Young Dads TV: digital voices of young fathers

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There exist a number of discourses surrounding young fathers that, until recently, have been dominated by professionals and academics, leaving young fathers with no forum for their own voices. Young Dads TV (2010-13) provided a major corrective to this state of affairs, giving young fathers their own collective voice through the power of the media and the internet. This voice continues with the Young Dads Council (2013-present), an advocacy project that employs young fathers to reduce the poverty and isolation of their peers. This paper describes the challenges of providing an ‘authentic’ voice for an isolated community and the opportunities offered by digital technology.

key words young fatherhood • collective voices • Young Dads TV • Young Dads Council • experts by experience

Introduction

Young Dads TV provided the ‘authentic’ voice of young fathers in the United Kingdom (UK) between 2010 and 2013. The project was created and managed by Scott Colfer on behalf of Media for Development, with funding from The Monument Trust. Young Dads TV succeeded in building a community of young fathers below the age of 25 who influenced policy and services at a local and a national level in England.

The Young Dads Council grew out of Young Dads TV and is designed to reduce the poverty and isolation common for fathers below 25 years of age. Young fathers working for the council are paid a Living Wage to act as consultants for public services that want to improve their support for fathers, and to provide peer support for other young fathers. The Young Dads Council is managed by Hannah Turner-Uaandja.

In the first part of this paper, Scott Colfer writes about the challenges of providing an ‘authentic’ voice for a community and the opportunities offered by digital technology and social media. In the second part of the paper, Hannah Turner-Uaandja outlines the work of the Young Dads Council, and Lemar Johnson, in discussion with Hannah, recounts his experiences of being a young father and his work as an ‘expert by experience’ for the council.
Part One: Collective, collected and curated voices: Scott Colfer

I am a service designer and the creator of Young Dads TV. When I began Young Dads TV back in 2010, relatively little was known about young fathers in the UK. There was some academic research but it tended to be limited in scope, both in terms of numbers (research was often based on a set of only five to 20 young fathers) and in terms of territory (research was often limited to a single city). The research was often several years old too. I wanted to co-produce a project with the young fathers themselves, putting them in the driving seat and collaboratively producing something that would both address their needs and empower them to support themselves, which is easier than it sounds.

Young Dads TV was underpinned by a ‘user-centred design’ process in which a ‘discovery phase’ uncovered the needs of the community in question (Government Service Design Manual, 2014). By understanding needs, one can define problems before designing solutions. Young Dads TV’s discovery phase lasted 12 months, consisting of:

- three months of partnership development;
- six months of insight workshops with over 100 young fathers in 11 local authorities in England;
- three months of problem definition and development of solutions.

I used the ‘hook’ of film-making to frame the insight workshops, asking groups of young fathers to produce short films that communicated what being a father meant to them. The act of film-making meant that the young fathers had to appraise what they were saying, thinking more critically about their views than would normally be the case and (due to constraints on time) prioritising the most important insights to be included in their final film. This process of critical appraisal and ‘editing’ is often done by professionals but by empowering the young fathers to film and edit their own videos we were able to avoid processing their views through an academic filter.

These films were of low quality in terms of production, but high quality in terms of the insights they contained. I made the decision that these films should be published on YouTube (which is how the name Young Dads TV came about). Although they received only a modest number of views, the level of engagement among professionals – including academics, midwives, children’s centre managers, charities and government – was very high. This was the first time that many professionals had knowingly heard the views of a young father, and this collection of ‘authentic’ voices spoke for itself (despite some very wonky camera work!).

I found it interesting that our YouTube and Twitter channels were most popular with professionals and had little engagement from young fathers themselves. Anecdotally, the notion of young people being ‘digital natives’ is not true in the case of young fathers, many of whom are living in poverty and have little or no access to the internet.

I needed to distil these insights into a high-level problem definition before I could start developing services to address the needs of young fathers. I was keen that this problem definition remained as accessible as the YouTube channel so I made the decision to commission a short drama to summarise the key learning from the discovery phase. Working with a director and a group of young fathers, a plot was drafted that was a ‘real’ representation of their lives, and which summarised the
key learning. The film was then professionally produced. What could have been an internal document became a popular short film that was viewed over 6,000 times on YouTube alone.

It is at this point that things became trickier. Up until this point, the young fathers had only been asked to talk about their individual experiences. Their experiences were so unheard, and so valuable, that they became ‘experts by experience’. However, my assumption that they could then take an active role in the leadership of the project proved to be naive, at least in the short term. Due to a variety of personal circumstances, and a lack of professional experience, it proved to be unrealistic to assume that young fathers could play a significant role in the running of the project without significant support and training. Out of over 100 young fathers met during the discovery phase, only seven were willing and able to join the project steering group (the Council of Young Dads). Within this steering group was a wide range of skills, interests and availability, so their level of involvement in the project was highly personal, and shifted with their changing circumstances. The Council of Young Dads was quickly asked to consult with many organisations, providing a collective voice for young fathers in the UK, but the members of the council had to be carefully chosen, trained and supported in order to act as consultants without being placed in vulnerable situations. This collective voice had to lose some of its authenticity in order to safeguard the young fathers and enable them to operate in professional settings, but this was a concession well worth making in order to influence policy regarding young fathers at a national level.

The Council of Young Dads was so successful at providing the collective voice of young fathers that it outgrew Young Dads TV and became a service in its own right. Now called the Young Dads Council, its members are trained and continuously supported so that they can legitimately assume leadership roles. The young fathers are employed as consultants and paid a Living Wage for their time, and their services are prized highly enough that organisations hire the council to work on projects.

**Part Two: Being an ‘expert by experience’ for the Young Dads Council: Hannah Turner-Uaanjdja and Lemar Johnson**

The Young Dads Council is designed to reduce the isolation and poverty that many young fathers experience by making the UK ‘young-dad’ friendly. The service offers consultation, staff training, workshops, action research and outreach services to anyone looking to include young fathers in their services (www.youngdadscouncil.co.uk). The organisation creates a space to provide a national ‘authentic’ voice for young fathers, but also provides kinship and personal voices to members who, in many cases, would otherwise not have found their voices as young fathers.

Young fathers on the council are referred to us through various support services in and around London. While all very capable, this does mean that many have complex sets of needs and their understanding of the working environment varies greatly. For many, the journey from being a young father to a young father’s adviser has been a challenging but ultimately rewarding one. When training these young men, the greatest barrier has been their distinct lack of confidence and belief in themselves. This, sadly, has been nurtured by a system intrinsically designed to support mothers. To challenge this I created a semi-professional, supportive group environment where council members work together on their communications skills and discuss thoughts around
fatherhood and masculinity. The council’s first goal is to support members through a programme of positive reinforcement. We ensure that everyone can identify their strengths and values through positive affirmations, sometimes something as simple as ‘I have a very good handshake’. With time, patience and support, all of our members have been able to work in a professional environment, knowing that, as experts by experience, their contributions are highly valued and welcomed.

Our longest-serving member of the council, Lemar, has been working with us since 2013. Now aged 20, Lemar became a father to his son at the age of 15. He realised his passion for fatherhood and fathers’ rights after attending Kate Bulman’s award-winning Fatherhood Programme at Oakhill Secure Training Centre in Milton Keynes, England. Upon his release he was referred to the Young Dads Council, where he went on to win the Brook Sexual Health Young Person of the Year award.

However, when Lemar joined us he was experiencing the isolation that many young fathers in the UK face. Support groups for young fathers rarely exist and information about local support is rarely disseminated to fathers during pregnancy or at birth. Lemar writes:

I grew up with a dad who didn’t do anything and then left, so I basically grew up without a dad. That broke my heart and to be honest, I don’t want to do that to my child. When I tell my story to some young people who might be going through the same thing, it comes from the heart and so it touches theirs. My dad looks down on me because I had a child when I was young and when I think about that I feel like I’ve failed, and that’s difficult to live with alone.

In his role, Lemar especially enjoys being a representative of the council, speaking with other young fathers about the barriers they have faced on their journeys into parenthood, and disseminating that information to professionals. He writes:

It’s great that I get to represent the views of young dads. I find that the difficulties I have been through [when becoming a father] stay with me and help me to speak. But I’m not the only young dad in the world and everyone’s point is important. When I’m with my peers I listen to what they have to say so when I talk it’s not just my point of view. I’m a good listener and to be honest, I love it.

Council members quickly understand and utilise the power of their own voices. Lemar goes on to explain:

I never felt uncomfortable talking to other young dads at work because I’ve never been in a predicament where I’m talking to people about things that don’t concern them. I’ve been comfortable because I’m talking to people who are in my category, who are going through what I’m going through. I don’t mind speaking to them and telling them my story because I know my message will touch at least one of their lives. I’m not talking just to feel good about myself, I’m talking to pass on the message that they can be a dad … so that they can pass on the message to someone else, who can pass on the message to someone else….
Through his time at Oakhill Secure Training Centre and as a member of the council, Lemar has become an agent of social change within his field. He writes:

Before I was a dad and started talking about being a dad I was going out and searching for a male role model. Because of that experience I’m not going to let my son or anyone else have to search like that. The way I can make sure of that is to speak publicly about my journey.

I used to do things without thinking about anyone else. Back in the day, I wouldn’t really look out for people, I wouldn’t really care – I would only care about how things would affect me. Now I take up responsibility. Now I would describe myself as this helpful, nurturing person.

For many of the members of the council, the training, workshops and even the shared experience of the project have become a definitive part of their journeys into adulthood. Lemar explains:

The Young Dads Council helped me to voice my opinion, finally! Hannah worked with us on our communication skills, which helped me to speak and listen properly. We shared all of the parenting skills we had learned through different courses, which has helped me to guide my son in the right way. The team helped me to become more of a family man.

Perhaps one of the most important outcomes from the council has been the way in which group members behave collectively. Collectively, they have created a safe space in which they support not just those they consult with but also each other. Lemar discusses how his ideas about ‘being a man’ have changed since he became part of the collective voice of young fathers. He notes:

It [the project] literally helped me to be an actual man. I thought I was the only one but there are so many people out there like me, of a similar age. Once you have a child, it changes everything. I know now that it’s ok for men to have a little gossip about things they’re going through, you don’t have to be afraid of what people think.

Finally, we have found that our model of working is especially effective when consulting with professionals. The young father advisers are able to work professionally within the sector. This means not only that they are treated as peers by all who have worked with them, but also that they are able to definitively change the support environments that they work with. As Lemar reflected:

It feels great to be heard and be respected by professionals because those are people that can help change what you are talking about. When you’re speaking to professionals and you get that breakthrough, to be honest, it gives you a boost to think, ‘Yes! I’m finally being heard.’ For a professional to come to you and say ‘I really like what you said,’ it shows that you’re doing something right, it shows that you’re getting there. Things don’t just happen overnight, it takes time, but the respect of a professional shows that you’re one step closer.

When I first spoke to professionals I didn’t know where to start. The first
session, it was kind of hard because during the Q&A [question and answer part], some questions are so big that you forget the question when you give the answer. During our debriefs we learn ways to overcome things like that. I now know how to break an answer down by taking quick notes, and that it is OK to ask members of the session to repeat themselves! Now, I find it quite easy because when you’re talking about something that you’re so passionate about, it just rolls off your tongue and you want to get your point across. My mission is to make every young dad a part of their child’s life and a part of their community. I want to help break stereotypes.

The first time I spoke in public about being a dad I was nervous but now I’m past nerves, I’m happy to do it. I’m not doing it because I have to do it, I’m not doing it because I’ve been told to do it, I’m doing it because I want to. It’s going to benefit others and it’s going to benefit me – if you do good, good will follow you. The feeling of helping someone is overwhelming.

Conclusion

The success of Young Dads TV and the Young Dads Council has shown that isolated communities can develop an authentic, public voice. Everyone is an expert in their own life (an ‘expert by experience’) and has unique and valuable insight. The internet offers a space for this voice, which can exist unfiltered by academic and professional constraints, connecting decision makers with the needs of people they find it difficult to meet in real life.

However, the support of an organisation is important for this process. The assumption that anyone ‘off the street’ can take a leadership role in a project is naive, in the short term at least. A variety of personal circumstances and a lack of professional experience can make it unrealistic to assume that ‘experts by experience’ can play a significant role in the running of a project unless significant support and training is provided. However, given enough time, support and training, ‘experts by experience’ can indeed take a leadership role in a project and make a real difference to service provision and to the lives of others. This might take a couple of years, but they will rapidly become a project’s most valuable asset. Young fathers working for the Young Dads Council are employed to help charities and public services that are willing to pay for their expertise. Young fathers like Lemar talk with their peers and other professionals alike, directly sharing their knowledge and experiences. Lemar’s audience might be smaller than that allowed by the internet, but the impact is often more profound.

A recent evaluation of Young Dads TV praised the project for taking an approach that employed young fathers’ innate skills and empowered them to take action for themselves:

Conversion factors such as networks, increased agency, sense of purpose, belonging and identity should derive their value from the communities they serve and be sustained by developing self-esteem and resilience within the participants that allow networks to grow and develop beyond their initial purpose. (Emira et al, 2013, p 22).
Isolated communities clearly can design and create their own services if the right kind of hands-on support is provided. Everyone is an expert in their own life and has insights that no one else can provide, and with time and support even the most isolated communities and individuals can take control of their own lives. The ventures reported in this paper have been very effective in facilitating young fathers to find a collective voice, thereby supporting them in sustaining their role as a father, and in the process supporting professionals in the development of their services. While such provision clearly has a valuable place in supporting new cultures of young fatherhood, in the current funding climate it remains to be seen whether such provision can be further sustained and developed over time.

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