

# Interactive Performances as a Means of Social Participation and Democratic Dialogue

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## Introduction

In this position paper we present our ongoing research in relation to cultivating democracy and civic participation through the writing and performance of interactive theater experiences<sup>1</sup>. We provide an example of a performance that facilitates audience participation through expression and sharing of opinions and emotions, by means of digital technologies. The performance leads to further discussion within the community and inspires more artistic and theatrical experiences in this context.

## Related Literature

Over the last years, research has investigated the role of digital technology as a means of social inclusion (Warschauer, 2003). For instance, a number of projects have combined a focus on social issues of global mobility with the exploration of how technology can support various social relationships within city contexts. By drawing on the notion of cities as isolating places full of strangers, research has focused on how technology can enable connections between proximate strangers (Yukari, 1998), or facilitate the emergence of latent social networks in public spaces (Satchell, 2006). Another strand of research has been concerned with exploring how Information Technology can promote participation in “official”

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<sup>1</sup> This workshop paper is partly based on an another article currently under review (Ekenberg et al. 2013).

democratic processes, such as elections and civic participation (i.e. De Cindio et al., 2007), and how computational artifacts can promote a direct dialogue between people and local institutions (i.e. Ranerup 2000). Research carried out in the German context has investigated, instead, the role of technology in promoting meetings between communities of immigrants through the organization of intercultural Computer Clubs (Stevens et al., 2004). The organizations of computermediated activities (i.e. documenting family history, sharing experiences about local neighborhoods) were occasions for people to address complex issues of identity building and knowledge acquisition. Similarly, the European Project Puente (Lentini et al., 2009) has targeted different social groups (migrants, local citizens, school children and teenagers) and institutions (public schools, refugee centers, unemployment centers, etc) to explore how participation in creative activities, such as the organization of photo exhibition about the local territory, could help establishing a dialogue between people and their territory and, thus, nourishing a sense of identity connected to the place itself.

Where much research focuses on official democratic structures and participation in official processes, we look at how people can be empowered to express their feelings and opinions in the context of cultural artistic experiences that they are able to participate in. We now continue with our specific case of an interactive theatrical experience.

## Interactive Theatrical Experiences

In our project we investigate how inclusion and participation in the creation and design of interactive performances can encourage civic participation, particularly in inter-cultural areas of the city. Our collaboration with RATS theater is facilitating this research through its use of novel methodologies for inclusion of local community members in its creative process as well as the actual performance. We continue by describing the production of *Antigone's Diary* as it appears to the participating audience. After describing first experiences through observation we reflect both on the theoretical implications of this multimedia performance and its outcome in terms of civic engagement and its potentials for public decision making.

### Antigone's Diary

*Antigone's Diary* (Forsberg, 2012) takes place in Husby, a suburban area northwest of Stockholm. The subway ride from the city centre takes almost half an hour. In May 2013, Husby came to international attention as a result of a week of riots: young men roamed the streets and burned cars, threw stones at the police and shattered shop windows. These riots were reported world-wide and frequently compared to the outbursts of violence in the suburbs of Paris in 2005 and 2007. The unrest in Husby had ostensibly been attributed to local indignation following

the police's murder of a 69-year old man. As is often the case in such incidents, the reasons are much more intricate.

Husby was developed and built by the Stockholm City Council in the early 1970s and the first tenants moved in around 1974. The subway station was opened in 1977. At the time of writing, about 12,000 people currently live there, and of these 83% are immigrants or the children of immigrants. The suburb contains two elementary schools, one school for the upper grades of the compulsory school system, a library, a sports hall and an ice-hockey hall as well as a very popular indoor aqua park (with swimming pool, wave machine and water slides). High unemployment and low education have turned Husby into an immigrant ghetto.

This picture is enhanced by Husby's proximity to another suburb of a very different kind: Kista.

Kista might be described as the Silicon Valley of Swedish computer engineering: it features a conglomerate of world-known technological industries, such as Ericsson, IBM and Microsoft, as well as more than 1,000 businesses and incubators working within the area of computer and system development. The computer departments of Stockholm University and of the Royal Institute of Technology are located there. About 25,000 employees and thousands of students work in Kista. The social standard of this suburb becomes obvious when one arrives by subway and has to pass through Kista Galleria, a large shopping mall featuring a significant number of fashionable global brands.

Husby may be the next stop after Kista on the subway's blue line, with only a field separating the two locations. They are, however, in many ways, a whole world apart. Coming out of the subway in Husby, there is no shopping mall, but a rather narrow square with some private and public enterprises: a pizzeria, a kebab restaurant, an Asian grocers, a dry-cleaner, a pharmacy and a doctors' surgery, a day centre for aging Iranians, a public assembly hall. On the square and the adjoining streets, women of all ages go about their business, wearing shawls and niqabs, while groups of men sit on some of the benches chatting in the sun.

The performance of *Antigone's Diary* always begins right in the middle of Husby's central square, where a little podium with some odd posters marks the place where the audience gathers. Some of the spectators come from the subway, but most members of the audience are teenagers from the local schools who have been especially invited to be part of the piece (see picture). Although these youngsters instinctively know how to download the application they are told they need for this production, many prefer to use the mobile-phones that are provided by the producer: they have split earphones so that two participants can share one phone and thus share the experience, which often seems preferable to most of the school-age children who participate in the production.

Whenever the participants are ready, they push their start button and the performance begins. The voices that the 'spectators' hear are pre-recorded by professional actors, who are not present at the scene. The participants have to imagine the characters — what they look like, what they are wearing and their behavior implies — according to the expressive signs of the sound track. After a short prologue that invites them to join in the search for Antigone, the first scene plays around the podium in the square. Now, the participants hear the voice of a guard who urges both Antigone and the 'ancient' chorus who are also present through the headphone to remove the sculpture on the podium. Most of the young

members of the audience – usually about 30 participants at any one time – probably know little or nothing about the myth of Antigone, so they take in all the fictional information they hear on their mobile-phones. The imagined characters of the play are said to have no permission to build anything on the square, but they maintain their right to support Antigone’s idea of beautifying their suburb. The chorus gets angry about the guard’s stubbornness and Antigone asks the participants ‘What makes you angry?’ Now the display of the mobile-phone opens for a text message that can be sent in response to the question. This opportunity is much welcomed, especially by the young participants who immediately tap in their comments. Those who share the phone try to agree on what their message should be. As soon as the text has been sent, the participants can scroll the responses of other members of the audience, including those from earlier performances. Thus the collective answers to the question become part of the information that the performance transmits.



Meanwhile the participants move to the second performance space – some manage to write while they are walking – following the GPS map on their display. On the one hand, the group walks in a collective movement, but on the other hand each participant or group of participants choose their own pace. As they walk they listen to music and only when they arrive at the designated location does scene number two start in their earphones. This second scene is located at the schoolyard and the recording they hear imitates the loudspeaker voice of a headmaster, but in the play it is Creon who speaks. He addresses the citizens of Thebes, friends and students, and tells them that Eteocles has been buried and that Polynieces will remain unburied to be eaten by dogs and birds. Sophocles' tragedy remains present in this contemporary narrative. Whoever defies this order will be condemned to death. Antigone is upset and her voice in the earphones asks the participants 'When is it permissible to refuse an order?'

Scene number three plays in the bedroom of Antigone's stepmother Eurydice, the wife of Creon. This time the outdoor location has little to do with the fictional environment. A concrete wall has been roughly painted so that a window might be pictured, but the listeners need to use their imaginations to picture this scene. Antigone's stepmother is asleep and not willing to engage in Antigone's worries about the unburied Polynieces. The question she asks the participants is: 'When do you feel lonely?'

The fictional bus stop where scene four takes place and the Cultural Centre of scene five will have to be imagined by the listeners because at that point they are walking on a nondescript path within Husby's housing estates. In scene six, when Antigone buries her brother and speaks to the dead body in a moving monologue, the group has come to a park, where some roughly hewn stones with inscriptions actually evoke a graveyard. In the following scene Antigone meets Haimon in a shopping mall, here played outside a grocery shop. As with several other locations, only some colorful stripes hanging from a rope between lamp-posts point to this as the place of the scene. In scene nine the chorus fuses lines from Sophocles' play with descriptions of the local environment. Antigone responds with a significant question: whether Husby subway station is the first or the last stop on the blue line. In the next fictional scene Antigone is taken by the police and pushed into a police car. When a crowd approaches the car, the officers notice a fire in a parking lot. They decide to take Antigone to a disused subway station – the grave, in which Sophocles' Antigone is buried alive. For local participants the nameless, disused station is a recognizable referent, a place of fear and to be avoided. For the participants, the conjuring of this station creates a palpable sense of the horror of Antigone's fate.

The twelfth and final scene brings the scattered group back to the square. The listeners hear mass protesters shouting in Arabic – using recordings from the events in Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2012 – demanding the end of Mubarak's dictatorship. Haimon whispers the last question about what freedom means to each individual participant. The responses to this question stretch from simple statements such as 'summer vacation' over 'democracy' and 'justice and equality' to quoting Janis Joplin's famous 'freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose.'

## Method

A student researcher examined the content and character of all the 714 text messages that were sent in during the performances. The messages were divided into five categories, of which the main category consisted of proper answers to the questions that were asked. No less than 617 or 86.4% of all the texts that were sent in were indeed reflections and responses to the questions that concluded each scene. Considering that a small number of messages were sent by mistake or otherwise unreadable and that some responses concerned the performance as such rather than a specific question, only about 5% remain for the category of making fun of the questions. But even the small percentage of participants who ridiculed the topics bothered to send text messages; this points to the fact that they were obviously listening to and engaging with the performance.

## Participation through text

The seriousness with which the audiences encountered the performance is very well expressed in the text messages that were sent off in response to the questions. The question after scene three – ‘When do you feel lonely?’ – serves as example: ‘when I am alone’ – ‘when one cannot meet the family’ – ‘in the evening’ – ‘when my dad leaves my bedroom’ – ‘at three o’clock at night, sometimes’ – ‘when nobody stands up for me’ – ‘when I am with a lot of other people and I only think of how little we share with each other’ – ‘when one is solo para siempre’ – ‘when someone you trusted betrays you’. These responses showed a surprising level of engagement by the high schoolers who wrote them, inspired by the play.



Since each participant also could scroll the responses of other people, these messages became part of the ‘manuscript’. Thus the audiences were not only interacting with the performance, they were also interacting with each other. Here the sense of a collective experience became manifest – collective also in the sense that the text messages were anonymous or at most tagged with a common first name (this is excluded in the published text). Again, the seriousness of the messages might have had an encouraging effect on the participants, their engagement and willingness to contribute with their own opinions. We would argue, therefore, *Antigone’s Diary* provided experiential access to a theatrical event that carries theatre beyond the limits of the conventional co-presence that has dominated theatre and performance studies over the last two decades.

## Artistic methods in citizen interaction

*Antigone’s Diary* was, as we mentioned at the beginning of this article, produced by RATS Theatre, a section of the Department of Computer and System Science at Stockholm University (DSV). Situated in the middle of a hub of hightechnology businesses on the one hand, and having Husby as the neighbouring community on the other hand, computer science moves constantly between technological advancements and social and political needs. Husby has been considered, not the least in the media’s coverage, as a ‘problematic’ suburb, neglecting the potential and activism of its multi-cultural inhabitants, which relates to the issue of civic participation and eGovernment.

Indeed, the local population have displayed a degree of skepticism with regard to numerous kinds of reforms that have been initiated during recent years, not the least because these are considered to have been imposed on the citizens without a significant dialogue in advance, leading to an interesting function of *Antigone’s Diary*. The performance has been able to engage different groups of people and has, to a certain extent, changed the media image of Husby. Newspaper images of ethnic males presented as potentially dangerous ‘other’, have been replaced by attentive young women with headphones, listening to mobile theatre, making it highly relevant to consider whether such modalities can be used for citizen communication on a broader setting, involving people whose voices are not often heard to any significant extent from a societal perspective. This is particularly interesting since deliberative forms of democracy in which citizens participate more actively in the planning and decision- making procedures are generally considered utopian. The prevailing formal processes give disproportional power to people having the means, time and opportunity to participate in decision-making and negotiations.

The concerns involved here are many, but everything circulates around how to design public process models and how these can be incorporated in high complexity decision-making, encompassing different points-of-view, different perspectives, multiple objectives, and multiple stakeholders using different methods for appraisals. In the public decision implementation, such a decision framework should furthermore allow for different groups of citizens providing their assessments of planning options using methods designed for different points-of-view. Typically in planning decisions, this includes environmental impact assessment methods such as life-cycle assessments, return-on-investment calculations, equality and ethical assessments as well as political ideology alignment made by necessity by decision-makers. So the step from participating in a theatre play might seem to be large, but the largest problem with participatory decision-making is inevitable — public involvement.

How can *Antigone's Diary* contribute to this intricate elicitation, modeling and development of e-democracy? First and foremost the performance shows how such interaction can be organized and also points out the conditions, under which the interaction can become successful. The creative process that has been invested in *Antigone's Diary* became a crucial prerequisite for the interaction potential of the performance. The clear, intelligible plot enhanced the communication, while the perceived lack of comprehensibility of the problems at hand is something that forcefully prevents active participation in decision-making processes. City planning is a typical example: The ground plans and blueprints are difficult to understand for most people and the terminology used to explain such documents is of such a technical character that only experts tend to understand them. In this situation, a significant proportion of people who are concerned or likely to be affected by the proposed plans are largely excluded from the public discourse.

*Antigone's Diary* skillfully pointed out the importance of place, where city planning can serve as an obvious example. Often the plans are exhibited in the official locations that the authorities are based in instead of bringing the exhibition to the population likely to be affected by these changes. The accessibility in terms of the location that is part of the stakeholders' own environment is as essential for city planning as it was for the drama of *Antigone*. Furthermore, guiding the participants to the exact locations which are the objects of the public discussions, creates not only a virtual engagement but becomes the playground for practical involvement. The movement through places, especially in collective groups, enhances the participatory potential. Participation becomes a kind of playful way of engaging with serious issues. In addition, the social media allow participants to instantly give expression to their perception.

Applied to the example of city planning the advantages are obvious: the authorities need to create materials that are comprehensible also for laymen, i.e. they have to be developed with the citizens who are affected by what is proposed. The forms of presentation need to be accessible in the places where they are to be

implemented. The interaction with the citizens has to take place while they are engaged in the questions at hand. The involvement has to be formatted so that the citizens feel that they are concerned. In the case of city planning, the experiences of *Antigone's Diary* can almost be literally transformed into a model of public decision-making. Other public decision-making might require other elaborate analyses of the principles of public participatory processes.

This concerns the discursive and the public interaction layers which are dependent on the interest and willingness of various stakeholders to become involved. *Antigone's Diary* illustrates a number of pertinent points about the issue of community involvement that have implications for the ways in which participation (on both a theoretical and practical level) can be considered by those working with these communities or supposedly representing their 'interests'.

During the workshop we would like to discuss the following questions: How can we develop and document methods for enabling democratic dialogues at the level of the local community? How can we identify and document methods that can be used by the production team to design interactive performance aiming at triggering democratic dialogues?

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