



# Engaging Community With Social Research

*Using Social Research to Develop and Evaluate Local Government Community Engagement Initiatives*

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## 1. Introduction and Context

### **Background**

In 2011, a partnership between the Community Development and Facilities Branch of the Toowoomba Regional Council and Dr Andrew Hickey from the University of Southern Queensland commenced exploring the uses of social research in local government community development practice. The branch had identified a need for developing richer accounts of communities located within the Toowoomba region local government area, and although significant economic and demographic datasets were available via in-house and external providers, including the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing (2011, 2006) and Council's own 'Community Profile' (2011) and 'Community Atlas' (2011) socio-demographic maps, the analyses of community drawn from these accounts could not provide Branch staff with a complete picture of the communities they were working with. Branch staff sought a sense of the *qualitative* aspects of living within community and set about attempting to identify the relational and affective nature of their communities. Through the gathering of accounts of the *experience* of community, Branch staff sought to refine and target program delivery in their community engagement initiatives. To this end, a partnership with Dr Andrew Hickey, a social researcher based at the University of Southern Queensland commenced, and set about identifying a skillset that community development practitioners in local government might draw on to effectively account for and record the relational and experiential aspects of community (Pretty 2002; Hickey 2012).

An outcome of this early partnership included the development of a set of practitioner focused research training resources initially trialled with Community Development and Facilities Branch staff of Toowoomba Regional Council through 2012. Further funding to develop these resources was needed however, and following the securing of an ACELG Partnership Grant, the project extended to commence development of a web-based professional development training package, *The Social Research Toolkit*, underpinned by a research agenda that sought to understand how local government practitioners (especially those in community engagement and development) might go about using social research within their day-to-day practice. With a project team including Dr Andrew Hickey (University of Southern Queensland), Mr Paul Reynolds (Toowoomba Regional Council) and Dr Lisa McDonald (University of Southern Queensland), the development of *The Social Research Toolkit* commenced and a field-based research project exploring the uses of qualitative social research in local government settings undertaken in sites across Australia.

This report details the key findings drawn from the Partnership Grant that supported this project and provides insight into the ways social research might come to be used in local government community engagement.

## ***Theoretical background***

'Community' provided a key term for this project, with the ways that local governments go about conceptualising community providing the principal focus of this research. This project sought to understand how local government agencies make sense of the communities they work with, and how social research might provide a basis for generating richer, research-informed insights into *who* and *what* the community is.

Typically, local government understandings of community draw on a conception of community that positions place and social interaction as central to the experience of community. This definition also invokes a sense of the individual-as-Self as a primary agent within social formations (Berger and Luckman 1966; Colombo and Senatore 2005). As Prezza, Zampatti, Pacilli and Paoliello's (2008) analysis of territorial sense of community highlights, bonds generated according to shared inter-connectedness, shared spatialisation and shared experience stand as significant for understanding the structure and formation of community. Crucially, as Mannarini and Fedi (2009) note, these dimensions of community are held as *personalised* – a 'mental territory' – with community maintaining a phenomenologic basis that is mapped both cognitively and, with reference to Wiesenfeld (1996, 1998), inter-subjectively by the individual in terms of the geographic space. From this basis, 'community' within local government understandings has typically been configured as something shared, inter-connected and spatially distinct. That is, community is viewed as physically located and geographically identifiable, and made meaningful in terms of the inter-connections groups of individuals have with each other and the space they occupy.

Recent work on mapping the 'emotional geography' (Eckersall 2011; Mackie, 2011) and 'emotional cartographies' (Nold 2009) of communities highlights the affective dimensions of being situated. Following on from work in place-attachment (see particularly Buys and Buys' 2003 discussion on the role of place attachment in forming a sense of community) and psychological sense of community (Pretty 2002), the emotional connections individuals have with a space and the affective dimensions of being connected to other individuals form powerful markers of community. As Eckersall notes, it is the 'feelingness of a place [that] gives a sense of how we connect places with memories and experiences of the past' (334). In conjunction with this, recent work undertaken on 'neighbourhood effects' (van Ham, Manley, Bailey, Simpson and Maclennan 2012) highlights the place-based connotations of identity and the implications this has for individual senses of self.

It was from this conceptual launching point that the project detailed in this report developed. In particular it sought to problematise two assumptions that attach to local government community engagement:

1. The research sought to ask questions of the role of local governments in their engagement with community; what this idea of 'community engagement' might mean and how it might be enacted when the idea of community itself is inter-subjectively relational, multifarious, changing and *slippery*.

In asking this question, recent literature exploring notions of 'agonistic pluralism', as charted by Mouffe (2000) and extended by Ploger (2004), and 'guerilla pluralism' (Medina 2011) were resonant theoretical cues in that they opened the possibility for new

conceptualisations of community to emerge as foci for the research. These conceptualisations of community move away from fixed points of definition and *situatedness* to see community as something far more fluid and disparate. In these articulations, community, rather than functioning from such fixed, *situated*, points of definition, might well be understood according to its 'messiness', plurality and placelessness. The implications of this shift in thinking about community, combined with approaches to qualitative enquiry that highlight the inter-subjective and relational aspects of experiencing community, provide for local government agencies a chance to take stock of what effective community engagement practice looks like, and how both the idea of community is understood and outcomes in the name of 'community engagement' might be generated.

2. A second focus that guided the project asked how social research might be utilised by local government to inform understandings of community and consequently harnessed to provide focused and meaningful community engagement practice.

A major concern of this project was in understanding the ways that local government agencies responsible for engaging community come to understand and enact specific visions of the community in their engagement practice. To engage with community means to have at least some sense of who and what that community is. Yet practical approaches for ensuring communities are understood via the generation of evidenced, research-informed conceptualisations of community remain scant in the literature and in practice. As uncovered in this research (and detailed later in this report) community engagement is often undertaken according to the *tacit* understandings of key staff located within local government. When research is used by local government, it often tends toward 'statistical' and demographically oriented datasets that, while valuable, cannot provide a sense of the experience, emotional context or motivation associated with community. Mapping the terrain of community according to research informed understandings generated from the deployment of social research techniques by the practitioners themselves provided a focus for the project reported here.

To achieve insight into these two points of focus, this project sought to work directly with local government practitioners to uncover existing practices and to identify approaches for the development of community engagement that draw on social research techniques. While focus was given to well-known data collection techniques including interview, survey, observation, statistical counts, and participant observation, also included was consideration of the use of social and digital media in accounting for community. Emphasised as part of *The Social Research Toolkit*, this aspect of the project sought to identify strategies for up-skilling local government community engagement specialists as 'practitioner researchers' (Hickey, Reynolds and McDonald 2015; Robson 2002; Cochrane-Smith and Lytle 2009).



## **Significance**

The significance of this research lays in the insight it provides for local governments on the understandings they might form around the nature and identity of community and the possibilities this affords for developing focused and more dynamic community engagement practice. By building-on and enhancing the initial understandings of community that the Community Development and Facilities Branch of Toowoomba Regional Council apply around the uses of social research in their day-to-day practice, this project extended its analysis of current practices in local government use of social research to include insights from local governments including Ipswich City Council, Redland City Council, Southern Downs Regional Council, Gold Coast City Council, Newcastle City Council and Wyndham City Council. This report provides a set of findings that indicate the place that social research currently has and might continue to have in local government community engagement practice.

## **Project stages**

This project was divided into two distinct stages.

Stage 1 was focused on the development of *The Social Research Toolkit*, a web-based professional development resource for use by local government community engagement practitioners. The Toolkit stands as an open-access resource dedicated to the explication of social research techniques as they might be used in local government contexts. The Toolkit also represents a tangible outcome of the Partnership Grant and will be used as a resource in further research inquiries into the uses of social research by local government.

The Toolkit can be accessed from:

[www.socialresearchtoolkit.net](http://www.socialresearchtoolkit.net)

*Appendix A* provides a 'screen-grab' image of the main page of the Toolkit.

Stage 2 was focused on intensive field-based discovery of existing practice in the use of social research by local government, focusing specifically on community engagement. The remainder of this report deals with this stage of the project and the findings it revealed around the use and applicability of social research in local government settings.



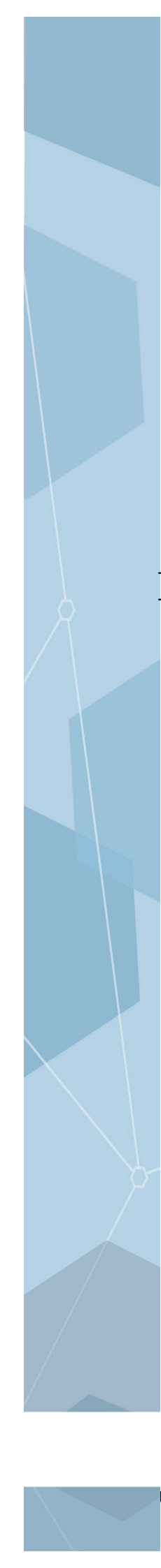
## 2. Previous Research and Methodology

The literature highlights initial forays into techniques for capturing research informed accounts of the relational and affective dimensions of community (see particularly Mannarini and Fedi 2009 and Antonsich 2009), however explicit connections between the work of community engagement sections of local government authorities and the use of social research as a practice deployed by local government practitioners remain limited. Ploger's (2008) survey of the uses of Foucaultian social theory on community engagement and Gunder and Hillier's (2009) applications of Lacanian psycho-analytic theory show significant theoretical developments for how richer, phenomenographically captured senses of community might be utilised, but it has been largely in the area of community-arts collaborations that significant forays into understanding the affective and relational aspects of community have developed (see particularly Nold 2009 and Contact Inc 2012 as examples). But again, dedicated explication of how local government might utilise social research for community engagement remains scarce. A significant opportunity existed within this research to extend approaches for the accounting of community via the use of social research within the everyday work of local government authorities.

The research stage of this project deployed focus-group, workshop and interview research techniques, in conjunction with document analysis, to gauge current practice in local government use of qualitative research. In particular, emphasis was placed on uncovering existing practice in community engagement and practitioner use of social research to inform engagement practice. A secondary theme interested in understanding how local government organisations, as a whole, use and interpret qualitative social research also filtered through the inquiries.

The research team gathered the dataset for this project according to the following schedule of techniques:

- One-on-one interview: conducted by Dr Andrew Hickey with 4 participants representing the Far-North Queensland Region of Council (FNQRoC), the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ), Wyndham City Council and Toowoomba Regional Council. These interviews were conducted via telephone, except those with participants at Toowoomba Regional Council (with these interviews conducted in person). The interviews were audio-recorded for the purpose of generating transcripts, and lasted upward of 1 hour in duration. These interviews were conducted between October 2014-May 2015.  
The purpose of these interviews was to establish initial insight into the use of social research by local government agencies known for their community engagement practice. The insights revealed by these interviews provided context for the subsequent field-based data collection and analysis.
- Focus group workshops: conducted by the research team with groups representing Toowoomba Regional Council, Gold Coast City Council, Redland City Council, Ipswich City Council, Southern Downs Regional Council and Newcastle City Council. These focus group sessions were convened between September and October 2015, and consisted of 1-day workshops covering a schedule of topics interested in understanding the nature of contemporary local government community



engagement practice, the uses and interpretations of social research and local government decision making, and evidence-based practice. The insights provided during these workshops provided the primary dataset for the project. The focus group sessions were audio and video recorded for the purposes of generating transcripts.

- Document analysis: a subsequent analysis of selected local government websites and publicly accessible documentation conducted by Dr Lisa McDonald and Dr Andrew Hickey provided a reference point for understanding how selected local governments currently understood community, and explicitly referred to social media usage and digital applications of social research. Although only briefly referenced in the findings detailed in this report, this broad analysis was undertaken in order to establish context around the use and reception of social research in publicly accessible local government digital communications. This analysis of local government documentary materials was conducted between March and May 2015.

The collected data was thematically analysed against the project's prevailing research foci. The key themes generated from the data are detailed below in 3. *Findings*.

### 3. Findings

The findings generated from the analysis of the collected data are organised according to the following categories:

- Tacit understandings of community
- The local government 'practitioner-researcher'
- Social media and digital engagement
- The uses of social research in local government

Across the dataset and within the views of those practitioners, administrators and professionals captured during this research, a somewhat surprising amount of consistency in views was captured. By and large, those interviewed or engaged during focus-group discussions felt that community engagement presented as a complex yet (still) not fully understood practice, and in aligning with views extant within the literature (Pini and Haslam 2006; Bovaird 2007), suggested that even though a fundamental component of the remit of local governance, community engagement remained secondary to infrastructure and service provision; the so-called 'roads, rates and rubbish' ethos of local government (Aulich 2006).

On the other hand, local governments tend to apply sound community engagement principles and genuinely listen to community expectation in regard to longer term planning issues e.g. Strategic Plans, Strategic Community Plans, etc. The issue here lies in the 'longer term' focus of these plans and the inherent risks associated with the fluid or dynamic nature of communities and associated changing expectations. Local Governments should periodically validate longer term plans to ensure alignment with 'current' desired community outcomes. This can be achieved iteratively through regular updates to internal knowledge management systems, ensuring local intelligence is captured, stored and organisationally accessible.

In extending these insights in the place and purpose of local government community engagement, participants engaged during this research felt that social research offered significant capacity to enhance community engagement practice, but that requisite skill-sets and time implications for gathering this data, as well as the representation of specific forms of data presented as challenges to widespread use in local government. One prominent theme to emerge from this research revolved around the form that social research - and especially *qualitative* social research - is represented in and the challenges this poses to local government process more familiar with data derived in statistical-numerical formats.

Finally, a prominent theme from the data revolved around understandings of the uses of various forms of social media in local government community engagement, and their usefulness as sites of research about community. Although participants engaged during this research indicated that predominantly their local government organisations had a social media presence, rarely did this extend beyond the use of social and digital media as an information dissemination tool. As explored in the sections below, through electronically mediated dialogue social and digital media offer significant opportunity for gaining insight

into community that extends beyond information dissemination, and have the capacity to influence, if not significantly alter, established understandings of community.

Summaries of the data, as gathered from the interview, participant-observation and focus-group sessions conducted for this research are presented in the following sections.

### ***Tacit Understandings of Community***

The participants engaged during this research indicated that community engagement practice typically came to be enacted according to what we refer to here as *tacit* understandings of community.

British philosopher Michael Polanyi (1962; 1966) coined the concept of ‘tacit knowledge’ as that which is ‘intuitive and unarticulated’ (Lam 2000: 490). Tacit knowledge (and the practice it manifests as) consists of intuited action; not strictly cognitive or strategic, but based on experience and perception. Lam (2000) provides an important insight into the concept of tacit knowledge as this relates to organisational structures (such as those typical of local government):

*At the cognitive level, the notion of social embeddedness underlines the ‘tacit’ nature of human knowledge and the dynamic relationship between individual and collective learning. It draws our attention to the fact that a large part of human knowledge, such as skills, techniques and know-how, and routines, cannot be easily articulated or communicated in codified forms. Knowledge of this kind is experience-based... (489)*

The concept of tacit knowledge drawn from Polanyi’s and Lam’s conceptualisations provided an important point of consideration into the ways that participants described their work as community engagement practitioners. Several pointed to the notion that community engagement work functioned from a basis of implicit understanding- the ‘know how’ of the practitioner in Polanyi’s terms (1962). As one participant highlighted when discussing how engagement initiatives came to be brokered:

“It is often based on who you know... it depended on who you knew through your networks” (Darlene)

Another extended this to suggest:

“...there'll be an element of ‘that’s just how it is’; you understand community based on who it is you are and how you do your work.” (Bec)

Tacit knowledge of community in this sense was connected to experience and a general understanding of ‘who was who’ in community. Often this was based on long-term connections with community and the local government organisation.

Participants also pointed toward the presence of key members of the teams they worked in- colleagues who often had long-term associations and knowledge of their job as community engagement professionals and extensive connection to networks of organisations and individuals. Perhaps not surprisingly, these colleagues held status as significant members of the teams they operated in, even if their position within the organisational hierarchy

didn't align with this status. Tacit understandings of community worked as intuitive points of reference around what engagement initiatives would be delivered and how these might work.

But of course, tacit knowledge is knowledge that is difficult (if not impossible) to codify. This is knowledge that occurs *in* practice but typically isn't recorded in process manuals, strategic plans or similar documentation. Although it appears that, at least for those local governments represented in this project, tacit understandings of community provide a platform upon which local government community engagement initiatives are often launched, a significant risk in the form of inconsistent practice and 'lost knowledge' are presented by this reliance on the tacit knowledge of key staff. When embodied in the individual community engagement practitioner solely, community engagement practice is at risk of being parochial, idiosyncratic and inconsistent in application, purpose and effect. It also occurs that if, through one reason or other, that staff member comes to leave the organisation, so too is that tacit knowledge lost. While deeply valuable in the insights it might provide, the reliance on tacit understandings of community presents considerable risk for the deployment of resources in the name of community engagement. Local Government should also consider appropriate knowledge succession strategies and allow appropriate timeframes to ensure effective handovers and relationship endorsements between community and incoming staff to ensure confidence levels are maintained.

Of interest to this research was the role tacit understandings of community could play in community engagement practice when informed by (more codified) social research. While this project did not seek to suggest that tacit understandings of community should be ignored- in fact we would argue that this tacit knowledge of community provides an invaluable base-point from which to commence more strategically oriented engagement initiatives- it must be informed further by codified approaches for engagement; approaches that draw on social-research informed understandings of community that maps against organisational objectives, staff skill-sets and (most importantly) community expectations. Relying solely on the individualised views of community held by specific staff poses significant risk for the local government agency.

### ***The Local Government Practitioner Researcher***

After establishing that the basis upon which community engagement was often derived involved the tacit understandings of communities held by individual staff, the research turned to consider how a social research informed practice in local government might develop. Of particular interest to our inquiry was the current use (if any) of social research techniques in local government, and how these techniques might be feasibly used within the local government organisation as an aspect of the 'regular' workflow. We came to conceptualise the uses of social research as part of engagement practice in terms of the 'practitioner-researcher'. Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (2009) provide a useful definition for practitioner-research when suggesting:

*...practitioner research [is] an umbrella term to encompass multiple genres and forms of research... where the practitioner is simultaneously a researcher who is continuously engaged in inquiry. (x)*

For this project we saw the practitioner researcher as the local government professional engaged in the development and practice of social research designed to inform continuing engagement practice.

The participants engaged in this project saw value in conducting their practice as practitioner researchers, even though few to date were doing so in a codified and deliberate way. Fewer still used qualitative methods to generate data-informed engagement practice; only one representative of those local governments contacted for this research noted the formal use of social research using qualitative methods. However, this participant did highlight that the staff involved in this process of gathering research-informed views of community were not relying on any formal training in research conduct, but drew heavily on tacit knowledge of community and experience in community engagement. As she highlighted:

“... our community development staff members are conducting the surveys and interviews. But they are staff who have picked up these skills as community development practitioners not as social researchers”. (Paula)

She moved on to note an important point however:

“We have this greater understanding of the local area than an [external] researcher would have”. (Paula)

This participant noted that the value of conducting research ‘in house’ enabled the connections, networks and affiliations local government staff have with community- that is the tacit knowledge they hold- to be informed and extended with research-based data. This was an important insight, and the participant highlighted themes that were expressed by several other participants. In short, while participants engaged during this project felt that tacit understandings of community, as held by individual staff, were important and provided a base-point from which to launch community engagement initiatives, these views required a further evidence-base to enable rigorous and strategic enactment of engagement initiatives that met with community expectations and organisational objectives.

This raised three points of significance for this project and the consideration of the role of the local government practitioner researcher; firstly, that the insider view-point was valuable and provided a sense of nuance that an ‘external’ view could not necessarily capture, secondly, that making visible ‘in house’ knowledge allowed for sustained relationships and organisational knowledge management to occur *within* the organisation and between colleagues, and that thirdly, combining research practice into the role of the practitioners’ community engagement practice enabled possibilities for rich, and engaged connections with community to form.

This latter theme from the data stood as central to several of the discussions captured throughout the project. While participants in the interviews and focus groups felt that significant capacity for community engagement practitioners to capture data as part of the community engagement initiative existed, considerations for how this data would function (and equally, what it might miss) required consideration. As one participant, Debra suggested, while the ‘insider’ perspective might enable the formulation of a “rich and nuanced understanding of community”, it risked being parochial and ignorant to wider

phenomena; it ran the risk of being *too close* to the action. This resonates with suggestions from the literature on ‘insider-research’, as suggested in Coghlan (2003) and Asselin (2003). The literature notes that the insider-researcher may well become *too familiar* with local conventions and ways of doing things and miss the possibility for enacting new practice and seeking new lines of inquiry. This was suggested by some participants who highlighted that in some instances research conducted by external parties (predominantly consultants) could provide an impartiality that might be missed if conducted ‘in house’. But equally, it emerged that the inside knowledge generated through tacit understandings of community, informed as it might be by rigorous applications of social research, could provide a more focused, meaningful and strategic way of engaging with community. This view was shared amongst the participants engaged during this research.

Perhaps the final word should be given to one participant who further articulated this view of the practitioner-researcher in terms of the scale of the local government organisation:

“It comes down to the size of the council... I look at the small councils and you find that they are actually quite close to community anyway. The bigger you go [in councils] the more they tend to be ‘away’ from their communities” (Brett)

*Knowing* community stood as being the central motif running through the discussions had with the participants. Whether through the application of tacit understandings or what was generated through research-informed inquiries, the goal was to understand the nuance and shape of the community in order to accurately and meaningfully design and deliver engagement initiatives. The role for social research was to inform these understandings of community and to frame practice. Although not practised widely, the application of social research was considered to be a significant way of achieving this insight into community.

### ***Digital Engagement and Social Media in Local Government***

How insight into community is constituted in a digital era was given detailed attention during both stages of the project. In Stage 1, Module 4 of *The Social Research Toolkit* was designed to open dialogue about both the nature and location of ‘local’ communities as they appear through digital technologies (such as smart phones and portable computer tablets), and the application of different online platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. This resource invites engagement practitioners to ‘rethink’ the structures and locations of communities in light of the mobile digital era so as to explore and expand current approaches and understandings in, and of, community engagement practice.

As noted above, following a detailed survey of selected local government websites, it became apparent that new dialogues for engaging with and applying digital media and technologies were appropriate as the preferred mode of communication with communities was observed to be a ‘one-to-many’ delivery model. This model was typically effected through information presentation portals or, where necessary, dedicated consultation portals for particular activities such as presenting infrastructure proposals or seeking comment on, for example, development matters. With the exception of the Wyndham City Council website, which invites its constituents to comment through a narrative approach, the ‘Have Your Say’ consultation model tended to dominate engagement initiatives where community opinion was sought. Such a model suggests a conflation between the distinct



practices of consultation and engagement, and was confirmed as a common approach during Stage 2 workshop conversations with community engagement staff. One member explicitly stated, for instance, that:

“Local government tends to use social media as a device for one-way communication rather than interactively”. (Peter)

This respondent also felt that a reluctance to be interactive was part of unstated communications strategies to limit external communications only to certain staff so that ‘awkward’ community dialogue could be contained and minimised:

“Complaints are responded to quickly on Facebook, but local government responses are not always transparent. This is because they carry risk and need constant moderation”. (Peter)

A sustained emphasis in the project about what the digital era meant was an attempt to both suggest and explore theoretical underpinnings which claim that the arrival of digital devices, networks and media in our lives, and also our workplaces, has fundamentally changed the way that communities are created and understood (Fuller 2005). Additionally, the idea that the sites *where* a sense of community happens are now likely to incorporate place-based as well as digital locations, and often at the same time (Paterson 2007), prompted certain directions for exploring engagement practice. Digital technologies can inspire nomadic practices ‘on the ground’ (Miyata, Boase, Wellman & Ikeda 2006), thus asking engagement practitioners to reconceptualise what constitutes communities and their locations. The notion of mobility therefore emerged as an organising theme for extending understandings of community through the widespread use of digital devices.

It became apparent through the workshops that the relevance of mobility for community engagement practice was a complex matter which could not be singularly resolved or easily conceptualised. From the workshop dialogues, it was clear that an application of mobility concepts was dependent on the specific contexts in which community engagement staff worked, and what was brought to those contexts by community interactions. In the case of interpreting social media comments which were made ‘on the move’, or in shorthand on the micro-blog Twitter, for instance, it was generally agreed that social media provides a high volume of fragmented communications as opposed to comments made through formally structured surveys. The question of how practitioners might make meaning out of the fragments was not straightforward given the targeted nature of many engagement initiatives, and the mediated nature of digital communication. As one participant remarked:

“Engagement needs ‘hooks’ not just responses through/to ‘mass media’”. (Rami)

The comment rightly indicates an understanding of ‘social media’ as inherently structured by global corporate enterprise, and may suggest that communities which are created or exist fundamentally ‘online’ are responsive to corporately contrived interests rather than agent in their method or means of communication. But, it may also suggest that in order for local governments to create such ‘hooks’, communities are conceptualised as already the subjects of governance, raising further questions about understandings of ‘community engagement’ in digital times. Does the practice of ‘community engagement’, for example, indicate the co-creation of communities *with* local government, or does it suggest community as responsive to local government needs? Indeed, the thought that community

comments or responses were inherently fragmented was generally challenging, with questions raised about how to manage such communication.

According to one participant, fragmentation in communication makes it less possible to source “where information travels to and how LGs can perceive what they’re doing and where” (Stephanie). Digital communications are inherently non-linear and depend less on coherence than interpretive, at times affective, sequencing (Jones 2006). Might engagement practice benefit, then, from the challenges put by non-linear understandings that encourage a less aggregating approach? Might this ‘disaggregation’ offer local governments new directions and vocabularies for interpreting contemporary communities? Certainly, current thought about network communications has suggested that networked mobile media enables a sense of proximity to others which is not dependent on their physical presence alone, and that it is this sense which secures moments of social engagement (Ling 2008, p. 164; Wei & Lo in Ling 2008, p. 164). But from at least one workshop response, there was a tendency to consider digital interactions as ‘thin’ and therefore not really ‘real’. This response appears to suggest a reluctance to explore digital networks as viable sources of ‘valid data’.

Yet, it was also noted that digital networks can facilitate coordinated services and other responses to crises or emergency events. This was seen by a number of workshop participants to indicate, in summary, that:

“Social media has ‘selective relevance’ and ‘spikes’ following a disaster or other event, but any information should be complimented with face-to-face communications”. (Alex)

For these local government community engagement practitioners, digital technologies and associated practices present complex, at times untried, ways of conceptualising what constitutes communities and their locations, and introduce a number of challenges about how to apply mobility concepts in community engagement. While it was proposed by one of the researchers that social media, in particular, represented but one observational technique from a broader array of social research methods, hints were evident as to why its use in local government was slow, with the comment that:

“There were older people on Council who did not understand the power of social media or its potential for LG”. (Stephanie)

Such potential is unsurprisingly again tied to the issue of risk in managing ‘unruly’ communication, and a reluctance at the management level to address the potential value of qualitative digital research. In considering such reluctance, one participant remarked that:

“Online responses can become debates between different people rather than only institutional responses”, indicating the volatility of online spaces and the comparative safety of more traditional methods, where “how one is perceived in social media is different from survey participation”. (Peter)

Other discussions revealed, though, that the ability of the general public to openly discuss local government issues on social media should be welcomed as it offered opportunities for engagement staff to interpret and make sense of online discussions themselves. This was seen as one way to dissuade an over-dependence on quantitative data:

“A lot of survey data is ‘lost,’ and perhaps social media could assist ... Social media can be quantitative, such as showing the number of ‘Likes’, but it is not qualitative on its own – it must be interpreted”. (Alex)

Issues about the validity of data and how to be selective were also raised, with the suggestion that a portal could be used as the beginning of further communication, and this strategy could be supported by inviting the public into face-to-face interviews. In this way, further pathways for meaningful engagement could be explored. A general concern remained, however, with the inability of engagement practitioners to readily access social media in the course of their roles. Access was usually limited to selected communications staff who effected risk management strategies, as we have noted above. The reconceptualisation, not only of community structures and locations, but also of what constitutes viable research ‘data’, then, is brought further forward by the presence of digital media and technologies in local government. It is feasible to ask, then, how ‘practitioner-researchers’ might viably apply the seeming impasse of digitally inspired complexity? And what implications might such application have for understanding communities in the digital era?

In responding to these conceptual and research challenges, it may be useful to restate some of the sentiments about what constitutes community that were mentioned above, except this time as they appear through the lens of ‘digital engagement practice’. Quantitative data tells us that approximately 40% of the world’s population is now connected online (ITU 2013), with general combined useage of social media and messaging applications recently increasing by just over 200% (Mashable 2013). With these vast shifts in communications practices, how are communities defined when traditionally understood indicators for their existence, such as identity and shared experience, disperse through digital technologies? In methods of engagement, is it a case of transferring existing notions of community into a digital format, or could understandings of community be revised in ways which assist qualitative practitioner-researchers in their practice?

The presence of digital technologies in local government community engagement practice has been instrumental in shaping new interactions with local government, and has uncovered varied and emergent formations of community through communications devices such as the smartphone, and through social media. One ‘solution’ to the disaggregating nature of digital communications may be to apply a ‘facet-based’ approach to reconceptualising contemporary communities. This is because urbanised post-industrial societies have moved away from the dichotomy of local versus regional formations of community to the less aggregating flexible community formations that are characterised by partial networked relations (Miyata, Boase, Wellman & Ikeda 2006). Digital networks, such as the Internet, therefore, contribute to, rather than detract from, established community relations because the Internet adds to those relations, further facilitating a move away from bounded, holistic communities who live in close proximity toward far - flung, multiple and partial communities (Miyata 2006). Opportunities to dedicate aspects of engagement research, which assume this level of complexity in digital social media rather than contain it, may therefore emerge. In other words, the presence of digital social media and mobile technologies further confirms that communities are not fixed in place or time, but are disparate, diverse and complex, thus requiring equally sophisticated conceptualisations in local government.

The inclusion of a focus on digital social media has articulated the idea that all communities are to a lesser or greater degree *speculative*, or contingent, and as such, would respond well to facet-based local government research which is selectively applied and interpreted, perhaps more than quantitatively aggregated. Such research would rest in the hands of community engagement practitioner-researchers who were fully enabled to apply it in the contexts in which they work. It should be stressed, however, that a facet-based approach would not replicate, or limit, an understanding of digital technologies as 'new tools' for *measuring* a level of community engagement through, for example, 'social media,' but would situate digital technologies themselves as inspiring different ways of being in the world and thus different ways of being with each other (Papastergiardis 2006; McDonald 2014). Through the use of equally speculative social research methods (Wilkie, Michael and Plummer-Fernandez 2015), the notion of a *speculative community* may, then, offer local government more direct access to the phenomenological, or experiential, aspects of engagement initiatives and thus a stronger link to their outcomes. What will be required involves a conceptual shift in understandings of communities, their locations, accessibilities and overall organisation.

### ***The Uses of Social Research in Local Government: Research-Informed Practice***

The question around why social research informed insights into community might be valuable to local government provided the impetus for a fourth theme from the data.

In general, the development and use of a research-informed dataset on community provided the basis for not only planning and delivering engagement initiatives that remained meaningful and connected to community, but also provided an evidence-base for the justification of expenditure, both within and beyond the local government organisation. Picking-up on earlier discussions, where suggestions around the place of community engagement in the local government setting saw it as secondary in importance to the 'roads, rates, rubbish' focus, participants suggested that the availability of a robust dataset provided the evidence they could use to justify expenditure and the continuation of programs. As one participant noted:

"It is becoming increasingly tougher to argue for community programs." (Brett)

Another participant shared a similar view by noting:

"In an era where there is less money to support practice, having a research-informed basis is vital." (David)

This is a significant insight drawn from the data. The participants readily connected the meaning that social research could provide for justifying an engagement program or maintaining/altering existing practice as indicated in the evidence that the data provides. This is step toward evidence-based practice, but drawn in this instance from the insights that social research might provide.

A tension formed at this point of the conversations however when consideration of the *type* and *format* of the data that might be used by local government was broached. In relaying a broad characterisation of a split between *quantitative* forms of data that emphasise

statistical-numerical representations of evidence and qualitative forms of data that emphasise the narrative and affective experience of phenomena, one participant noted the following:

“[In my organisation] qualitative data is not [seen as] data that needs to be considered. My argument is that qualitative data needs to be considered as knowledge. [Qualitative data] needs to be considered in the same way that quantitative data is”. (Brett)

One participant provided an insight into why this preference for statistical-numerical data functioned:

“When you’re working with demographic data you’re working with ‘facts’. When you’re working with qualitative data its harder to pin this down... When you’re working for funding or making decisions, its easier to work with ‘the facts’”. (Darlene).

Beyond questions that relate to the ontologies of knowledge that see ‘statistical’ forms of data as ‘factual’ (and by extension to this logic, ‘infallible’), it emerged that for local government, quantitative forms of data presented as the standard by which ‘data’ was understood and recognised. This was summed up nicely by one participant who suggested:

“Stats are easy to access and for anyone who can handle a spreadsheet can work with this data...” (Paula)

This immediately opened questions around how more qualitative forms of data might be incorporated into local government processes. The participants could see value in qualitative forms of data, and the insight these provide for understanding what we have come to see as the relational and affective aspects of community- the *experience* of community. One participant noted the following:

“Traditionally using the ‘hard data’ only offers a part of the picture. Qualitative data starts to open up the views of community to offer insight into what they’re thinking”. (Peter)

It remained however that even though qualitative data might provide significant insight and valuable understandings, quantitative data, typically represented in the form of statistics or demographics provided a standard *lingua franca* in local government considerations of research. Speaking of attempting to utilise a different approach for formulating a survey instrument that included a greater array of open-ended questions, one participant highlighted that:

“It has been difficult to persuade councils to do things differently.” (Paula)

Even with the use of a data collection technique that is recognised by local government as valid and useful (the survey questionnaire), this participant highlighted the tensions at play in changing the *form* of the data that this might deliver-on and the utility it would have in local government decision-making. Implicated within this statement are questions around how effectively data collection techniques that are foreign to local governments (techniques including dialogic interview, action research, interpretive phenomenologies and similar) might fare if used. The participant continued by noting that this involved the ‘training’ of her own local government colleagues (including elected councillors) in understanding qualitative data formats. She highlighted that it has taken some time to build familiarity

with these forms of data, and that as a distinctly different approach to research from the expected numerical-statistical datasets that are predominantly used in decision-making within council, qualitative research required a shift in attitude around what counts as *reliable* 'data'.

Interestingly, one participant highlighted a prominent example of where qualitative data-typically in the form of narrative statements and affirmations- do find application:

"We often see the 'warm and fuzzy' data used in council brochures. This often captures the 'cultural stuff'." (Mardi)

This participant highlighted a clear split in application of quantitative and qualitative data in local government; on the one hand, the 'facts' represented in statistical-numerical form were often reserved for internal reporting, including budget and strategic planning. On the other, qualitative 'narrative' data was used in outwardly focused documentation and marketing materials. When asked why this use of qualitative research was reserved for the outward-focused material, this participant suggested:

"... so we look good". (Mardi)

The key point stressed here is that there does appear to be expected ways for data to not only be used, but also, in how certain forms of data find recognition as valid. This presents a challenge for the use of social research- especially social research of a qualitative form- that does not fit with formats that are recognised in current local government practice. While we would suggest that qualitative research has significant application in informing the strategic and operational practice of local government, it remains that a shift in understandings and attitudes around what constitutes 'data' will be required.

This broached a major concept that emerged from the discussions with the local government staff engaged in this project: *translation*. Translation has featured as a prevailing theme through this research on a number of levels; the translation of local government practice into community; the translation of community desires and needs back to local government; the translation of tacit knowledge of community into formal community engagement practice, and so on. But in this specific iteration, translation stands as representative of a shift in the ways certain representations of evidence come to be made accessible and meaningful in the local government setting. Translation here refers to how qualitative data, presented in formats that differ from more frequently applied statistical-numerical datasets might be incorporated into representational forms that local government can use to make decisions.

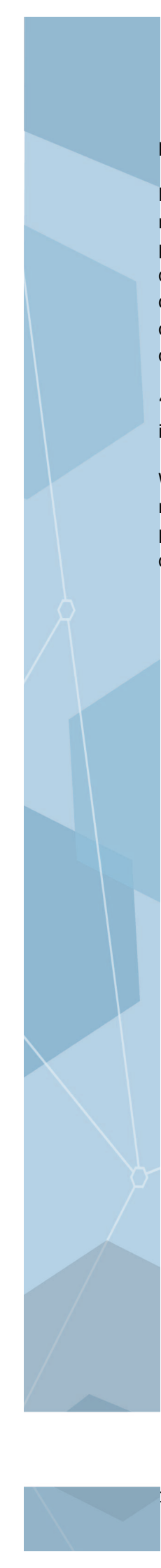
As participants noted:

"Local governments, I think, are still not oriented to use qualitative research to solve their problems. I think, unless you have a researcher in house who is able to intervene, then research wont come into making business decisions... It just isn't understood." (Paula)

"The challenge is to get people [local government staff] to know about these different datasets..." (David)

"What we really need in local government is evidence-based decision making... we need





people to recognise that they need this evidence.” (Brett)

For these participants, social research provides an opportunity for evidence-based decision making. This is where the primary value for using social research emerged for the participants in this project. But equally, using social research as a mechanism for connecting with community, engaging staff skill-sets and continuously refining program delivery required a shift in attitude around what counts as data and how qualitative forms of data might find application in the local government context. This sentiment was noted by one participant:

“The problems with research is often in the practicality of applying it ‘on the ground’. There is often a disconnect between the research and what happens in practice...” (Darlene).

While considered valuable and offering potential, the use of (particularly qualitative) social research as a principle form of evidence in local government will require a shift in perception around what counts as ‘data’ and how this qualitative evidence comes to be collected, organised and formulated in practice.



## 4. Discussion

The prevailing views captured in this research included the value of social research as a mechanism for generating an evidence-base for informing practice, and the potential social research offers to enhance community engagement program design and delivery. However, the application of social research by community engagement practitioners remained scant in practice, with few instances of structured and cohesive application of ‘practitioner research’ uncovered.

To this end, the first stage of this project was dedicated to the development of *The Social Research Toolkit* as a professional development portal for local government practitioner researchers. Given that the data suggests that the use of social research is widely considered beneficial to local government practice, but that capability to enact this in practice remains limited, the need for a resource such as the Toolkit stands as significant. As an open source portal, the Toolkit additionally addresses the interest practitioners have in digital social research, inviting their participation in new directions for engagement practice.

Although this current stage of this research has drawn to a close, this project will continue under the guise of furthering understanding around the place and purpose of social research in local government practice, and the roll that social research might play specifically in the decision-making and strategic planning of local governments. Using themes generated from this research as its base-point, emphasis will be given to how community engagement professionals might come to develop skillsets as practitioner-researchers, and how the translation of social research might work into local government structures.

As an important insight into these processes, this research ultimately is interested in uncovering the ways that local government practice might be enhanced, expenditure minimised and effectively targeted and programs designed against rigorous and accurate understandings of community. Moving beyond existing practice and the use of statistical-numerical datasets as predominant points of evidence to include nuanced narrative accounts that open understandings of the affective and relational experiences of community remain central to this. Given that community is fundamentally experienced as a relational and affective phenomenon, it would seem to make sense to identify local government community engagement practice that takes account of these factors.

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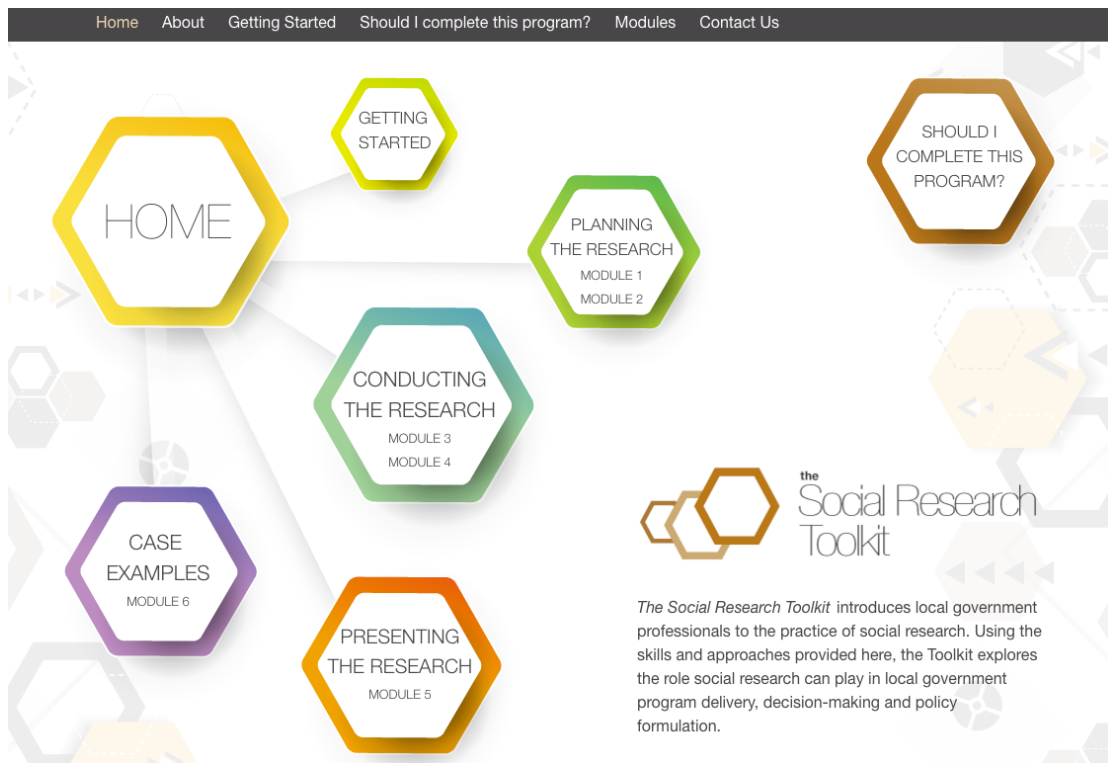
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## Appendix A: Image of the Social Research Toolkit Portal





## Appendix B: Publications derived from this research

1. Hickey, Andrew. (2015). The Economies of Engagement: The nature of university engagement in the corporate university. *Social Alternatives* 34 (2).
2. Hickey, Andrew and Reynolds, Paul and McDonald, Lisa. (2015) Understanding community to engage community: the use of qualitative research techniques in local government community engagement. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 37 (1).
3. Hickey, Andrew T. and Bates, Darryl and Reynolds, Paul (2014) Acts of defiance: engaging community from the perspective of local government. In: *Community capacity building: lessons from adult learning in Australia*. NIACE, Leicester, United Kingdom.







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