Executive overview of project

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Introduction

The extent to which goal-oriented communities use and adapt digital technology to support their activities is largely undocumented, especially with the rapid adoption of social and mobile computing.

Although digital technology is being used to create and maintain communities of likeminded people, knowledge of the way this technology is used is critical to the group's longevity, success and capacity to effect change. Further, this issue is of increasing prominence for technology and service providers as community groups are given greater power through the rise of localism.

This research addressed the needs of community groups that work to achieve a common goal and thus it was hoped to bring maximum benefit to connected communities by understanding and disseminating what works well, identifying current barriers and assessing requirements for future systems and service providers.

2. State of the Art Review

An investigation of goal-oriented group characteristics found that a shared goal or interest provides the reason for being a part of a community[1]. Researchers[2] highlighted the importance of value for on-line communities, and for the socially constructed groups this value is personal motivation. The technological considerations arise from the services offered in order to support the return of the value proposition, for example either through discussion forums, chat or question and answer sessions.

It is also proposed[3] that participation is at the heart of online communities. Participation, it is argued, involves both the digital content of the community and the people with whom participation takes place. Participation is also influenced and regulated by factors such as policy, privacy, trust, member roles and motivation.

Additionally, levels of participation are based on the amount of trust that an individual has about the group and its members. The issue of trust[4] relates to Coleman's (1990) social theory which explains how trust is both at the 'macro' (the site designer) level and the 'micro' level (user groups).

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[1] Whittaker et al (1997)
[2] Mittilä and Mäntymäki (2002), Hunter and Stockdale (2009)
[3] Arrasvuori et al (2008)
[4] Lai and Turban (2008)

Researchers also posit that due to the ever-changing nature and development of technology, the study of software applications are felt to be 'poor foundations for the study of digital activism'. Further, the 'end devices' used to connect to a network are also constantly changing[5]: consequently, any recommendations that stem from studying these will also be limited.

So for community groups, motivation and participation to achieve shared goals are at the heart of their ethos, and any technology chosen to communicate their aims both internally and externally is but a tool that serves the need to ensure an effective 'grounding' or common understanding of their message. Grounding is essential to communication, as once a message has been formulated, assurance is required that it has been received and understood as intended, else there is little confidence or trust that the discourse is proceeding in an orderly way: limiting the choice of communication medium to that which is available may also limit what can be communicated.

3. Research aims

Given the increasing ubiquity of technology, the rise in different forms of groups and collaborative working and the importance placed on community endeavors, there is a need to ensure that groups can work as effectively as possible. With this in mind, the research firstly aimed to discover the experiences of groups using communication technologies, and secondly to provide a set of recommendations which could help them make more informed decisions.

4. Methods

A qualitative, mixed method approach was used between January and May 2011: an on-line survey, semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews and discovery workshops. Although it was hoped to use just an on-line survey, it proved difficult to contact groups through local community databases, as many of these sites were out of date. The results are therefore based on an analysis of 38 responses to the on-line survey from a wide variety of not-for-profit groups, interviews with 8 voluntary organisations and 4 decision (policy) makers.

5. Results

The results on the online survey showed that all groups agreed communication technologies were vital for information sharing, acquisition and communication, and nearly half felt that these had played an important role in group formation. Most were interested in experimenting with social media. Facebook was used to promote group profiles, recruit new members, communicate with other groups and coordinate activities. Some were also migrating to other -applications such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, and YouTube.

The most popular digital technologies used were email (95%), websites (80%), Facebook (55%), blogs (35%) and technologies to create paper-based artefacts (71%). Twitter (21%), YouTube (13%), Google groups (11%) and television (3%) were lightly used, as were Wordpress, Surveymonkey, sms-casting and radio. Reasons for technology selection included speed, convenience, cost, knowledge of group leaders,

[5] Joyce (2010)

trial and error, and simplicity. Major problems faced were access to sufficient expertise (80%), cost of IT support (70%) and steep learning curves (59%). Other issues included lack of time and confidence, changing staff roles and reliance on external IT professionals.

Eight community not-for profit groups were interviewed in more detail - a Civic Society, an organisation for the homeless, a local women's organisation, a local authority working with young adults with special needs, a charity supporting female sex workers, a news website focused on women, a community group membership organisation and an online residents' association. The groups' objectives ranged from direct influence on government policy to empowering and supporting local people within the community. Two groups were established prior to the advent of computer based technology; three groups came 'into being' through technology, and two operated at a virtual level.

Although all the groups used email, one group mentioned that this only reached 40% of its membership and had reverted to paper-based newsletters. All groups had a website, which was seen as essential for offering a 'window' to their group, and as a repository and monitoring feature. Most groups used Facebook. Twitter was adopted enthusiastically as it was seen as easy to use and could reach beyond local boundaries.

Typically, the groups used whatever technology that would get their message across; they 'drifted' into social networking, but were slow adopters due to unfamiliarity with the protocols. Technology selection was usually based on the knowledge and expertise of the leader. Only one group bought in outside expertise, and their experience was not positive. This meant that groups mostly operated without technical support, as it was too expensive. Other important barriers included the readiness (or not) of the audience (e.g. whether or not they were computer literate, able to follow instructions or had access to computers), the need to avoid overextending the activities of the group, and the lack of free or inexpensive information, technology and expertise.

Four decision makers were also interviewed: a local MP, a local authority communications leader and two managers leading a local authority project aiding voluntary sector organisations. They used a variety of technologies to consult with the public, including email, Facebook, Twitter, bespoke software and Second Life.

For most of the decision-makers, the use of technology was driven by the audience. This meant that the technologies routinely used tended to be the free, commonly known communication methods chosen by small teams. The importance of local expertise and positive encouragement of a Chief Executive that supported collaboration and public consultation were stressed. There was some concern by one decision-maker that the use of technologies was not based on evidence of increased participation, but on cost and resource demands. Also, they stressed that technology mediated communication should be another opportunity for dialogue, rather than the sole communication method.

However, the use of digital communication methods was felt to be positive in that it encouraged more participation from the public. All treated this information in the same way 'as comments given through traditional representations'.

Another positive consequence of the increased contact was the concomitant breadth of information available to the decision-makers and the potential to affect subsequent decision-making. For one decision-maker, a particular consultation event was hugely successful and crossed local boundaries and attracted participation from over 105 external cities.

Although age was felt to be a factor in relation to members of the public communicating digitally, social-economic issues, both concerning the lack of access to IT and also the lack of literacy, were mentioned, in that some found it difficult to formulate a comment even with access.

One decision-maker also raised an issue of accountability in that the public's access to technology had made his office 'much more accountable'. Other issues mentioned related to time, both in relation to servicing the digital technologies, the quicker response times required, and the need to develop protocols for inappropriate/offensive comments.

6. Conclusion

The research has shown that the technological landscape that community and voluntary groups operate within is patchy, beginning with the lack of an up-to-date central contact database. Data gathered from those who did agree to participate showed that there is a wide range in expertise in relation to the technologies used mainly due to the lack of freely available information, affordable software and consultation services. Typically, the choice of technology was based on a 'champion' within the group who tended to recommend technologies that he or she was familiar with. Further, the technology choices were, in most cases, based on free applications, such as Facebook, Twitter and Wordpress, but these choices were further prescribed by the technologies that audiences were capable of dealing with. This in turn affected the level of 'grounding' referred to in the literature in that the common understanding required to communicate effectively - externally, collaboratively and internally – needed constant revision.

The ad-hoc nature of technology choices was also reflected by the decision-makers interviewed: again these were determined by a 'champion' and prescribed by audience expertise. In addition, some audiences were found to display a lack of both IT-literacy and language literacy. There were also some indications that using technology for public consultations was often due to cost considerations, rather than based on a fully developed consultation framework.

However, although the groups can be characterised as 'slow adopters', they are nonetheless quickly and effectively using social media. Further, those who use information provided by groups (e.g. from public consultations) do value the information and the capability to reach out to more people, and see ICTs as a valuable 'extra' tool in the communication toolbox.

In summary, barriers to the use of technology are seen as relating to the capacity and capability of the group and its membership or wider constituency, and (where appropriate) the capability and capacity of the policy makers to process the information provided. To address the barriers we have found a set of recommendations and a fact sheet (see links below) have been produced to guide new communities in their selection of the most appropriate technology. These include the need to think strategically, use

technologies effectively, get good advice and technical support, even if it has to be paid for, set clear goals, use open source programmes, get training and adopt technologies at a steady pace.

7. Recommendations

Based on the research carried out for this study, it is recommended that a central, constantly updated, contact database be developed. In addition, it is also recommended that a central repository of information about appropriate technologies be made available to not-for-profit groups alongside the provision of a free software suite - for example, Wordpress. The provision of such a software suite would engender trust, simplify the need for instructions and ensure the effective grounding of communication both across and outside the voluntary and community group landscape.