

Hay Festival and Reading in the Digital Age

Lead Institution: University of Birmingham

Region: Birmingham

Partner Organisation: [Hay Festival](#)

The Project Outline

This project is a collaboration with Hay Festival, which runs an annual literature festival in Hay-on-Wye (Wales). Since 1988 Hay Festival has brought readers, authors and publishers together to share stories and ideas in live events.

The project analyses the contributions that Hay Festival has made in shaping cultural and critical understandings of reading today and how this might be changing in a digital era. Despite popular appeal and hosting a huge array of national and international authors, the import of Hay Festival and other such events for contemporary literary culture has been historically neglected by academics. This is beginning to shift. Reflecting on the new venues, communities, publication routes and reading experiences that the Internet and social media have enabled, scholars have turned back to examine precursors, such as book groups, author interviews, poetry readings, and literary festivals (Driscoll 2014, Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2014, Roach 2019, Weber 2018).

This project examines the Hay Festival to analyse the role of these older format live events in a digital era. For audiences, what does attendance at a literary festival offer that streaming or watching a video might not? What do festival tweets tell us about their viewpoints? For authors, how do they conceive of their appearance at such festivals? Is this changing in an era of social media? Is the live event complementary to publication? Does it detract from or supersede written forms?

In order to place these trends in context, the project will provide the first in-depth academic history of Hay Festival and the evolution of its live events strategy. Given Hay Festival's international reputation and importance to the UK creative economy, this research project will provide a vital contribution to both the story of arts organisations in modern Britain and the emergence of literary festivals as an international phenomenon in an era transitioning to digital connectivity. What model of reading and 'literature' has Hay Festival promoted via its events? What do readers and event goers understand the value of the festival experience to be? How has institutional and commercial funding shaped Hay Festival's programming and goals? Do literary festivals support, or resist (devolved) government rhetoric around the 'creative economy'? What model of transnational literature is promoted by Hay Festival and how might new technologies have shaped this model?

The project will significantly benefit from year-round on-site access to Hay Festival. The partnership will enable the student to build up a unique dataset of research interviews with key individuals at the organisation, offering vital insider perspectives and information to be captured for analysis. Hay Festival's ties with the publishing and arts sectors will enable the student to contact key individuals for research interviews vital to the project. Further, the collaboration will enable the student to conduct research interviews during the annual festivals.

Such close collaboration with staff will enable the student to engage effectively with the organisation's archives, which were deposited at the British Library in 2017. These newly available print, digital and audiovisual materials, will be invaluable to the project, providing a history of live events featuring

conversations between writers, editors, and critics, along with audience questions. Thanks to the partnership providing access to many of the current members of staff who planned and delivered those events, the student will be uniquely placed, to effectively utilise—and build on—this archive. Working with British Library and Hay Festival staff, the student will develop a digital exhibition of archival materials, hosted by Hay Festival and timed to coincide with their 35th anniversary in 2023.

Methodologically, the project will utilise a combination of semi-structured interviews, archival research and literary analysis of digital materials. The project will contribute to three key areas of literary research. First, the project will provide the first archivally-based academic history of Hay Festival, contributing to Hay Festival's goal of stimulating use of their archives, while helping scholars and arts funders to assess the contributions literary festivals make to contemporary culture. Second, the project will contribute to the burgeoning study of the 'digital literary sphere' (Murray 2018) by charting transformation of reading practices and experiences of literature in the digital age, thus also enabling Hay Festival to assess the efficacy of utilising digital resources for live event delivery. Finally, the project will explore an often-neglected area of literary studies, namely the ways in which readers experience literature collectively today.

How to find out more:

Lead Supervisor:	Dr Rebecca Roach and Alexandra Harris
Email:	r.roach@bham.ac.uk A.Harris.2@bham.ac.uk