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“Do We Have LIFT-Off?” Social Media Marketing and Digital Performance at a British Arts Festival

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ABSTRACT

Arts festivals have been explored through many lenses, but social media marketing and digital performance are less studied. The potential of social media networks in digital performance is exemplified by the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT), which repositions social media technology as an enabler for audiences to co-produce digitally oriented performance. This article argues that the relationship between social media marketing and performance is more hybridized than often assumed, with performances forming a creative development loop from producer to audience through performative social media. Harnessing the creative potential of social media platforms via “digital staging” encourages audience insight into process as well as product.

KEYWORDS

Arts management; festivals; performance; social media; technology

Introduction

The London International Festival of Theatre, known as LIFT, is a month-long biennial urban arts festival encompassing theatre, music, and dance: a place “where the city meets the stage” (LIFT 2014). Since 1981, LIFT has built its reputation on commissioning and producing creative, avant-garde and often radical work. It has grown in scope over the years to colonize spaces from dance halls to cemeteries as temporary backdrops to unusual performances, installations, and gatherings. After a hiatus in 2001, LIFT re-launched in 2010 with a refreshed mission to involve younger, socio-economically and ethnically diverse local audiences: residents who “represent the world because of where they come from and the communities in which they live” (Ball 2014, 1). This celebration of community values, ideologies, and identities celebrates the very essence of a festival (Getz 2010, 2) but it also places LIFT in a crowded landscape of arts organizations striving to maximize their cultural relevance in order to maintain financial support from government, continue to raise revenue from ticket sales, and involve new audiences, all while trying to program valuable and unusual work.

In this competitive scenario, LIFT’s artistic director Mark Ball (2014, 1) emphasizes an organizational mission to “work with artists who have radical imaginations and an extraordinary way of looking at the world.” But these perspectives, extraordinary as they may be, need to appeal to a wide range of audiences, including the much-discussed “digital natives”

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(Prensky 2001; see also Bennett, Maton, and Kervin 2008). These “millennials,” to quote another definitional zeitgeist (Strauss and Howe 2000), are Internet-savvy young adults comfortable with consuming content digitally and open to engaging in unusual creative experiences. Digital technology has long played a role in LIFT’s offering (Parker-Starbuck 2011), but rapid developments in technology mean that mobile devices and social media now dominate digital life (Berry and Goodwin 2012; boyd 2010; Carah 2015). How, then, can an arts organization such as LIFT continue to involve digital natives as active audiences?

The answer may be through mainstream social media, including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube: surprising choices given their ubiquity. We can look at commonly studied digital social media in a different way via application to an arts festival by refiguring social media as a kind of “digital staging” that helps to produce performance, rather than its more common utilization as an information dissemination or marketing tool. Further, digital staging can reveal, in a virtual sense, the spatiality and constructedness of temporary festival spaces more often discussed via their physical iterations. The arts festival distinction is important here because these festivals constitute “temporary environments that contribute to the production, processing and consumption of culture” (Waterman 1998, 54), all in one time and place. Such a targeted scope allows for a generative analysis of social media.

Contrary to harnessing social media as a marketing tool, this article demonstrates how the relationship between social media marketing and performance can constitute co-constructed performances that shift audiences from consumers to collaborators. I argue that LIFT represents an effective meeting of social media and digital performance because, rather than performance informing marketing, here the two forces work in circulation, with audiences learning about the development of the performance via social media, leading them to engage with the development process and, as a result, helping shape performance outcomes rather than being the passive receivers of marketed performance. The contribution of this article lies in examining, in more detail, LIFT’s online networking platforms to show how mainstream social media can contribute to forms of marketing and digital performance that are unusual in construction and delivery. The result is digital performance that moves away from a producer-consumer relationship and towards a hybrid model with meaningful audience participation that exemplifies the development of marketing as an interactive, live, and co-curated experience (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). This always-in-process performance model represents a valuable application for social media in arts festivals and arts programming more generally.

The case study approach

This article takes an applied case study approach, building on debates at the intersection of arts management and technology via performance studies: the growing attention paid to digital arts festival marketing (Hudson and Hudson 2013; Shih, Han, and Carroll 2015; Thomson, Purcell, and Rainie 2013); social media as a tool for different models of communication (for example, Carah 2015; Larsson 2016; Van Djick 2013); and the “liveness” of digital performance (Carlin and Vaughan 2015; Dixon 2007; Hemment et al. 2013). I begin by outlining key critical debates around arts festivals, introducing the stepping-off point for my own research into social media marketing and digital performance. I then explore LIFT’s social media strategies for maximizing audience engagement and suggest this hybridization of social media and performance is a kind of digital staging. Finally, using the digital theatre project *Longitude* as a case study, I examine some of the conceptual and production issues generated by using digital staging as part of digital performance and consider its future utility, not just at LIFT, but within cultural arts more generally.

The fieldwork that informs this case study came from my time as a digital content volunteer for LIFT in 2014. The choice to pursue an in-depth case study of a single organization allowed me to develop practical, rather than just theoretical, knowledge (Flyvberg 2006); in so doing, I am able to illustrate different modes of operation in an applied context. My immersion in the organization invited an ethnographic approach that provided insight into the mechanics of both the marketing and performance profiles of the festival. I conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with three staff (intern, middle-manager, and director) to complement the larger case study and to build on my own experiences of the organizational praxis, recognizing Helen Schwartzman's (1993) argument that organizational ethnography attends to the value of the stories told by staff. These interviews were particularly useful in learning about the centrality of digital programming as an organizational priority across the different staff levels.

Arts festivals in the digital age

Arts festivals have synthesized the public cultural imagination in various guises for centuries. City-based arts festivals have grown exponentially in scale from the early 1980s onwards (Gursoy, Kim, and Uysal 2004; Olsen 2013; Quinn 2010; Waterman 1998). The political drivers behind the development of "creative industries" in relation to arts festivals and cultural policy more broadly, as explored, for example by Bilton and Leary (2002, 49), and the extent to which local communities and particular demographics engage with the city's festivals, have been a key focus of arts festival research (Hauptfleisch et al. 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Pratt 2005; Quinn 2005; Van Aalst and Van Melik 2012).

There is, however, less scholarship with a specific focus on the digital dimensions of festival marketing and content, and consideration of how this might further develop in future (*pace* Shih, Han, and Carroll 2015 and Slack, Rowley, and Coles 2008, amongst others). Given the opportunities for creative production offered to us by mobile phones and social media (Alexander and Losh 2010; boyd 2010; Hartley 2009; Turner 2009), as well as the wider shift in marketing to consumer-led "value co-creation" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004, 5), consideration of these dynamic marketer-consumer relationships in artistic contexts would generate valuable insights into not just digital marketing and performance, but also how technology is incorporated into daily life. Critical focus on theorizing and contextualizing the politics of festivals obscures attention to the more pragmatic concerns of how they function in the pervasive digital context of the contemporary global North. After all, if an arts festival is about creating a temporary public space, members of that public can experience this space effectively (and indeed affectively) via digital engagement (following Connor 2013; see also Carlin and Vaughan 2015). The proliferation of arts festivals in recent years as commodities for the contemporary city that seeks to "reposition and differentiate itself in an increasingly competitive world" (Quinn 2005, 927; see also Olsen 2013) is a central challenge to the integrity of arts festivals. In this context, pursuing *digital* futures in both marketing and programming might constitute an effective way in which producers can continue to stake out meaningful and individual offerings in cultural arts.

Meanwhile, digital performance scholarship, while healthy (see, for example, Kozel on affective computing (2008), Salter on new media performance (2010), and Parker-Starbuck on techno-mediation (2011)), would benefit from further applied case study analysis in a festival setting. Doing so can show how the heightened temporality of the festival setting encourages digital performance that can be actively engaged with, and shaped by audiences, whether through social media marketing or within digital performance itself.

Social media as “digital staging”

Staging has been theorized as a dramaturgical aspect of public life (Sennett 1977) and, more pejoratively, in terms of an artificial staging of authenticity (MacCannell 1973), an illusory “staging of openness” (Allen 2006, 3), or as a way of domesticating public life, reducing its distinctiveness or “edge” (Zukin 2010). This article proposes considering staging from another angle, by thinking of it not as something artificial or performed, but in the context of construction. “Digital staging” here refers to the generative force of technology in helping shape performance. It is used in this scenario in the service of actual (albeit frequently unorthodox) theatre, but could also be applied to the way that technology helps scaffold hybridized digital-physical conversation, or the kind of digital staging that helps produce the Internet as a forum for information. Put another way, digital staging is recognizing the potential of technology as a structural contribution to a hybrid experience. By thinking of social media in more performative iterations, we can think more about the constructed dimensions of performance. These circulations represent new ways of a performance coming together and of looping back to the audience.

Attracting millennials to LIFT

With 3.4 billion Internet users worldwide and some 2.3 billion social media users (Chaffey 2016), it is clear that social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, are highly relevant to consumer behavior. Yet arts organizations have been slow to encourage online conversation about their offering before or after performances (Connor 2013, 4). Honing in on LIFT’s social media platforms shows us how the festival utilizes these channels for digital staging.

The majority of LIFT’s audience demographic are active social media users, and slightly younger than the average theatre attendee, with proportionally less disposable income available to fund their arts attendance; of 1,400 audience members surveyed at LIFT shows in July 2014, 51% were aged 20–34 years old, with 6% even younger at 16–19 years old; 60% of attendees matched the 18- to 34-year-old age range of “millennials” and “digital natives” (identified, for example, by Howe & Strauss 2000; see also Bennett, Maton, and Kerwin 2008). Meanwhile, social media usage by British theatre audiences seems to be growing: a sizeable 24% of theatregoers surveyed in 2013 tweeted about performances they planned to see or had seen, rising to 47% among 16- to 19-year-olds. Yet only 3% of theatregoers surveyed received information about theatre through social media (Mermiri 2013), reflecting wider evidence of underutilized media channels (Humby 2016). LIFT is something of an outlier to this digital lacuna because it prioritizes marketing via social media in its strategy, partly to better target its younger audience and partly because of the lower associated costs from online marketing. As a result, interaction with the festival’s online presence from users is healthy.

The organizational emphasis on digital marketing is writ large in LIFT’s highly stylized website (Figure 1), a showcase for the festival’s offering with built-in “widgets” for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This frequently updated content contributes a sense of energy to the website and communicates real-time activity on behalf of the festival, in turn directing people to LIFT’s social media platforms. Online interaction from audiences peaks during festival season, but outside of the biennial fixture, LIFT commissions and rehearses work in preparation for the incumbent festival, as well as curating satellite or “in residence” projects to run throughout the year. Updates from these projects are broadcast across LIFT’s social media channels as glimpses into the work in progress. This primes audiences for the performance

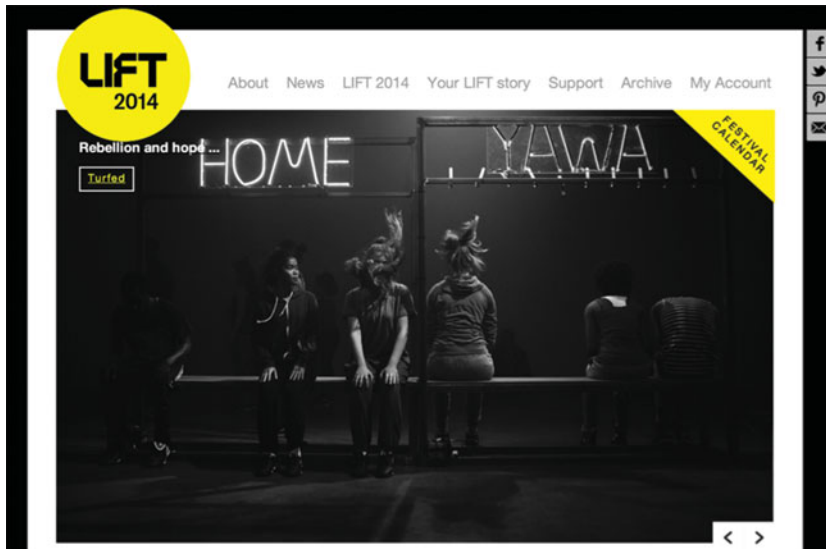


Figure 1. LIFT homepage (2014).

and shows them the work in progress, not just the finished product. Like opening a Latourian “black box” (Latour 1987), LIFT makes the constructedness of the performance visible via social media. In so doing, it disrupts established conventions of performance as something packaged for presentation only when complete, instead inviting the audience into the development process.

Twitter and audience involvement

Twitter functions as a broadcast channel as much as it constitutes a communication tool, being used as electronic word-of-mouth for opinion sharing of brands (Jansen et al. 2009; Nitins and Burgess 2014). In such a brand-friendly environment, it is clear why Twitter is the most popular of LIFT’s social media platforms (Figure 2). LIFT’s Twitter followers grew from 14,500 in May 2014 to over 16,000 by August 2014. The main goal of the Twitter platform throughout festival season was to attract and involve audiences in upcoming shows using an unusual or conversational style while minimizing marketing fatigue amongst followers. There is an ethical context to this form of social networking marketing, because it involves a “work” of sorts for those audiences engaging with the interactive offering of the organization. In fact, LIFT’s social media communications with audiences maintained a striking intimacy, no mean feat when we consider that online conversation is in many ways “different” from co-present conversation (Honey and Herring 2009). Critics have argued that early predictions of online sociability have failed to materialize because of emotional dislocation online (Zhao and Elesh 2008; Huberman, Romero, and Wu 2009), but meaningful interaction between LIFT and its audiences suggests that this supposed dislocation has either dissolved over time as online conversation has become more ubiquitous, or constitutes less of a problem when the interaction is not personally intimate. As a result, festival followers treated LIFT’s postings as invitations to conversation, replying with their own thoughts, projects, and political opinions. Thus, their social media interaction generated online conversation with both the festival and each other.

Additionally, live-tweeting post-show discussions from performance venues led to spikes in the organization’s social media presence, measured through follower views and follower



Figure 2. LIFT Twitter profile (2014).

interactions. Adding photos of the post-show discussion, including shots of the director or stage, helped “set the scene” for those following the live-tweeting as if in a broadcast format, cultivating a sense of liveness in the debate and contributing another form of digital staging. The blurring of marketing with performance is manifested in this scenario in the physical-virtual construction of the post-show debate rather than the performance itself (Figure 3), capitalizing on audience participation to communicate their mutually generative involvement with the festival.

Facebook and paid content

What is so interesting about this performative reading of social media is that it reveals differences as much as commonalities between platforms. In contrast to Twitter, Facebook sharing lost efficacy at LIFT on a general level. Changes to Facebook exposure algorithms in 2013 resulted in a limited sharing scope for Facebook groups and pages (Bucher 2012), and LIFT’s own Facebook postings now reach just 10% of LIFT followers organically, despite an 8,000-strong network. This disproportionately low ratio can now only be boosted by paid-for promotion initiatives including “post boosting” and “sponsored stories” (as per Fisher 2015,



Figure 3. Live-tweeting Q&A session with playwright Lola Arias (reverse chronological).

51). These extensions were pursued during the 2014 festival, using Facebook analytics data to measure impact against financial investment. As expected, post boosting facilitated media reach, with a direct positive correlation between finance committed to each campaign and the resulting view counts and “click-throughs” from both those already following LIFT and people who Facebook targeted for introducing to LIFT because of their relevant stated interest. The natural feel of this product “matchmaking” is anything but natural, but LIFT staff reasoned that the wider reach justified the relatively low financial resource committed to the campaign. The real test is in catalyzing or stimulating online activity to the extent that it becomes self-generating, which succeeded in this campaign as more and more users shared the paid-for content, justifying in terms of exposure, the initial outlay and minimizing marketing costs.

YouTube and digital staging

The idea of digital staging via YouTube interaction is, in a sense, more direct than Twitter or Facebook because it already comprises a performative element through its video content. It is a less conceptual iteration because it does not require an ongoing virtual conversation between producer and audience, providing as it does the virtual product directly for consumption. Perhaps because of this accessibility, YouTube is a popular site of participatory culture (Burgess and Green 2009, vii), and is used at LIFT for digital marketing to broadcast performance samples. LIFT’s dedicated YouTube channel totals over 100 videos and

regularly releases new “shorts” to social media platforms to generate interest in upcoming performances. These trailers represent figurative “journeys” into the festival, emphasizing non-traditional participatory routes including contemporary dance, drag performance, and parkour. Despite the “digital labour” (Postigo 2016, 332) that viewers and subscribers perform by viewing content, YouTube’s prioritization of subscriber-sourced content means that the platform is still generally an equitable space for user contribution: it “gives credence to viewership, not sponsorship” (Hodgson 2010, 8). This is an important draw for LIFT, which has an ethical responsibility to balance its social networking with audiences in such a way that reciprocal involvement is as organic and meaningful as possible while also operating in proactive ways that encourage digital natives into the festival through peer recommendation.

Additionally, video media has proven highly persuasive in a digital marketing context, not least because of its ease of sharing with other network users. It is thus well suited for artistic and cultural production, and during the festival videos were uploaded by both LIFT as an organization and also contributing performers and directors. But even a cursory search through British arts organizations suggests inconsistent adoption of the format in the sector, particularly amongst larger organisations. This reluctance may be down in part to the recent growth of “small screen” culture, which has produced users with (perceived) intimidating expectations for customization, on-demand access, social connectivity, and the ability to shape content (Hodgson 2010). Yet there are rewards for pursuing platforms incorporating such tenets: the straightforward digital staging of video helps furnish would-be audiences with an accurate picture of the performance they might buy tickets for, while existing ticket-holders are given a window into their upcoming performance. They feel that they have a stake in its narrative, and are more likely to share, and thus promote, content amongst their own social networks. This in turn lends peer approval to the content and encourages peers to judge the festival programming favourably.

Hybridizing marketing and performance

The extent to which social media influences the marketing of LIFT indicates the unassailable position that web 2.0 has adopted as mediator to the communicative practices of the organization. In a fieldwork interview for this research project, artistic director Mark Ball rejects what is commonly seen as a dichotomy between marketing and performance in arts organizations. As Ball argues: “I think the idea of marketing and artistic creation as separate isn’t a particularly helpful one, because we want to create work that an audience feels like it has a stake in: or even, in some ways, like something an audience feels it can artistically contribute towards” (personal communication, August 1, 2014). This coproduced model of product/producer and process/consumer running in parallel is not unique to this programming, but it is a strategy at odds with how performance arts has historically been presented as the finished product of an opaque or developing process. Nevertheless, for the arts to remain relevant in a future of multiple social contexts, Ball’s tactic for harnessing digital networks—even if (or precisely *because*) users of those networks are given access to the frequently messy formative process—seems wise. An organization like LIFT can utilize the flexible remit of social media to break down traditional binary divisions between artistic production and the marketing that frames that production, and in doing so fashion something interesting in the new space created. Thus, it can reveal the constructedness of performance and not be afraid of that exposure, because it brings the audience closer to the performance process and intensifies their experience of it.

How might these iterations of digital staging change in future social media? Justin Hodgson (2010) argues that digital media should not be seen as a replacement of old media

so much as a convergence, where old and new media practices come into contact in mutually transformative ways via our evolving screen culture. In reality, while cultural and arts organizations seem well placed to respond meaningfully to the opportunities generated by such a convergence, production/marketing binaries remain largely intact and this is why theorizing a digital staging model is so fruitful. In our interview, Ball is clear about the LIFT model extending beyond marketing, reiterating that “[it] isn’t just us pumping out marketing information, it’s a way of augmenting the experience of the performance, of engaging our audiences into a conversation, which in itself can have an impact on the artistic output of the organization” (personal communication, August 1, 2014). The challenge now is to encourage audiences to actively participate in digital staging to ensure authenticity in Ball’s “augmented experience” beyond social media involvement.

Longitude and digital staging in co-produced performance

Having discussed social media as a form of digital staging, and alert to ways in which we can ensure authenticity in “augmented experiences” of theatre, we now turn to co-produced digital performance as an agent for digital staging. Co-production has been thought of as the sharing and cooperation of different actors involved in spatial processes and knowledge making (Richardson 2016, 2), and in technological terms as the “phenomenon of consumers increasingly participating in the process of making and circulating media content and experiences” (Banks and Deuze 2009, 419). We have seen how digital staging can involve audiences via social media, but inviting audiences to co-produce performance itself allows us to reframe co-production in more positive terms than the ambiguous power dynamic that characterizes this process in other social media contexts (Banks and Deuze 2009; Grabher, Ibert, and Flohr 2008).

Longitude was an experiment to produce a new way of experiencing live performance, with small production teams operating across London, Barcelona, and Lagos as three cities on the same 0° global longitude. An environmental broadcast drama unfolded over three weeks in July 2014 based around a hypothetical illegal trade in freshwater sources, set in a near-future world battling global water scarcity (Figure 4). Each week’s performance was broadcast

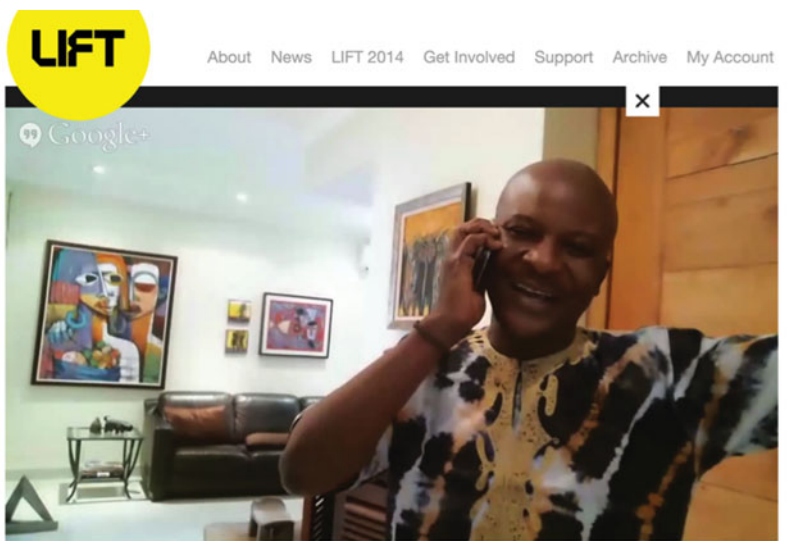


Figure 4. *Longitude* episode 1, hosted on Google Hangouts (2014).

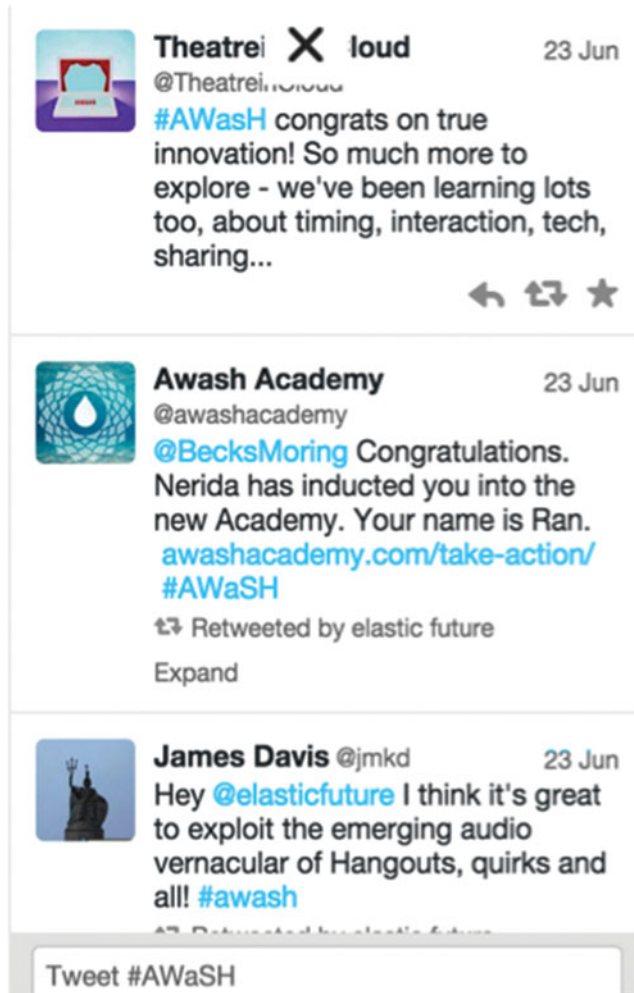


Figure 5. Twitter interactions hashtagged to #AWaSH (2014).

simultaneously across all three countries, with transitions between each of the three countries edited in real time. Anyone could be an audience member, for free, simply through access to a computer, tablet device, or mobile phone with Internet connection. This departure from an orthodox broadcast model constituted a new digital space in which the audience experience functions as a form of live feedback to the performance.

To aid this communicative framework, the hashtag #AWaSH (a reference to the show's corrupt "Academy of Water and Spiritual Healing") was coined to collate audience-generated social media updates (Figure 5), and a website inviting users to log real-life incidents of climate change in their vicinity was circulated online. User tweets were geo-tagged to a location by Twitter so the interactions between audience members watching *Longitude* revealed their scattered geographies in much the same way that the show's actors were distributed across three diverse locales. Far from suggesting that audience contributions are disembodied, or that the places they communicate from are without position, they are rooted in physical space as their "spatial self" (Schwartz and Halegoua 2014, 1643). This looping between performance and social media speaks to Doreen Massey's definition of space as something that can be networked, dynamic and hybrid (1994). Jonathan May, LIFT's

marketing and digital manager, suggests in an interview for this research project that such an exercise allows artists to “play with that space between audience and performer, and what they can do in this realm to make something interesting” (personal communication, July 2014). The “liveness” of *Longitude* meant that the figurative space constructed by the performance was impermanent, made real not by its own performance but by viewership.

Producing *Longitude* also highlighted the jeopardy inherent in digital practice because the bandwidth connection speed varied across countries, leading to an uneven broadcast quality. Overall, the live broadcast remained unbroken, but the issue had the unexpected consequence of rendering visible the global communication web that constructed the live performance. Liveness remains a key element of theatrical performance (Phelan 1998; Reason 2004), but Philip Auslander (2000, 7) argues that clear-cut distinctions between “live forms” and what he terms “mediatized” forms have blurred or even disappeared. In *Longitude*, the phenomenological quirks that arose in performance—a slight viewing lag, or the split-second glimpse of the frozen pixels of a human face before the bandwidth strengthened and the picture crystallized—highlighted the occasionally uneasy juxtaposition of the live/physical and the digital/virtual. These quirks were not just visually irregular, but interrupted the narrative and invited examination of the medium’s workings rather than just its face-value performance, exposing its constructedness. The technical glitches visible in this model of digital performance thus convey a valuable, albeit unintentional, insight into its liveness and its digital staging.

Conclusions: The future of digital marketing and performance

By extending established research on performance to the relations between audience and producer, and social media marketing as an embedded part of digital performance that recognizes the value of personalized interactions between consumer and company (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004), this article has demonstrated how hybrid digital spaces that reveal their own constructedness can progress creatively generative performance. Social media can be used not just as a marketing tool but as a form of digital staging that helps to involve audiences in both the development and outcomes of theatrical performance. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are ubiquitous social media platforms that can nevertheless be harnessed in unusual ways to hybridize the digital/physical space between performer and audience, resulting in novel, co-produced digital performance. This boundary blurring resituates marketing as co-created interactive communication while inviting audiences to participate in the performance itself.

Applying this concept of digital staging to just one arts festival demonstrates the fascinating possibilities for online social media in progressing arts marketing and performance. Despite Susan Kozel’s argument in 2008 that digital media would be increasingly incorporated into the performing arts, it seems that such opportunities are being borne out slowly in contemporary programming at British mainstream arts organizations. The Barbican’s *Digital Revolution* opened with much fanfare regarding its digital performance installations. Yet its rather mixed critical response (Kent 2014; Sooke 2014) suggests that it faces the same challenge as any practitioner looking to create worthwhile digital performance: how to create a piece that engages the digital and the human meaningfully without taking digital engagement as a proxy for human engagement. Amongst the proliferation of media and cultural forms predicting socially emancipatory digital futures, scholars and practitioners alike need to maintain a critical perspective on the challenges as well as benefits generated by digital performance, particularly in terms of (dis)embodiment.

Certainly, the perceived “otherness” of digital performance is an issue familiar to LIFT’s artistic director. In a report revisiting his 2008 Clore fellowship in digital arts production, Ball reflects on his own assumptions regarding the anticipated speed of digital progress: “my assertion that [...] the traditional relationship between artists, producers, venues and audiences would be forever disrupted now read[s] like the wide eyed ravings of a cultural idealist” (Ball 2013). Like many in the arts and humanities trying to hypothesize what the near digital future might look like, Ball finds himself foregrounding the *incorporation* of digital processes into arts and cultural productions as the key element of what technology might offer us, rather than his previous prediction of technological advance in and of itself. The distinction is subtle but vital, because it emphasizes the continued importance of solid human-computer interaction design in planning digital projects. Festivals are, after all, agents for connecting people and place (Derrett 2003; Quinn 2005). Good digital theatre does not necessarily have to be person-centred or conventional, but recognizably human elements continue to engage audiences, especially when constructed via audience participation or interaction such as the digital staging discussed here.

Performance has long been bound up with changing media environments (Dixon 2007), and digital experiments look set to navigate many of the same negotiations. The vision Ball had in 2008 of theatre in the near future predicted that technology would be incorporated as a matter of course, from collaboration in scriptwriting with audience members to sharing the whole creative process online in an open-source format. That vision has yet to materialize. As Ball comments in our interview (personal communication, August 1, 2014):

Although the digital infrastructure is there to enable that, the mind shift hasn’t happened [...] people’s cultural experience is still going and receiving in passive mode, culture that is given to them. When I wrote that article in 2008 it was kind of, full of a Utopian idealism about how culture could be genuinely democratized through technology. And that’s happened at a slower pace than I thought it would.

The tendency for celebratory hype surrounding digital capabilities should be treated with caution; as Ball notes, the potential of technology is rarely realized as fast, or in quite the same way, as our “Utopian idealism” wills it to be (personal communication, August 1, 2014). Advances in digital technology are frequently greeted with a media-driven fanfare that fades as that technology proves unwieldy for practitioners, or of limited scope, or resistant to personalization and hacking. There is evidently still work involved in moving audiences beyond their familiarity with “receiving in passive mode” to a co-produced digital performance experience. However, by continuing to attract digital natives who may not be traditional theatre-goers but who are confident technology users, and by encouraging digital staging via social media, festivals and arts organizations can help broker an innovative new crop of digitally oriented projects.

Looking more widely, digital technology is often *less* accessible than promised. Arts organizations and festivals are well placed to harness new ways of imagining the city digitally, but such a shift will have to work hard to ensure equitable delivery. As cityscapes become increasingly plugged in, deprived urban residents and rural communities are at a shared risk of digital isolation; the potential for digital performance to transgress spatial boundaries can only be realized with attention to uneven access to these fora. There remains a troubling segmentation in arts marketing strategies, often based on stereotypes of digital literacy or aesthetic appreciation that overlook diverse potential audiences. Bernadette Quinn argues that, to be impactful and holistic in nature, festivals must adopt a more consultative approach that embraces local resources (2005, 939). LIFT’s extensive digital programming for its 2010 rebirth and the festivals since set the tone for how an international festival might function with technology

at the center of its offering, but a question remains here about whether digital consumption is an appropriate model for *local* involvement, especially considering London's acute socio-economic inequalities.

Accordingly, 2015 and 2016 saw LIFT program a series of practitioner-run projects in Tottenham, one of London's most deprived boroughs (Haringey Council 2016) involving local artists, schools, and residents. In a cultural context of xenophobia, government-enforced austerity measures, and endemic youth crime in the district, the scheme's particular involvement of local 14- to 18-year-olds constitutes a meaningful outcome, not least because an ongoing relationship between organization and audience is planned through local performance workshops and targeted funding opportunities. Beyond involving more privileged "digital natives," LIFT seems to be serious about its role in listening to and indeed actively involving those who remain underrepresented amongst a proliferation of voices already debating socially emancipatory digital futures.

Reluctance to persevere with technological innovation may also be down in part to the inescapable reality that efficiently manipulating technology in artistic contexts requires considerable skill, ruling out, at least initially, some of those with the most exciting ideas for utilizing it. However, partnership and skills sharing provide one way round the obstacle. As governments and funding bodies increasingly recognize digital performance as a legitimate endeavor, they are rewarding new work in digital contexts. Training and collaborative opportunities have followed and are now spreading not just to practitioners, but also arts organizations across Europe and North America. Productions that synthesize art and technology imaginatively are proliferating, indicating that the frequently capricious nature of digital practice is not so prohibitive that it prevents practitioners pursuing digital performance. Concomitant growth in digital social media has ensured that technology is increasingly human-centered and user-oriented, primed for both digital marketing and performance; the challenge now is to plan for equitable delivery that better caters to those historically marginalized from either traditional arts offerings, technology, or both. If producers continue to experiment with digital staging in social media and performance, and increasingly involve digital natives in their collaborations, digital marketing and performance can further diversify and incorporate audiences as authentic co-producers.

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