3. Raising the Barr

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In 2012 Walsall Council, in partnership with Barr Beacon Trust, received a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund for a project called Raising the Barr to restore Barr Beacon local nature reserve and re-engage the community with the site. The project was led by Walsall Council with supporting partners, including the Beacon Trust, Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust and the Collingwood Centre, as well as local schools, voluntary organisations, businesses and many volunteers. The grant was for a total of £485,838. The project ran for four years.

This chapter examines the meeting of digital media and heritage in this innovative case study. It will consider the challenges the project faced and the lessons that can be learned. As the project progressed, the media landscape changed, with technological advancement and with spreadable media (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013) and participatory culture becoming more dominant cultural forms (Jenkins 2006). This required a transmedia strategy, the intentional creation of media for different platforms and the facilitation of online community participation. Raising the Barr was considered a ‘wholehearted success’ (NW Environmental Ltd 2016), but as always, lessons learned can be translated into models of working for new projects.

### Project introduction

Barr Beacon is one of the highest points in the West Midlands, with panoramic views reaching to eleven counties on a clear day. The site offers various important habitats for wildlife, including lowland heathland, as well as being an important recreation site. The on-site heritage features include the war memorial, which is one of Walsall’s most
recognisable landmarks, a flagpole of rare design and the Sir Joseph Scott tree plantation.

The objectives of the Raising the Barr project were listed in a report as follows:

- To restore and improve Barr Beacon’s historical features, including the war memorial, flagpole and Scott plantation;
- Engage with up to 120 volunteers;
- Improve interpretation across the site;
- Engage individuals and the community in the future management and development of the site;
- Deliver and establish ongoing events and an activities programme;
- Provide opportunities for community organisations to run their own events at the site;
- Provide training opportunities in specialist skills and crafts relating to the management of the site, archaeology and maintenance of structures.

(NW Environmental Ltd 2016)

The project saw the restoration of the nature reserve’s heritage features: its war memorial, flagpole and tree plantation. The memorial had been badly damaged by weather, vandals and thieves, and its restoration was the most important achievement of the project (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Barr Beacon War Memorial after restoration. © Daphne Ison.
It was carried out to a high standard in, at times, difficult circumstances with snow and high winds. It needed innovative techniques and materials to achieve a durable structure resistant to defacement and deliberate damage.

The grant was also used to increase the number of activities offered to help the community, visitors, schools and colleges make the most of Barr Beacon and take ownership of the site. Various events and activities, such as a forest school, an archaeological dig, a meteor watch, memorial services and the Bands on the Beacon music festivals took place over several years, with volunteers, community organisations and local businesses getting involved.

The interpretation of the site was another major aspect of the project. At the start of the project a ‘stylebook’ was created by an external agency to ensure a consistent branding across platforms and for different activities; this included logos, colourways, fonts, backgrounds and all design elements which could be used as part of interpretation across different platforms. This included digital interpretation – films, a website, social media channels and a mobile phone app – as well as more traditional leaflets, posters and on-site interpretation boards. The project attracted extensive press coverage, with various local press articles and a Central News report.

A website for Barr Beacon was produced as part of the project. This was originally meant to be developed by an independent production company and to be a stand-alone site for Barr Beacon. However, Walsall Council’s IT department updated their policy on external sites and all council websites had to be developed using a specific web language, so staff were brought in to develop the website within the council IT team. While the design of the site was more constrained, being part of the council web umbrella will give the Barr Beacon site longevity, with the team being able to update the page without extra financial implications. Any new content and current news can be updated directly by the team, as can any council branding updates. This may be something other council teams should carefully consider when running their own projects.

During the four years, films were produced about different aspects of the project, such as the restoration, the remembrance services, the music festivals and the wildlife on the Beacon. Some of these films were uploaded onto the council’s website. Shots of the lighting of the Beacon, which was part of the project launch event and the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee celebrations, were included in an ITV Central TV news report. The films were also made into a four-part series and broadcast on the local TV channel Made in Birmingham.
Social media channels included ‘Barr Beacon War Memorial’ Facebook community page, which at the time of writing has 70 likes and 69 followers (www.facebook.com/BarrBeaconLNR). The dates of the posts range between 2009 and 2014. A twitter account, @BarrBeacon, was also created and while active had 425 followers, with the last posts being from 2015.

A free-to-download mobile phone app for both Apple and Android phones was produced as part of the project (see Figure 3.2). The app is intended to be both informative and fun, suitable for a wide range of visitors, including families. It includes two GPS-enabled trails: Habitats & Wildlife and Heritage & History. These trails take visitors around the site, with points of interest (POIs) being marked both on the GPS-enabled trail map and with physical waymarkers on site. At each POI, users are provided with a multiple-choice question relating to their trail and the location. Light-hearted hints and scores add extra interest. The app also includes further site information and an augmented reality feature (see Figure 3.3) that enabled the user to see what they were looking at in each direction from the Beacon, which has magnificent 360-degree views. Using an app allowed for user interaction, augmented reality and a GPS-enabled map – all impossible with traditional information boards.

Project context and challenges

Of the challenges the project team faced, the major one was the consequence of central government austerity measures, as Walsall Council was having to implement major cuts across its services (Elkes 2014; Walsall Council n.d.). This meant that the project was managed by a reduced team who had an increased workload. The media and communications officer job was cut, and two years into the project the project officer left and was not replaced. Instead the grant was extended by one year. Keeping project staff on fixed-term contracts is a challenge if there is no prospect of long-term employment. Losing these two key people meant that some of the strategic vision for media and communications was lost, community engagement was reduced both online and on site, and social media channels were no longer overseen by anyone but updated as and when. Fortunately, throughout these changing circumstances Jeff McBride remained as the project co-coordinator throughout the lifespan of the project; this consistency and Jeff’s dedication to seeing the project through played a huge part in the project’s successful outcome.
Figure 3.2  Barr Beacon app. © Sanna Wicks, Treehouse Media Productions Ltd.
Another challenge was the inflexibility of long-term projects to adapt to changing situations, and in the context of this chapter to a changing media landscape. The loss of the media and communications officer magnified this issue for Raising the Barr. Funding bids for large-scale projects are often written several years in advance of actually winning the bid and consequently of work starting. The Raising the Barr project bid writing started in 2009, before the grant application to the Heritage Lottery Fund was successful and the four-year-long project was launched in June 2012. This means the project was ‘in the making’ for seven years. Over this period much change took place in mobile media technology, affecting the way we use platforms and devices, as well as the way we consume content. The project, which was conceived as a multimedia one creating media for separate channels, needed to work hard to keep up with new ways of communicating across different media outlets. Not only does technology advance but the advance brings with it a change in culture. New media technologies bring with them a change in the way we behave, as Marshall McLuhan described so many years ago (1964). Technologies exist and make a difference in the context of the culture in which they are being used. ‘It matters what tools are available to a culture, but it matters more what that culture chooses to do with those tools’ (Jenkins et al. 2006, 8).

This change in the media landscape created significant uncertainties for a project team: for example, when the Raising the Barr project was originally conceived and planned, the council team were thinking of

Figure 3.3 Barr Beacon app, augmented reality feature. © Sanna Wicks, Treehouse Media Productions Ltd.
putting together a DVD as a record and possibly for resale purposes. As the project progressed, DVDs became outdated, whereas instantly accessible video-sharing sites, such as YouTube and Vimeo (Sweney 2017), grew in popularity, so further thought was needed to determine the purpose of the films and the best method of making them available. In fact many were uploaded onto a dedicated YouTube channel as the project finished.

Our experience suggests that project teams will need guidance to understand what direction technology is going in, how audience behaviour is changing and how both might impact the outputs they are planning to deliver. Many still choose to produce content for an audience, while as Alvin Toffler (1981) points out, audiences are now ‘prosumers’—producers and consumers. Going further, Axel Bruns coined the term ‘produsage’ to describe a ‘new hybrid form of simultaneous production and usage’ in today’s user-led online content creation environment (2007, 1). Users expect to be able to interact with content, share, repurpose and remix it for their own purposes in our participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). In participatory culture ‘not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued’ (Jenkins et al. 2006, 7).

Social media is one of the easiest tools to enable and encourage audience involvement and participation. The use of social media was not part of the original bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund, but soon became a key tool in communicating and interacting with the community. The evaluation reported favourably on the project team’s adoption of social media:

> Considerable effort has been made to promote the project through the media and the internet including the use of social media. The potential importance of this avenue may not have been fully realised in 2010/11 when the project was being planned, but it appears to have contributed to the project’s success in raising awareness and understanding. (NW Environmental Ltd 2016, 5)

The use of social media is now a key part of advice given to current Heritage Lottery Fund grant winners for publicising their projects. The fund offers a selection of hashtags that project teams might want to use as part of their posts, such as #LoveHeritage, #HLFSupported and #ChangingLives (Heritage Lottery Fund n.d., 7). Lewi et al. (2015) argue that Facebook and other social media platforms offer a better solution compared to custom-built platforms for participation, requiring less moderation and easier maintenance with ‘more likely longevity and support’. Importantly, in today’s participatory culture, publicising the project is just the first step. Now projects need to consider other questions too,
such as: How can we offer opportunities not just for physical, on-site participation, but for online participation? How can online communities be involved and engaged in our project via social media platforms?

In this new form of culture, ‘the boundaries between amateur and professional, consumer and producer, grassroots and mainstream are breached, if not erased’ (Leadbeater 2010, 46). Are project teams prepared to include both official and unofficial heritage on platforms they manage? Are they prepared to build new kinds of relationships with audiences (Giaccardi 2012, 4) and to some extent lose curatorial control and ownership? The term ‘spreadable media’ describes an ‘emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways’ (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013, 1). In today’s participatory culture, media producers and project teams need to reconsider the way they produce content and offer audience participation opportunities.

Raising the Barr was not merely a heritage interpretation project, but also aimed to engage the community as volunteers and encourage them to take ownership of the site. It could be argued that social media offer a valuable tool in strengthening a sense of place for projects such as Raising the Barr, as they offer project teams an opportunity of ‘creating communication and interaction spaces capable of exploring and sustaining renewed forms of engagement with the physical and social settings of the heritage’ (Giaccardi 2012, 8). Taking this a step further, it could be argued that Raising the Barr was also about place-making, about involving local people in making improvements to their community spaces (Anderson 2012). The goals of place-making, according to Anderson (2012), are ‘to invite greater interactions among people and to foster communities that are more socially, physically, and economically viable’. When this activity moves online, it’s called digital place-making. Although there is much enthusiasm for digital place-making, some research suggests caution in using information and communications technology to support community development activities. While it can ‘amplify or catalyse activity’ (Toyama, quoted in Matthews 2016), it’s also ‘likely to encourage a more mundane type of “cultural vernacular” of banal online interactions’ (Matthews 2016, 421). So a balanced approach is required when considering how resources are spent on using social media as opposed to other means of audience and community engagement and digital place-making.

Today a co-ordinated or transmedia communication strategy is preferred by many companies and broadcasters (Jenkins 2006). The BBC,
for example, broadcasts television programmes live, streams content and offers it for download via the iPlayer, and also offers a content-rich website and apps for mobile devices. BBC Worldwide publishes magazines about the TV programmes, runs events and much more. Many marketing companies promote a transmedia storytelling approach and it can fit well with heritage projects. ‘A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole’ (Jenkins 2006, 96–7). The theory is that each bit of the ‘story’ or content is specifically designed for the platforms where it will be released, and works as a stand-alone, self-contained piece of content for audiences to engage with. Each platform will attract different audiences, and audiences experiencing stories across different platforms will have a deeper engagement and a fuller picture of the whole.

Raising the Barr received funding for specific purposes and the team commissioned stand-alone media components for various platforms, so its original approach was multimedia rather than transmedia. However, as the project developed there were opportunities to co-ordinate these components across media. The films were originally conceived to be mainly for archiving purposes, but as short-form film content is increasingly being used on social media platforms and by streaming providers to engage with audiences, they were later made available. It was perhaps due to the loss of the full-time project officer and the media and communications officer that these films were not regularly uploaded on to the council website, nor on social media, earlier in the project. Heritage Lottery Fund advice now includes: ‘Images and film footage can make a social media post more interesting and encourage interaction from the public. Pick images that are bright and in focus’ (Heritage Lottery Fund n.d., 7) and furthermore: ‘Remember to send out any good quality photos and films relating to the project alongside your press release and upload them to your digital channels. Please send them to us too and we can share them on our website and social media channels’ (Heritage Lottery Fund n.d., 9).

The mobile phone app is another component of the transmedia story of Barr Beacon. Mobile phone apps offer new ways of participating with the environment, and some, such as the Museum of London’s Street Museum app, have been hugely successful. Apps have the ‘potential to enhance the meaning and understanding of heritage and the cultural significance of place to clarify and explain the meaning behind the urban form and to form a better understanding of the place and its history’ (Abdel-Aziz et al. 2016, 490–1). While there can be frustrations with technological and user experience issues,
Apps offer value by helping visitors find new information as well as offering enjoyable and engaging experiences (Wicks 2015). The aim of the Barr Beacon app was to provide an easy-to-navigate user interface, so as to offer an engaging and enjoyable experience for visitors, a way of finding new information in a fun way, as well as to enhance the sense of place. Abdel-Aziz et al. (2016, 491) argue that features offered by apps such as Street Museum ‘contribute to enhance the “sense of place” and the attractiveness of public spaces which will increase the social interaction and the people attachment to their community’. The Barr Beacon app was offered on App Store and Google Play in 2015, but had only 186 downloads in the first seven months. It is unclear why the success of the app was limited, as no user feedback was collected, but the team’s resources to promote the app were limited and there was no co-ordination across media such as a social media launch or follow-up, and the website was not online at the time of the app’s release to promote it. In addition, the interpretation board that was meant to be installed on site, with a QR code link to the app, was not installed due to consecutive traveller encampments.

Nevertheless, a wide variety of media was produced, and in that way, together with the press coverage and the far-reaching community outreach that was carried out throughout the project’s life, impact was created. Greater impact may have been possible with personnel in place to manage the media strategy but marketing and social media are time-consuming and require dedicated staff to manage them. Raising the Barr’s experience suggests that in today’s media landscape a transmedia strategy is required, including the intentional creation of media for specific purposes, particularly for online distribution via various platforms. These media could have spread virally within the surrounding community, in the wider area and among heritage enthusiasts. As it was, the various media were not strategically aligned – for example, the films were produced separately from the social media channels, rather than for them. On the other hand, one could argue that much was achieved, as evidenced by audience engagement on social media channels in the early years of the project.

Furthermore, the allocation of limited funding is always an issue. Project teams and funding bodies are always tackling questions about the most effective ways of spending finances. So they need to ask: is it worth spending funding on outside help to develop or manage an overall media strategy and to revisit it for longer-term projects, or is there a more cost-effective approach? And how much scope is there to change and amend plans as a project spanning several years progresses, so that funding is
Lessons learned

Raising the Barr can be considered a ‘wholehearted success’ (NW Environmental Ltd 2016). The main part of the project was the restoration of the war memorial and other heritage features, and this was done to a high standard, making a real difference to the site, which previously looked run-down and neglected. ‘Both the Council and the local community can be proud of what has been achieved in turning battered, bedraggled, and largely forgotten features into a stunning new focal point for the public open space’ (NW Environmental Ltd 2016, 19). The local community was engaged throughout the project, with local schools using Barr Beacon regularly for various activities, from forest school to memorial services, and volunteers taking an active role in various events, such as the archaeological dig. The interpretation, including digital media, was created to a high standard.

Nevertheless, lessons learned can be translated into models of working for new projects. The recommendations regarding digital media for heritage interpretation projects would be to ensure that a dedicated person is in place to be in charge of the media strategy – either someone in-house, with required support and training provided, or an external consultant or company who can devise a strategy together with the project team. In this way an overall media strategy could be devised and implemented, meaning that the media created would serve a clear purpose and be more likely to reach their target audience, thus promoting the purpose they were created for.

Here are some recommended steps to follow:

• Start with a clear media strategy which is coherent across all media platforms.
• If the project spans several years, make sure to revisit the strategy annually, either dedicating a project team member to do so or leaving funding aside to pay for an external provider.
• Be flexible enough to adapt your strategy if required. This may be due to a change in your own agenda as the project moves on, due to the feedback from your audience – the community you are trying to reach – or due to a changing media landscape.
References


