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The Partnership Quilt: An Interactive Living Archive of Sex Worker Voices

ANGELIKA STROHMAYER, AND JANIS MEISSNER

Abstract Working alongside people who use and manage a local charity and professional quilters, we sewed a quilted blanket which we augmented with capacitive touch sensors to turn the craft Piece into an interactive archiver. In this way, the quilt tells the story of the women who were involved in making it not only through the seams, but also with our embedded voices. We describe the process of quilting a digitally augmented social fabric and the ways in which the sewing allowed us to learn through the seams, we present a project that brings together aspects of human connection, crafted learning, and living archival practice.

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a description and analysis of a collaborative project titled ‘The Partnership Quilt’. As the name suggests, we co-created a quilted blanket. We digitally augmented this with Do-It-Yourself (DIY) touch sensors, turning the craft piece into an interactive archive which literally ‘tells’ its own story and the meanings its creators associate with it (Figure 1).

The initial stitch was made by service users of the Girls are Proud (GAP) project, a charity that supports women who are sex workers or those who have been, or are at risk of sexual exploitation during a regularly scheduled drop-in session. Quilting was found to be a calming activity and was therefore used to create a mindful and relaxed atmosphere. As the women progressed in their sewing to create a patchwork quilt, we became involved and started thinking about what technologies could be used to turn the colourful quilt into an archive of

experiences. Together with Six Penny Memories, a duo of professional quilters, we were able to quilt an additional layer that incorporated DIY capacitive touch sensors; this is placed behind the traditional quilt, and together they create the living archive. After several months of sewing during the drop-in sessions and two full-day workshops where all stakeholders came together to assemble the quilt and solder the electrodes, we recorded a 30-minute-reflection of the process and different meanings the quilt had for all of us. Based on this recording, we curated twelve snippets that outline the process, meaning, and potential futures of the quilt, which constitute the entries in the archive. Alongside the quilt, we also produced a booklet and report¹ outlining the meaning of and instructions on how to make such a quilt.

Below, we provide a discussion of the social fabric that is sewn into the quilt as well as the how those who took part were able to learn through the seams to create this living archive of sex worker voices.

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Figure 1. These photos were taken throughout the process of making the quilt. Top left: Quilted electronics and controller; Top right: Traditional and digitally-augmented layers of the quilt; Bottom: Women involved in sewing the quilt. Photo Credit: Angelika Strohmayer and Janis Meissner. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

QUILTING WITH A DIGITALLY AUGMENTED SOCIAL FABRIC

A quilt is made up of at least three layers: the quilt top, the wadding in the middle, and the backing fabric; and sometimes the quilt top is made up of multiple layers of fabric, appliqué, and sewing in and of itself. In the Partnership Quilt, we added layers of quilted electronics to these traditional layers.

Due to the many different tangible (fabric and other materials) and intangible (histories, work, learning) layers involved in the production and life-story of the quilt, it becomes more than just an artefact. For example, it is contextualised in and extends the legacy of local histories of crafts and women's work. Many different techniques were used to craft the archive, but primarily it was made using the traditional English paper-piecing technique. With this, we were "*carrying on a tradition that's particularly popular in this area [...] the North East is absolutely steeped in history. We are very well known throughout the world for our quilting,*" as one of the professional quilters said.² There is little written history of quilters from the North East of England, but we were able to find traces of this precise technique in a regional collection of quilts (Allan, 2007) and a brief written history (1870–1930) of how quilting became the "very bread and butter" (Ferguson, 2011, p. 394) for many, while others aspired to make a living from their craft (Freeman, 2007). The Partnership Quilt continues these traditions, as said by one participant: "*just a job, keep ourselves busy, we've kept ourselves out of trouble and I've got some lovely memories sitting with youse*."³

At the same time, it also extends contemporary understandings of making, developing it into a hybrid artefact that bridges the contemporary digital world and traditional craft practices. Through this digital augmentation, it is not only the stitches and seams that tell of women's

experiences. The collated snippets of oral history of the region also create a space that allows the highly stigmatised women telling their stories "a different level of respect from those who lack [a written history]" (Freeman, 2007, p. 31).

SEWING THE QUILT AND LEARNING THROUGH THE SEAMS

The choosing of materials, their assembly into rosettes, the placement of buttons, and ultimately the assembling of the quilt as a whole gave rise to reflections of personal and communal narratives, creating a space for all of those involved in the project (Sellie, Goldstein, Fair, & Hoyer, 2015). Through this, the production of the quilt and the quilt itself become a tangible community archive that can be activated to support individual and group empowerment.

The quilted archive is more than just the material outcome of the project, in that the process (and documentation thereof) itself also functions as a kind of archival practice. Every choice made throughout the process, each stitch and button sewn onto the quilt, provided an opportunity for work, learning, and experience. For instance, this work can create pride as some of the makers said: "*[A]ctually seeing it, I feel a bit like, wowed. Is that the word?*" The process of production was part of this pride, which results in the final product also constituting the tacit archiving of these processes in and of itself:

"there's something about a group of women getting together and getting a thing done! [...] women are really good at that aren't they? Like, this is what we need to get done and everybody's done a little bit haven't they? And I think that's a beautiful thing!"⁴

The quilt's making was embedded in the practices of the charity, showing yet again that

the process played an important part in the meaning participants took away from this archival project as can be seen from this interaction between a member of staff and service user:

“drop-ins are just such a nice space to be able to do everything you want to do. Like you love the drop-in don’t you?”

“Yea, it’s, it’s the best thing I ever did. It changed me life”⁵

Further to the sewing of the quilt, the documentation of the experiences of making the archive (through a booklet, report, and the audio recordings on the quilt itself) therefore provide rich material for versatile reflection: the charity can use it for reporting impact, the service users for visualizing their individual progress, and detached audiences for connecting with life experiences outside their social bubbles. The last point in particular, can be seen as the archive has been exhibited at several public events such as the annual Festival of Quilts in Birmingham, UK, or at the centenary of the Northumberland Federation of Women’s Institutes. While the audience in one case constituted crafts people with a highly specialized interest in quilting, the other showcase reached a group of women with diverse interests who were likely to never have engaged with the experiences of sex workers. From the quilters we know that visitors at these exhibitions interacted with the quilt and listened to stories of those who created it, getting an insight into a different space by asynchronously interacting with people they may never have had a chance to meet.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presented the Partnership Quilt where a charity, a team of professional quilters and two Human Computer Interaction

researchers came together to create a living archive of sex worker voices in the form of a digitally augmented quilt. We highlighted the different meanings of the project for different stakeholders and audiences and the potential that interactions with the artefact hold for reflections in respect to localised historical traditions, charity services and learning through collaboration. Working with different aspects of ‘archiving’ we can see the quilt as a novel kind of interactive hybrid artifact – the result of hybrid craft practices (traditional quilting and DIY touch sensors), continues to be a hybrid artifact that exists digitally (digital storage of audio clips through the archive of audio clips), and the interaction with the quilt (to curate and listen to the clips).

Not only has the process of making been a learning process for all of those involved in sewing the quilt, or the exhibition and interaction with the finished product a learning process for those who took the time to engage, but it has also been an opportunity to create a hybrid artifact that allows for human connection, crafted learning, and living archival practice. What we mean to say with this is that the archive is a living, changing, and adapting artifact. The audio files that are triggered when interacting with the quilt are easily interchanged. As such, the archive has the potential to be constantly evolving and changing. We see the curation of these audio files (it is only possible to share a maximum of 12 clips at any given time) holding the potential for the development of a new space to collate and curate experiences within the infrastructure of the digitally augmented quilt. This process allows the curator to archive the files that are being taken off and to change the quilt’s front-facing contents; creating a new ‘gallery’ within the archive. This brings about the potential to not only have the

overall archive, but to be able to digitally and visually represent the curatorial processes. **END**

NOTES

1. Project report can be found at the following link:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321906645_The_Partnership_Quilt_Project_Report
2. This italicized quote – along with those that follow over the remainder of the article – were transcribed verbatim from conversations with various women involved in the making of the quilt. This statement was made by one of the professional quilters.
3. Transcribed verbatim with regional accents.
Quote translates: *“just a job, keep ourselves busy, we’ve kept ourselves out of trouble and I’ve got some lovely memories sitting with all of you”*.
4. Transcribed verbatim. This statement was made by one staff member at the partner organisation.
5. Transcribed verbatim with regional accents.
Quote translates: *“It changed my life”*.

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