Citation:
Wray, R (2021) Event Review - Report on Leeds Digital Festival, September-October 2020. The North of England Bulletin (4). pp. 10-13.

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Event Review

Report on Leeds Digital Festival, September-October 2020

The Leeds Digital Festival is an open, collaborative festival which takes place in multiple venues across the city of Leeds, and is run over the course of two weeks (normally) each spring. The festival's aim is to celebrate digital culture in all its forms. The festival operates on an open platform system meaning anyone can host an event for free whether they are a tech giant, a start-up or simply someone with a passion for technology.

The Leeds Digital Festival was first established in 2016 and celebrated its fifth birthday in 2020. 2020 was of course, an unusual year for everyone due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. When the restrictions of the UK's first lockdown hit, the decision was made by the festival's organisers to shift from physical events to online ones. After the success of the online-only event in April (with 134 panels, talks, and activities being held), Leeds Digital Festival returned in late September on a larger scale (with 294 events taking place). In contrast with academic conferences, many of the events are run by organisations such as Deloitte, BJSS, Tech Nation, BT, ASDA, ITV, Barclays, Raspberry Pi, and Leeds ODI meaning there was a lot of variety on offer for attendees to explore.

These events cover a range of areas including coding, social media, cyber security, artificial intelligence, data, augmented reality, virtual reality, health and financial technologies, and advice for digital start-ups. As a psychologist you might be tempted to think there is nothing of relevance to your discipline at the Leeds Digital Festival, or that this is all too technical-focused. However, after digging deep enough I found plenty to hold my interest with pertinent talks relating to technology supporting students with their mental health, creating engaging e-learning, and looking after personal wellbeing while remote working. The proliferation of talks focusing on remote working and wellbeing made the Leeds Digital Festival feel timely in the current COVID-19 era in which we are all encouraged to work, learn, and socialise in the space of our own homes.

The first event I attended was a fairly straight-forward introduction to the MindWell platform by Zoe Limbert. MindWell is essentially a one-stop shop bringing together self-help resources, information, and signposts to mental health services and support from Leeds City Council, NHS Leeds, and third sector parties. Limbert explained how the platform was co-designed with members of the public to make something that was previously complicated and overwhelming, more accessible and simpler to use.

Next up was Alex La Via's talk 'Constantly Connected' which focused on the 'human side' of digital transformation during a period of remote working. La Via argued that remote working has led to a longer working day, with employees feeling the pressure to respond more quickly to e-mails, a problem she refers to as 'e-presenteeism'. La Via talked about the importance of having a digital balance, and argues that either end of the scale is not ideal. La Via places digital overload at one of this scale – described as people constantly checking work e-mails and social media both during and outside of work hours, and always being available via communication technologies, eventually leading to burnout – and digital detox at the other end – described as when an individual completely cuts out the use of digital technologies in their working and social life. La Via outlined practical steps to develop positive digital habits such as reducing screen time, audio-only meetings, and digital wellbeing audits, but most of these steps were top-down in approach and not necessarily changes which can be implemented by individual workers. Instead, the focus in this talk was on making a business case to employers as to why they should care about their employees' wellbeing, as well as promoting an openness to different ways of working.

Returning to the theme of wellbeing and remote working there was a talk on 'Home Working: A psychological perspective' by Karen Burns and Robert van Tol which was focused on what happens when we mesh our home life and work life together. Burns and van Tol talked about how there are various background stressors currently in play at the moment that we may be ignoring. For example, global stressors such as the open-endedness and uncertainty of the pandemic, and endless scrolling news feeds; home stressors such as worry about vulnerable loved ones, and diverse domestic circumstances; and work stressors such as the blurring of home-work boundaries, and presenteeism. An interesting concept that was brought up by Burns and van Tol was the notion we are currently living in a 'social recession' in which we are all craving more structure and meaning in our lives. They suggested various coping strategies, particularly in relation to the importance of maintaining structure in our lives and keeping connected with others. For example, establishing a strong routine using techniques such as Pomodoro, and turning off notifications for apps on phones to maintain focus on a given task or activity without distraction. Other approaches to coping suggested including 'unplugging' from the news, and spending time outdoors (if possible), keeping in touch with friends, and spending time pursuing hobbies and interests (with an emphasis that this should not include personal/professional development activities).

Another interesting panel was on the subject of e-learning 'for the new normal'. Milosz Wojaczek described the pandemic as an interesting period for education, as prior to this e-learning was thrown around as a buzzword, whereas now it is seen as a normal part of learning. Fiona Cheetham suggested that the pandemic has meant universities have had to completely rethink their teaching and planning more carefully. A recurring theme among panellists was that

universities should not expect lecturers to simply replicate the classroom experience. For example, Steven Hope stressed that online teaching needs to be active, and that lecturers must not get too 'precious' about their plans. Instead, tutors needs to be flexible and prepared to make changes to their courses in response to what students want from teaching. Stephanie Naylor and Oliver Picton both raised important points that universities need to find out what their staff need, and ensure they have the right set-up for teaching, rather than adopting a 'one-size fits all' approach to learning technology.

The final event I attended was Sally Anne Poyser's talk 'ctrl+alt+del your day to be more productive at work' which again was focused on remote working and wellbeing. Poyser explained how she used to think she was good at multi-tasking, but realised that multi-tasking is not particularly productive. This is because you are jumping from one task to another and not focusing on any one task in particular. Poyser proposed that we multi-task to try to please everyone, but that working like this is not healthy. Instead, she advocated planning a day in advance all the key tasks you want to achieve the next day, and work on these tasks before trying to please other people (such as checking and responding to e-mails). A key theme in Poyser's talk was that humans have a need to belong and feel accepted, and that unfortunately technology is playing a role in this through social media and is therefore able to draw our attention away from other tasks. This has been exacerbated recently by many of us working on screens even more due to remote working. Poyser argued that we need to cut out all external distractions when working such as not checking e-mails or looking at phones and that this is because even when you think you have ignored a notification it has still caught your attention and this distraction time adds up.

While I miss the 'buzz' of shared curiosity and interest which comes with attending events in person, along with the opportunity to meet like-minded people, it is is revitalising how the Leeds Digital Festival has provided a semblance of normalcy in a period of (seemingly) unending uncertainty. There are definite advantages to holding such gatherings online, including reduced time, costs and pollution created via travelling, and ease of accommodation into busy work schedules, particularly for attendees coming from further afield. I particularly liked that when one presenter – Sally Anne Poyser – was unable to present due to injury, rather than cancel her panel outright, Poyser's talk was simply moved to a later date, a decision enabled by presenting online and so did not require the logistics of rebooking and/or relocation to another venue. As with in-person events, there were opportunities to ask the panellists questions using the chat function, but as an audience member with your camera off and microphone muted it almost at times feels like you could just be watching a video on YouTube. This left me wondering what it must have been like for the presenters to not be able to see their audience. I think looking forward to a post-COVID era it would be good to see events such as this and academic conferences offering a blend of online and in-person attendance, providing the best of both worlds for presenters and attendees.

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