

Connected Communities Keeping In Touch

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Key words everyday technologies, mobile phones, community strengthening, change

Executive Summary

- This report is the first iteration of a series of questions that would support the development of a digital communications strategy for communities of interest or place.
- Any such strategy needs to work with already existing key nodes in the network of community communication. Projects which build on people's everyday practice are more sustainable than those which introduce completely new technologies or activities.
- Diverse of models of change underpin different uses of communications technologies.
- There were few examples of private sector initiatives in our survey.
- Respondents did not talk about 'community strengthening' but about connecting to people, sharing information and joining in events and activities. Community life was described in terms of activities, encounters, collaborations and meetings.
- There is no 'one size fits all' solution but rather weaving technology into community activities in ways which best suit individual communication preferences and group purpose.
- Technology adoption is prompted by direct personal relevance. Understanding this adoption process enables key people to introduce useful enabling practices that go with the grain of relationship-driven patterns of connectivity.
- The skills developed around the functions of 'community management' in commercial media practice could be usefully adapted to the aims of connecting communities.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Keeping in Touch

This discussion paper summarises the key themes from *Keeping In Touch*, a collaborative research project involving academics from The Digital Cultures Research Centre at the University of the West of England, Knowle West Media Centre as community partner, and independent consultant Dr Clodagh Miskelly.

Keeping in Touch consisted in a scoping review of UK based projects, visits to three case studies and a small interview-based study with people who are active in a particular area of Bristol. The project asked:-

What can we learn about people's *everyday use* of mobile media and communication technologies that would support the aim of strengthening communities?

How do people already use mobile media and everyday communication technologies in their daily lives to 'keep in touch' with significant community networks?

The review aimed to

- scope best practice examples of community technology projects where intervention has been made using everyday communication technologies to strengthen communities.
- develop a network of co-participants in research into uses of everyday technologies in community strengthening activities.

We focussed on those projects which seemed to be going with the grain of what people are already 'doing' in their everyday lives, rather than introducing completely new technologies or activities. We also developed an interest in those projects which enabled people to choose to connect to the people they want to be connected to, i.e. belonging to a community in their own terms, rather than projects about improving service delivery for example. A full project report details the methodological approach, findings and recommendations for good practice for those engaged in community-strengthening. The full project report will be available on the DCRC website on Nov 30th 2011. In this discussion paper we confine ourselves to sharing the key discussion points and suggestions for further investigation.

This short paper is intended to be the beginning of a conversation rather than a literature review. It summarises what our respondents have shared with us on from their own experience. We do not attempt to define what is meant by the term 'strengthening communities' here, rather we interpret the different constructions of the idea that we found in our respondents. We have analysed the rhetorical claims made for community based digital connectivity projects, following up this analysis with three in depth interview based case studies. This research has then been discussed and in some cases implemented in Knowle West Media Centre in Bristol, a project with an already advanced practice in this area.

The project partners shared a common intention to not only enhance academic research and understanding but through the research process to promote tangible beneficial effects on

people's daily lives, sharing information on inspiring and useful examples of good practice in community technology projects. Outputs of the research are being shared in the form of guidelines for good practice and have already informed hands-on workshops on how to use everyday technologies to share and aggregate community information. *In this spirit we have constructed this report as the first iteration of a series of questions that would support the development of a digital communications strategy for communities of interest or place.*

1 What everyday communication practices already exist within your community ?

To learn about how everyday use of mobile media does or can support community strengthening we first needed to find projects that stated they were interested in both of these elements. This was tricky since everyday uses of technology such as text messaging are so mundane as to usually not feature in descriptions of community projects. Where technologies are specifically mentioned it is often because a bespoke use has been developed, or the technologies and the ways they are used are considered to be different, innovative or unique. Of special interest for this piece of research were those projects which seem to go with the grain of what people are already 'doing' in their everyday lives. Projects which build on people's everyday practice are potentially more sustainable than those which introduce completely new technologies or activities.

2 How do you think communication can address the problem ?

To understand the motivation for intervention and its relationship to technologies we looked at the rhetoric used by projects when they describe how they aim to effect change. This analysis reveals a range of different understandings of what constitutes strengthened community or motivates social change. There are many different models of change underpinning community communications strategies.

Different underlying theories of change are reflected in the diverse networks of people and technologies under consideration i.e. community members, community workers, technologists.

Understandings of how and why a technology might be useful in a particular context differ widely (e.g. to effect behaviour change on specific issues such as health or crime, opening up creative or communication spaces or helping people organise and attend meetings).

The range of agendas and approaches is confusing. It is not possible within this short scoping study to evaluate how effectively these projects might be achieving desired changes, *however the diversity of approaches and theories of change underpinning them suggests that further exploration would be of interest, especially where that diversity was correlated against technological interventions.*

3 What language do you speak ?

The initial scoping unearthed a hundred significantly different projects, individuals and organisations with a rich and diverse set of activities and goals in relation to mobile media

and communications technology for community strengthening. They evidenced significant differences in the degrees of formality of organisational structure, structures of decision-making and accountability, degrees of autonomy and of funding. The sample included partnerships between academic, public sector and community or voluntary sector groups. *There were few examples of private sector initiatives.* Each of these configurations has its own discursive formation, its own set of institutional and technological preferences. Designers, community workers, activists and technologists often speak different languages.

Within this diversity there is a clear tendency to polarise around what we might call socially led or technologically led projects. Socially-led projects are issue focused, deliver services, or work with a community of interest e.g. with mental health workers. Emphasis is on community, social activity and change; technology is introduced or adapted to support this. Technology-led projects involve specialists i.e. in community media, networked computing, or design, and involve skilling up people with digital communications skills. Emphasis is on the tools and how they can support emergent (often non specific) community functions. *However, people 'on the ground' did not talk about 'community strengthening' but about connecting to people, sharing information and joining in events and activities; they express the desire to make their communities better places to live, all of which could be understood as 'community strengthening'. Community life was described in terms of activities, encounters, collaborations and meetings, either online or face to face.*

4 What does your communications eco system look like ?

The diversity of community practices is evidence of the heterogeneity of communities. The diversity of agendas and approaches is confusing when it comes to making sense of all the projects. *But a diversity both of technologies and uses of those technologies is a strength in engaging, working with and building connections between as many local people as possible. It is not about trying to find 'one size fits all' approaches but rather weaving the potential and opportunities provided by technology into community activities in ways which best suit individual communication practices and preferences and group purpose.* Technology never solves a communication problem on its own.

Good practice projects highlight the importance of understanding local communication 'ecosystems' in order to develop effective approaches to using communications technologies in community strengthening. Those introducing the technologies need an underlying understanding of good practice in community settings as well as an understanding of technological possibilities and appropriateness. These may include for instance economic factors affecting what gets adopted in the case of eg data plans or levels of literacy in hard to reach user communities. Different communication technologies will reach different people. A balance needs to be struck when choosing suitable technologies between limits of functionality, control, accessibility, reach and familiarity. However when looking at

communications networks we need to be alert precisely to those who are absent from it; this is especially true of technological means of communication moderated by cultural capital and economic inequality,

“I suppose my fear is that when you talk about connected communities you go to the bit that is connected already as a community because that's where you can demonstrate the value and find the thing that you are talking about. That's not the same as saying I'm going to deliberately reach out to the most marginalised people and create something for all of us so that's what we should be trying to be about” (Alan Williams, United Response)

We need to look for innovative ways of prompting adoption by marginalised community members and technology users.

5 Who and what are your keys to connectivity ?

“You have to get down to the individual and what each individual wants to do and what's the right technology for them and it takes quite a while to figure it out sometimes. Maybe you try the wrong thing first, I think people sort of measure these things by what's your traffic on that site but for me it's not about that, it's about saying well you know this person and this is the difference that it's made to them and the more you start to get a few of those individuals who are suddenly connected then that's half the battle really” (Diane Simms, Kirklees Local Authority and Newsome Community Forum)

Strengthening communities through the use of technologies involves a mix of different kinds of connector – a key person, relevant content, relevant functionality and accessible technology. All the case study projects relied on key roles, both social and technological, and sometimes combinations of the two. Key individuals could be community activists, service delivery staff, or socially-aware technologists. Key people as connector is not a novel idea in community work practice. What is novel are the ways that technologies can be used to facilitate connection. Functionality can be a connector e.g. an SMS mailing lists enabling coordination of a group of people or a Facebook page for the ward set up by a community worker. Twitter has unexploited potential due to its partial adoption but can be seen to promote loose but useful connections.

Connectivity more often starts face to face; talking to a neighbour or the person alongside at a meeting, or introduction to a project through an encounter at a support organisation. Relationships are made out of many and personal connections. A stronger sense of belonging implies lots of little connections, both face to face and technologically mediated. Simple to use technologies can be used to amplify the impact of connections to enhance relationships. Technologies are needed that can work on inter-personal and inter-group level, easily and effectively.

Technology adoption is prompted by direct personal relevance: to keep in touch with family especially children, coordinate activities and shared childcare. Intergenerational links and a desire for involvement with children's education and keeping in touch with an elderly relative are all cited as the motivation for digital media becoming embedded in daily life. Understanding this adoption process enables key people to introduce useful enabling practices that go with the grain of these relationship-driven patterns of connectivity.

There was disappointingly little evidence of projects which enabled people to choose to connect to the people they want to be connected to i.e. belonging to a community in their own terms, rather than projects about connection to a local government service for example.

6 Is your solution sustainable ?

Bespoke software or modifications of existing platforms maybe be technically eye catching but are they long term sustainable? Does the support and maintenance infrastructure exist? There was a tension in the survey between 'everyday' and 'cutting edge' technologies. The timescales associated with the long-term tasks of building community engagement may not be compatible with 'upgrade culture' where new versions of software are constantly made available. A 'package of stuff', as one community worker suggests, is needed to engage with different people and this needs to include old and new technologies. *Introducing the potential of new technologies without replacing old ones was a common theme, with community and neighbourhood staff keen to use social media and texting to engage further in the community while not suggesting that these tools should replace what were referred to as 'more traditional methods' such as leafleting.* Solid relationships of trust are necessary to maintain engagement through technology that doesn't immediately deliver.

Sustainability is enhanced by taking an iterative approach to implementation. Introducing a technology or showing a new use for an existing technology leads to changes in people's everyday practice and that in turn changes the technology use or technology choices. As people gain confidence they find new uses for technologies.

Bespoke non-mainstream tools designed for a specific project will need a higher level of involvement from technical enthusiasts. This may create a demand for tech support that cannot always be filled. However, bespoke applications can be designed for the immediate context.

The successful integration of sustainable communications methods requires new kinds of people who are skilled in technical know how as well as community dynamics. *The skills developed around the functions of 'community management' in commercial practice could be usefully adapted to the aims of connecting communities.*

Future Research

Literature review of multidisciplinary research into community uses of everyday communication technologies.

Longer term tracking studies looking at behaviour change and communication strategies in communities.

How do implicit models of change determine what kinds of communication strategies are introduced?

What are the new key skills needed by community workers and activists to exploit digital social networking?

How can the commercial skills of social networking in media and marketing be adapted for community use?

External links

Digital Cultures Research Centre

www.dcrc.org.uk

Knowle West Media Association

<http://www.kwmc.org.uk/>

Kirklees Council

<http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/community/intouch/intouchmobile.shtml#what>

Thumb print city

<http://thumbprintcity.com/>

Homeless SMS

<http://www.homelessSMS.com/>

The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx

