the centre of attention, challenging and engaging their emotions and intimacy. In a digital environment that reflects a number of processes and relationships such as personalisation of a narrative, the familiarity, comfortableness and closeness we feel with the interface as well as the environment itself. Interactivity can also trigger emotional engagement, feelings and situations that seem our very own and unique experiences. Cultural practices such as theatre and performance has embraced interactive and immersive ways to take the audience inside the process, for them to become participants, co-performers, explorers and players. Increasingly immersive media and theatre such as Blast Theory, Punchdrunk and Crew are more popular engaging audience to personalised non-linear experiences. Bouko's paper *'Interactivity and immersion in a media-based performance'* evaluates the notion and limits of interactivity and the role of the spectator as well as the personalisation of immersive theatre and its interrelations.

A troubling issue of researching audiences in digital mediated and interactive experiences relates to the methods and methodological approaches with which researchers capture, understand and interpret these cultural and digital experiences as well as how technologies have affected these methods. The article *'Mobile Sensing, BYOD and Big Data Analytics: New Technologies for Audience Research in Museums'* explores mobile technologies as a tool for tracking a number of characteristics of these experiences. Moussouri's and Roussos' paper discusses the use of mobile technologies as an opportunity to offer unique data for audience research with a focus on tracking specific locations and timings of the visitor when outdoors. The paper also offers an extensive and detailed discussion on the various technologies in galleries and museum and their use to track

visitors' movements indoors, opening opportunities such as tracking the individual interaction with specific artefacts or artworks.

The use of sensor modalities is increasingly popular in researching engagement looking in aspects such as proximity, environmental and biological sensors as well as skin sensors. The paper by Witchel and colleagues extends that aspect and explores in detail the use of sensor modalities to understand the engagement of individuals with audio-visual stimuli. The interdisciplinary research is measuring embodied intellectual and emotional engagement using non-verbal movement parameters in the context of the narrative rhythm of the stimulus (Witchel et al., 2014)

The final paper by Spiliopoulou and colleagues takes up museums' relatively recent interest in using social media and social networking sites to enhance their relationships with audiences. Spiliopoulou and colleagues' analysis is one of the first systematic investigations in the use of social networking activities by a major cultural organisation. The authors examine data gathered with Facebook Insights to explore and assess the British Museum's social networking activities and make suggestions on the effective use of social networking sites.

The Special Section concludes with Ntalla's review of Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt's edited collection *Democratising the Museum: Reflections on Participatory Technologies*.