Digital Technologies Connecting Communities Project

Data Gathering Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the AHRC-funded Digital Technologies, Connecting Communities (DTCC) project (January – June 2011) a data gathering exercise took place with the aim of establishing what technologies community groups were using and assessing how successful (or not) those technologies were in giving the groups a 'voice' to their outside audiences.

During January – April 2011, 120 community groups and nearly 30 umbrella organisations were invited to complete an online survey (see Appendix 1). However, the information provided by searching local community databases proved to be somewhat out of date, in that there was a high proportion of 'bounce-backs' from defunct email addresses and also numerous websites that were no longer in existence. Despite, this, a response rate of 30% was achieved.

Thirteen groups from those who completed a survey were contacted during April-May 2011 for follow-up information. Eight were interviewed in more depth on a face-to-face basis or by telephone, and five US groups took part in a virtual workshop using Second Life software. In addition, four 'decision-makers' were interviewed: for the purposes of this study, 'decision makers' are defined as those who receive digital information from the public which has the potential to influence decision-making at local authority level and above. Also two 'disseminators' were interviewed, one who disseminated potential benefits of social media to the public, and another which was involved in using technology to engage the community.

In terms of the 38 survey responses, the groups were evenly split between newer (less than 6 years in existence) and more established groups, but all were relatively small in membership numbers. Nearly half of the groups stated that technology had played an important role in their formation, either via email or through the use of social software as a way of organising and communicating between the founding members. All the groups reported having multiple goals to achieve, mostly being to share information, raise awareness and influence decision makers.

Unsurprisingly the most popular technologies used were the easiest and least costly, for example email, telephone, websites, Facebook and blogs, but there was still continuing usage of paper-based artifacts such as posters, flyers and newsletters. In terms of experimenting with new technologies, most groups were willing to 'try them out' as they recognised that some could aid the quicker spread of information, but selection of new technologies did depend on how simple the were to use and cost effective they were. Typically, most technologies were chosen through trial and error or through the recommendation of one or more 'resident experts'.

Therefore, without access to a relevant expert, groups faced barriers in that they did not have the knowledge or confidence to exploit the potential of digital technologies. In addition, lack of knowledge often resulted in not enough time given to an informed discussion of what technologies were available and how they could be used. For some groups a change of roles, i.e. when the resident expert/s left the group, meant their use of technology became somewhat static.

Turning to the eight groups who completed the survey and then were interviewed in more depth, three of the groups 'came into being' through technology – in other words they would not exist had it not been for technology. All the groups used email, but one group had problems with this in that only 40% of their members used email, and so they also had to produce information in paper-based form. All the groups had a website and valued the resultant cost-effectiveness, repository and monitoring opportunities and most used Facebook and Twitter. One group also used Skype extensively and another mobile texting. Other technologies used less often were Googledocs and Youtube; Wikepedia, Ning and Flickr.

Again, the use of technologies was determined by how easy they were to use and also again, the decision about which technologies to use was overwhelmingly made by the resident expert/s within the group and so choices tended to be 'ad-hoc' rather than a planned strategy. Due to cost, only one group 'bought-in'

technology expertise and some groups, even if they had access to funds, were unsure where to access relevant expertise.

Of the five US groups who took part in the virtual workshop, four used technology from inception, with one developing a physical presence after the virtual presence had been established. For these groups the technology chosen was inexpensive and simple to use. However, there was no 'common' technology, instead a range was employed, such as Second Life, Email, Listserves, Yahoo Groups, Skype, CrossLoop, Facebook, Twitter, Moodle, Video conferencing and streaming. In common with the groups outlined above, technology decisions and maintenance were made internally and only one group paid for external IT support. Again, lack of time, money and training in technology were problematic, as were low internet speeds for rural audiences.

Meanwhile, the four 'decision-makers' interviewed reported that their use of technology was primarily driven by their audience capability and therefore tended to be free and commonly known. However, there were indications that technology decisions were also made by one or two people in the organisations, with only one organisation employed a specialist e-comms editor whose sole task was to keep up and advise on emerging technologies. In contrast the community groups though, the use of the technologies were supported by in-house IT personnel.

The decision makers were mostly positive about the use of digital technologies as a method of communicating and increasing participation with the public and felt that it allowed the increase of opinions from the public and also garnered opinions that cross local boundaries. There was also an appreciation of the monitoring facilities afforded which allowed a consolidation of consultations across departments. However some caution was expressed about the quality of responses and also the Increased accountability of organisations through a web presence and the concomitant reputational risks. Finally digital technologies were seen as only part of a toolbox that included traditional methods to include those without IT and that time management was essential to organise consultations and responses to the public.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Returning to the original aim of the data gathering exercise: establishing what technologies community groups were using and assess how successful (or not) those technologies were in giving the groups a 'voice' to their outside audiences, it is clear that the choice of technologies is made on an ad-hoc basis, and so the range of technologies used can be very varied. Also, the most important theme that has emerged is that, typically, community groups do not have the financial wherewithal to employ outside technological help. Thus they are completely dependent upon group resident expert/s who have the knowledge, time and expertise to explore the potential of digital technologies. This has resulted in not only an ad-hoc adoption of free, easy to use digital technologies in most cases, but also an over-dependence on 'what is known' and perhaps a reluctance to move forward to new, more appropriate technologies.

Therefore, the 'voice' of these community groups, and their potential to effect change within the wider community, both locally and nationally, is limited by what type of access to expertise they have in the area of digital technology. Until this access is addressed, the ability of community groups to effect change will be on an ad-hoc basis at best. Bearing in mind this lack of access and also the difficulty in contacting groups due to outdated information held on community databases, is recommended that research is undertaken into the possibility of providing a 'one-stop shop', perhaps via a web-based resource, that allows community groups to register their details and also access help and support in this area.

Meanwhile, from this data gathering exercise it is possible to put together a list of recommendations in relation to the use of digital technologies both for community groups who are starting up and those who are established. These recommendations have been developed into a fact sheet (see appendix 4).

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the data gathering exercise with community groups was to establish what technologies they were using and assess how successful (or not) those technologies were in giving the groups a 'voice' to their outside audiences.

METHODOLOGY

During January – April 2011, 120 community groups and nearly 30 umbrella organisations were invited to complete an online survey, however, the information provided by searching local community databases proved to be out of date, in that there was a high proportion of 'bounce-backs' from defunct email addresses and also numerous websites that were now longer in existence. Despite, this, a response rate of 30% was achieved (see Appendix 1 for survey).

The survey call was firstly advertised on all of the project partner's local university websites and sent to other outlets by their respective marketing teams. Members of the project team also advertised the survey on Twitter. Invitations to complete the survey were sent out via email to selected national umbrella organisations and groups identified individually from web searches. As an incentive, those groups who completed the survey and also volunteered to take part in either a further in-depth telephone interview or workshop were offered the chance to win an IT makeover, where computing researchers will arrange to visit and discuss their existing IT and web setup and ways in which they could move into Web 2.0, mobile platforms and social networking. Prior to deployment, the Ethics Committee at Coventry University passed the survey. In total, 42 surveys were submitted, of which 38 were complete and accepted.

From the survey responses, eight community groups[1], four decision-makers[2], and two disseminators[3] were contacted and subsequently interviewed either face-to-face or by telephone during May and June of 2011. The type of interview process used can be characterised as 'conversational' and relates to the 'Interview Guide Approach'[4] in 'which the interviewer has an outline of topics or issues to be covered, but is free to vary the wording and order of the questions to some extent.' As such, although prior to the interviews a series of questions would be formulated, within the actual interview process (each of which typically took around 30 minutes), the interviewer would, where appropriate, be free to probe for more in-depth responses, which may or may not be not be directly related to the original questions. However, every attempt was made to ensure that responses to the original questions were obtained (see Appendix 2 for interview schedule).

In addition, five non-profit groups based in the United States took part in a virtual workshop using the Second Life software (see Appendix 3 for workshop schedule).

The data from the interviews/workshop was analysed to establish what technologies the groups were using, who made the decision to use the technologies, what barriers there were to using technology and any recommendations for more effective use of technology.

[1] Defined as not for profit community groups
[2] Defined as those involved in consultations who receive responses from the public in digital form
[3] Defined as those disseminating the benefits of social media to the public, or providing tools for engagement
[4] Patton, M. (1990) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

1. ONLINE SURVEY[5]

The Call

The call for the survey was sent to around 120 community groups in major UK cities and also to nearly 30 umbrella organizations. The response rate was 31%, in that 38 completed and usable surveys were returned (see Appendix 1 for the survey).

The role of digital technologies

When asked whether digital technologies played a role in the formation of the group, 15 groups said that it did, including a reliance on e-mail initially:

- The Internet played a central role in that we only have an online presence - the site itself, Twitter and Facebook. Both social media platforms have been crucial in helping us attract readers.
- The group initially existed exclusively online, starting with Flickr and progressing to other platforms such as Facebook. There has only been one face-to-face 'meeting' that was the launch of the online archive that the group collectively enabled.
- Vital for information sharing, acquisition, communication.
- Certainly, a huge email list played a part in getting it off the ground, as well the ability to create websites quickly and cheaply.
- Initially through our Facebook group we started to raise awareness of our existence, and now through our website we have been able to generate new members, set up invitations to events, generate collective action in relation to campaigns/lobbying/marches/networking events. We envisage that Facebook members will migrate to the new web site, whilst keeping the Facebook group open to attract new membership, but also as another form of disseminating information to members in addition to Twitter, Linkedin, Flikr, YouTube.

When asked whether their groups had connected with other like/similar groups, and if so how, it seems that many of them had contacted, viewed or interacted with other groups both physically;

- I've reached out to local ones but also last year ran a conference for all London neighbourhood sites in Ofcom's offices
- Yes, via national and regional networks and through partner conferences etc.
- By going along to various community fares and making links with these organisations.
- Yes other Children's Society Projects through our internal intranet
- Yes, many local groups with which it works, usually through meetings.
- *Yes - strategic partnership*

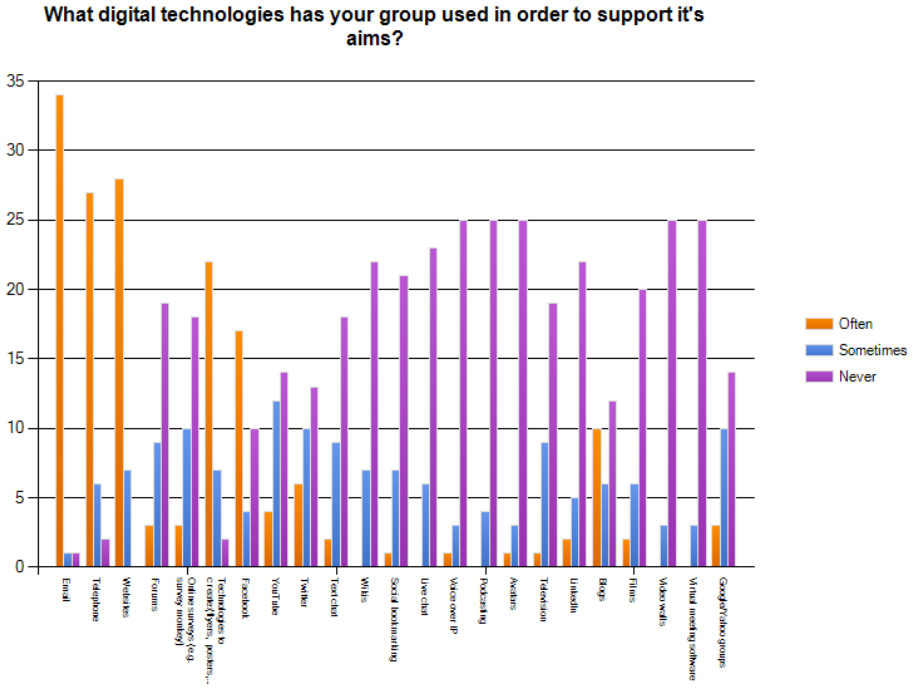
And through technologies;

- Yes, both locally within Coventry and nationally via face-to-face meetings, telephone, e-mail and web searches.
- A lot of the contact has been via Twitter, usually as a result of a story that we've run and the organisation has then contacted us as a result.
- Through Facebook, others have contacted us (via email and attending open meeting). Recently some from our group attended a joint Midlands wide group made up of similar anti-cuts campaigners. The Internet helped raise awareness such groups existed. Further meetings are now planned to help coordinate larger action.

Use of technologies

The most popular digital technologies groups had used in order to support their aims were Email (95%), websites (80%), Facebook (55%), Blogs (35%) and technologies to create paper-based artifacts (71%). Other technologies such as Twitter (21%), YouTube (13%), Google groups (11%) and television (3%) were lightly used. Other technologies used but not listed were sms-casting and radio.

[5] Online survey report produced by Dr Ahmad Reeves, June 2011



When asked who and why certain technologies were selected by the group, the responses showed that a variety of reasons were behind the selection:

Speed and cost

- Telephone and e-mails are always a great form of communication, using these was never a decision it just happened. A squadron Facebook group was set up to have better communication between the cadets and the squadron staff. It was also a fast, cheap way of getting a message out to everyone who uses or has access to Facebook.
- Given the cost implications of a print presence, I always planned that the site would be online only. I was advised by the web designer that I needed a Twitter and Facebook account (I was a virgin on both fronts at that stage) and just took it from there. Cost has always been an issue for us and, had the Internet not existed, then nor would our group.
- All decisions were taken by me based on the need at the time. For example, the blog was the best platform to quickly create a web presence. The Flickr group was the quickest way to involve photographers interested in the subject matter.
- By the resources available (funds, knowledge etc), the target audience (e.g. their access to technology).
- *Convenience and costs - email, website, Skype, Dropbox*
- As the founder and the coordinator I am given the task to decide which IT medium is most suited to what we are trying to achieve. In the 1st instance as I was already a regular user of Facebook with my own personal profile, it appeared be the most logical step in setting up a Facebook group for the hub. The other factor is which of the technologies are free and easy to use. We have only signed up to Linkedin and Twitter over the last 4 weeks, and both have been very useful in sharing information and generating new members, without any great difficulty. Albeit setting up the web site has taken near to 12 months and has been extremely costly to us as a small not for profit group, with no care funding.

Trial and error

- I decided. Stumblingly - trial and error.
- Generally we have had to learn as we go along. We take up suggestions, but we have no specialist support in-house and are largely self-taught.

Based on experience

- Mostly in response to the platform needed in responses to the changing technological climate (e.g. email, website etc) and in response to staff experience and skills (e.g. Facebook, Google groups etc)
- People voted with their feet, for example we dropped use of Ning as no-one liked it
- Purely the managing Directors choice due to his limited knowledge and expertise regarding technologies
- Some I think is what individuals happened to be using or be familiar with, not thought-out decisions. Website was agreed, looking at another groups, and taken on with initial support from another group that had used the same template
- It was decided by a few savvy committee members many of our membership are not very technical

Simplicity

- *The simplest form was thought to be the best.*
- *Email is so easy and available and a great way to target without overloading people. I guess it was a joint decision to use email to keep in touch although the steering group met monthly.*

Most used technology

In terms of how groups had used digital technologies to organize themselves internally, e-mail was the most popular first choice:

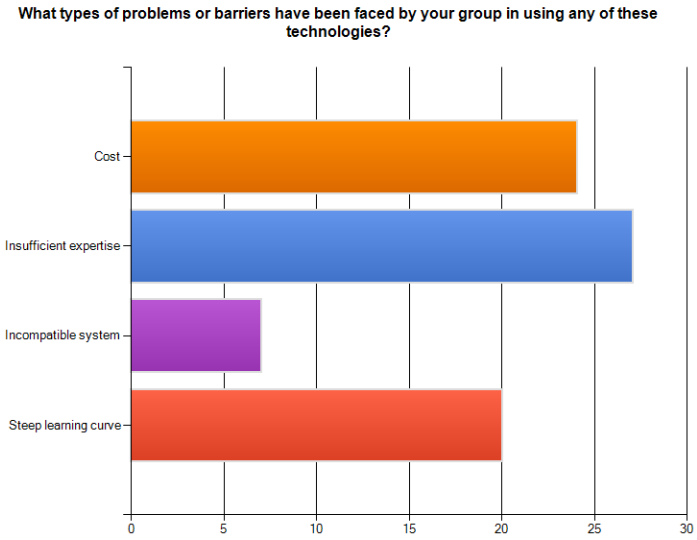
- Purely via email and telephone
- A members area on our website allows remote access to all volunteers of important documentation, Googlemail has ensured staff can access email/work/documents calendars from home.
- Mainly e-mail. We have had some problems with keeping integrity of lists Range of IT knowledge, experience, confidence and equipment in the group - think we are under using IT
- We use e-mail and we have a networked fundraising database.
- We use email and an intranet internally
- Google docs for monitoring systems. Email to ensure staff are contactable, online diary (my office)
- Mainly e-mail. We have had some problems with keeping integrity of lists Range of IT knowledge, experience, confidence and equipment in the group - think we are under using IT
- Only some committee members communicate by e-mail and we post our newsletter by land mail

However, Skype and Flickr and Google groups had also been used:

- We operate a virtual organisation in that most of us have never met. I carry out the induction process for new writers by Skype and e-mail. We all communicate by Skype, e-mail and Facebook. Occasionally we might text one another and on very rare occasions a few of us have met together, usually when going to events together.
- Skype for teleconferences blog postings to keep each other up-to-date with activities eternal emails
- Tagging on Flickr was one mechanism. However, most of the organisation has been done by one person, with this then facilitating the contributions of others.
- Google apps for our domain (email, calendars) enable efficient communications; six desktops and a server running Ubuntu 10.04 with a variety of software covering pretty much all we need (although we use a copy of WinXP running in a virtualbox to do payroll and accounts); mobile phones
- Google docs for monitoring systems.

Problems and changes

When asked regarding the types of problems groups had faced when using digital technologies, nearly all the groups mentioned cost (70%), insufficient expertise (80%) and the steep learning curve (59%) sometimes involved:



The other main reason given was lack of time and changing in staff roles, confidence and reliance on outside IT professionals:

- Running an online neighborhood network takes time. May well be issues of sustainability once I move on.
- Lack of time to really discuss IT - group wants to get on with practical projects. Roles change in the group, between people with different levels & types of knowledge and experience. Most of the coordinating groups use 'traditional' e-mail rather than newer forms. Some group projects use more IT than others. Also, some of broader membership do not use IT
- Staff confidence
- Being solely reliant upon professionals within the IT sector to produce a web site that is well developed and to standard - when this doesn't happen, you are left with a web site that is not adequate and doesn't meet the needs of the group.

When asked if any of the groups felt that the way they had used digital technologies had changed over time at all, many groups highlighted how they had begun to experiment with using social media;

- It has changed in responses to the changing technological climate e.g. with the introduction of social networking sites, websites, email etc
- The group uses Facebook more now than it did at the outset as we now have a private communications page, as well as our public Facebook page. We have always used the net (obviously), Skype and Twitter extensively.
- All staff more competent in a range of social media and willing to explore new apps and developments as they emerge
- Yes, as the project shifted towards completion the active role of the Flickr group diminished. YouTube was also used more early on and less so now. I think that most of the changes relate to the distinct phases of the project and what was required at each stage. Now the main mechanism being used is the Facebook group in order to provide updates and news.
- Yes by the introduction of new social media, which we are yet to exploit.
- More consistent use of Google mail now. Gradually more sharing and covering for each other using agreed formats
- Yes we are using more technologies. We have just started understanding how Social Media can help us and are starting to use Twitter
- It has changed a lot as group members respond effectively to email and telephone and can also pass on messages on Facebook.

- We tend to move with the times, so I suppose we change how we use digital technology by picking up new tools and skills, and dropping those which are no longer useful.
- Yes. Lots of ways - introducing FrontlineSMS meant we could use SMS from a keyboard rather than a phone ... our website moved from PBwiki to a Drupal-based CMS, and has been redesigned twice ... at one point email was an effective communication tool with young people, but Facebook messaging and SMS are much more effective now (many young people are snowed under with spam in their email accounts), etc, etc
- Digital technology has been able to keep the campaign ongoing - even when we are not meeting or have an event planned for the very near future. FB/Blogger/Twitter all enable the wider supporters to see we are still active. Emails have played a vital part in spreading vital news and getting that out to a wider audience via social media websites. We still could use it more than we do, but our limited experience means we make do with what we currently use.
- Yes, since we stated with social networking we have had great success. This makes people more open

Learning from others

We asked what their group had learned from the way other groups have used digital technologies to achieve their aims. The following quotes highlight how advice on both processes and specific technologies were taken from other groups:

- The learning process has come from trying to figure out how to use Facebook and Twitter better. I'm still not clear about how Facebook works, but I've certainly got to grips with Twitter and learnt its value. That's not to say that I undervalue Facebook - the problem is that I just don't understand it. I'm not sure that we've learnt that much from other groups but we do learn from one another. So as new people come on board that have particular skills, then obviously we try to tap into those as much as possible. On top of that, I have gone to several seminars on search engines and Google analytics.
- Wordpress is best blogging software to use for our aims. Bad use of survey monkey and how to design surveys that are the most user friendly to analyse.
- I think the main thing is that the process we used wasn't the best way to achieve the project aims. However, they were achieved despite this but if I were starting again I would adopt a very different approach, using digital technologies even more than I did first time round.
- Digital technologies are definitely the way forward for social enterprises and charities.
- Learned about this web template from another group - national transition movement working on IT - other groups using more blogs etc
- That there is room for advancement saving time and money
- We follow a number of other similar organisations and look at their websites, use of Social Media etc
- That most people are a little overwhelmed by technology, and feel comforted by brand names (Microsoft in particular)!! We have copied approaches from others to our Facebook page, emailing styles, blogs, etc from time-to-time - and other people's poor practice has sometimes clarified where we need clear policy (for example, receiving emails from others with our email addresses visible in the CC field led us to be very clear with all staff and volunteers to only use the BCC field for emailing.
- Of late we have recognised the way in which information can be shared quickly online, particularly in relation to campaigns that are promoting human rights abuses here in the UK and overseas. We were recently able to communicate and influence an MP that is proposing that forced marriage is legalised in the UK - the initial information was picked up via a twitter link to a local newspaper article citing the MP's proposal in the commons, we then subsequently contacted the MP via twitter, who in turn emailed us. This led to an exchange of emails between us in relation to the matter.

In the opposite direction, we also asked if they felt their group had influenced other groups with the way that they had used digital technologies. Most said that they hadn't but there were a few examples of influence:

- We have become the reference point for community websites in the UK and beyond. The Young Foundation uses it as a template for it's local 2.0 work and a reference source for many organisations and individuals.

- That's hard to say. I think it's more the concept of what we do rather than the technologies we've used that have influenced other groups.
- Inspired some to start blogging and using survey monkey
- Not to a great extent, although I have given some guidance to a couple of other similar groups who were starting their own initiatives.
- We have run social media surgeries for community groups on several occasions, so we have passed on skills, as well as the sense that it is all there for the using.

Outputs and meeting aims

We also asked how groups had selected and used technologies to disseminate their outputs in digital forms. The responses highlight a wide range of practices:

- Our outputs are twofold: 1. The website itself 2. Results reports from surveys and campaigns - final form usually produced as pdf.
- Not incredibly innovatively - through digitally produced newsletters that are circulated via Facebook, email and our website, through PowerPoint presentations etc.
- It's perhaps not so much which technologies we selected as the technologies selecting us! The web designer advised us that we had to be on Twitter and Facebook. That may seem obvious now but at the time I couldn't see the point. So there was a bottom line - we were advised we wouldn't be able to function without making use of these technologies and obviously that has proven to be the case. The same goes for Google Analytics. Initially I wasn't sure about it, but of course now I understand its value.
- 2 questions - selected in reference to what is commonly used and free and easy to use - e.g. Skype, Wordpress, Survey Monkey, Movie Maker, YouTube etc
- The decisions have largely been based on the need at each stage of the project, the need to keep costs low and the limitations of the knowledge of those with more executive functions within the project.
- Purely by email due to our lack of knowledge of other technologies
- Mainly e-mail lists. Distributing documents electronically. Distributing posters electronically. Linking up with other email networks
- Our group use flyers, emails, telephone and reports to disseminate information.
- Email flyers e-bulletins, news pages on the website reports housed on web and videos
- Mainly through our website.
- By commissioning design work and putting it on display at community events and on our website
- Generally ad hoc or in response to pieces of advice
- *Main method of communication, marketing, PR and socialising.*
- Emails and photos sent to local newspapers for publicity.
- We have picked flexible technologies that integrate well with one another - for example Wordpress websites are highly customisable, and can easily be integrated with Flickr, Twitter, YouTube and social bookmarking sites.
- A discussion took place about using online sites like Facebook/Blogger and we just got on with it. At each meeting a sheet was handed around to collect email addresses/mobile numbers, a database was quickly formed so contacts could be included in the updates and alerts.

Our groups also commented on how central the contribution of digital technologies had been to achieving their aims;

- It's the very foundation.
- It undoubtedly aids communication (internally and externally), which is central to achieving any aim
- It's no exaggeration to say that we would not exist without digital technology. Its concept would have been out of the question without the net and social marketing tools. We could never have afforded a print option and without the net, we could not have disseminated our message and become as well known as we are today. We have a long way to go, but without digital technology we would not be here at all.
- Absolutely central to aims and process involved in challenging digital exclusion

- It could not have happened without them. The crucial phase of the project from announcing the objective to launching the archive was exactly one year. This would not have been possible without the use of digital technology to gather and redeploy the content in such a short space of time.
- Enabled us to reach more people
- In particular, maintaining a mailing list of approx 100 people without incurring printing and postage costs
- Really helped us to concentrate information - more portable more powerful. Helped people with learning difficulties put their points of view across in safe environment (video) and we can show people their views and words
- It helps us to fundraise, e.g. by letting people see what we do via a film on our website.
- Being able to get information out to organisations quickly and easily has made a big difference to our aims of providing timely and relevant information and seeking to influence key decision makers
- Essential tactic for fundraising, grant-writing and awareness
- It's essential to it - we would be extremely limited in our abilities to learn, organise, communicate, fundraise, etc. if all we had was pen and paper
- We have a wider base and almost one year on, we are still campaigning. The dt has helped keep the group going, especially when we ourselves have not been as active due to holidays etc. We have now linked up with larger groups and organisations, which we can interact with and we are able to publicise events. Rather than feel isolated and small, dt has helped show we are part of a wider network of people, all with the same goal of stopping public sector cuts.
- It has given us a virtual platform to share information in relation our activities, generate new members, link in with other similar groups, effectively exchange information, undertake research.
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Final thoughts

The final two questions of our survey firstly asked each group to the top three pieces of advice they would give to new groups planning to use digital technologies. These have been summarized as follows:

1. Get as much knowledge as possible about available technology. Discuss and decide:
- Be clear why you're using it and what you want it to achieve
- Be informed - find out what's out there (it's changing all the time)
- Get expert advice, even if you have to pay for it
- Don't pay for it until you have discussed with experienced colleagues as lots of free stuff out there
- Be open and transparent about your aims and objectives for the initiative.
- Get familiar with the wealth of digital technology available on the market
- Discuss it deliberately early on
- Think about what it is for
- What works for others may not work for you, think through what you need to achieve
- See how other, similar organisations use digital technologies
- Use the expertise your members already have, perhaps particularly young people (Facebook, blogs, twittering)

2. Organise staff, training and links with outside sources of help
- Be skilled - access training to enable use of new technologies
- Make links with digital technology experts and activists to support our sector in achieving its social aims and objectives
- Be open about each others expertise and lack of
- Try to diversify roles!
- Encourage volunteers to take up IT training
- Be open to learning, often by trial and error, in order to achieve your outcomes.
- Develop methods that can be shared and passed on between key members, with instructions!
- Give staff support to use the technology
- Find a trusted source to help you maintain your systems
- Get specialist help where you can

3. Make sure you invest sufficient time, funding and efficiency.
- It takes time to use effectively. Don't start if you/your group can't afford the time
- Be efficient - technology is intended to facilitate not complicate!
- Ensure your web developer sets it up so that you can make changes to your site yourself.
- If you invest a bit of time front end it will reap great rewards and time and cost saving later
- Set up a site that allows will grow with you and reflect your changing needs
- Make it as easy as possible for people to get involved and keep in touch with progress.
- Make sure your audience can access it
- You only get out what you put in!
- Invest money into digital technologies to support the reach of your organisation
- Look for opportunities like this project
- Try to fund it adequately
- Set up a communications group
- Don't rush into anything - but don't get left behind

And finally, given their experiences, we asked what are the three things new groups planning to use digital technologies should avoid. These have been summarised as follows.

1. Don’t spend too much money on unnecessary technology.
- Don't be blinded by the glitter; it's just a tool.
- Paying for anything unless essential
- Spending money on the first piece of technology they see
- Spending lots of money on fancy equipment which wont be used
- Spending lots of money on fancy equipment which wont be used
- Spending big sums of money – its not necessary

2. Rushing into things without proper support or relying on one person only.
- Taking on too much at once
- Over complication, keep it simple.
- Relying on one IT expert
- Being unrealistic
- Investing in technology without the support in place to maintain it
- Relying on a single Webmaster
- Jumping in head first without consulting with experts or activists in digital technology
- Not taking enough time to plan and devise a strategy for implementation.
- Not having passwords etc or expertise to carry on with digital work if a key person leaves
- *Data loss, disclosure and hacking vulnerability*

3. Not using the right selection of technologies or looking unprofessional.
- Too many different technologies as its hard to deliver a clear message to all
- Not updating the site regularly
- Using too many platforms at once
- Using the wrong kind of technology - inaccessible for target audience
- Always being aware of the target audience
- Setting up a site that looks unprofessional
- Just replicating what you do offline
- Failing to interact with your audience
- Creating something that needs high levels of maintenance from a small number of people.
- Forgetting access for disabled people and non IT users
- Not updating things: these tools help to show the public face of the group. If a blog, Twitter account or YouTube channel is left un-updated, people will assume that your group isn't doing anything.

As a final point, we asked each group if they had any further comments about how their groups has used digital technologies to meet their aims and goals.

- In hindsight I wish that we had been able to find a way to execute the project entirely online. This would have been possible and I am currently exploring a new approach that could achieve even greater scale much more rapidly and this first process has been a good learning experience through which to frame things in the future.
- We are currently exploring a business model that will assist with the merging of digital technology and the third sector
- Noting that the group's use is probably broadly in line with the group's demographic, so also probably missing potential members who either use lots more interactive IT, and who don't use it at all
- Our group has been able to influence the City Council (in my humble opinion) via direct lobbying but also by videos uploaded to the sites that have been viewed by councillors. I know that councillors have watched/visited our websites and this has had an effect on some decisions made.

2. COMMUNITY GROUPS (INTERVIEWED)

The aim of the interviews with community groups was to establish what technologies they were using and assess how successful (or not) those technologies were in giving the groups a 'voice' to their outside audiences.

Eight of the groups who completed a survey were contacted during April-May 2011 and interviewed in more depth on a face-to-face basis where possible, and by telephone if not.

All groups were not-for-profits, and included a Civic Society, an umbrella organisation for homelessness, a local women's organisation, a local authority organisation working with young adults with special needs, a charity supporting female sex workers, a news website focused on women, a membership organisation for community groups and an online residents' association. The objectives of the groups ranged from having a direct influence on government policy to empowering and supporting local people within the community.

What technologies?

Two of the groups were set up over 30 years ago and so - apart from the telephone - there were no technologies available to them:

> It was 1984, so [no technologies] probably.

In addition one of the groups, set up in the 1990s, also did not use technology at the beginning:

> It was set up by traditional ways, word of mouth, meetings face-to-face contact and telephone contact…so by very traditional means.

Whereas the rest of the groups did use technology when they began, with three 'coming into being' through technology, typically beginning with a Facebook page and/or website:

> Facebook…this is the way we have come into being and developed.

> I always wanted it to be online because I knew I couldn't afford anything else. I mean that's part of the joy of it, you can start something up…were it in a print format the costs would have been absolutely phenomenal

> Well when we set it up, I'm not a techie, but I learnt a little bit about 2.0, and said what about this 2.0 thing, couldn't it be applied to this scenario?

Further, two of the groups operated predominately at a virtual level and have little face-to-face contact with members or with their audiences: rather they communicate using email, Skype, text, Twitter and Facebook.

> After a year the purpose got confused so that the people running the site would go to the meetings and get told what they were doing wrong, but the people telling them didn't want to get involved in running the site. So now the three main people who run the site communicate virtually.

However for one group founder, operating virtually did bring its own problems:

> The bigger problem is not physically meeting with the [members], it would put faces to names, and feeling you really are out there and it can be a bit lonely. And I work from home and rely on technology, and would be in great difficulty if it let me down.

Commonly used technologies

The most regularly used technology by the groups was email, which was used to communicate between group members, Trustee boards and the outside world:

> We produce reports for the funders: the format depends from funder to funder, sometimes it's a Word document that is printed and sent, other times we'll email it [and] for staff and volunteer recruitment we email [local voluntary action group] with updated vacancies

However, for one group emails only reached 40% of their membership and they also experienced a great deal of resistance to the idea of an electronic newsletter:

> I think that is because people who haven't got email, don't want to be bothered. They are quite vociferous. But there is also some resistance. People do like paper. I mean our newsletter is not…don't get the idea that it is some sort of twenty page…it is a pamphlet really.

Because of this, and the problem with spam filters, this particular group had returned to sending out the newsletter in paper form:

> So many people's computer systems were blocking our email because they went out in batches or they had attachments added to them, so in many areas people weren't getting the information. So we are going back to the old method as a better guarantee that people are going to get the information.

All of the groups had a website and these were increasingly seen as essential, not just because they represented a visible presence in terms of audiences, but also because of the repository and monitoring facilities:

> I don't think in this day and age, we can be without a website.

> We have a website that's becoming increasingly important to us and increasingly used as we monitor hits and see people are using it more and more.

> We are using it as the focus of our information sharing I guess. We used email a lot in the past and we would email information out to people, but what we do increasingly now is we email people but direct them to the website so the information stays on the website and people can access it either when we alert them to it or later on if they want to.

For one group, whose client base was young adults with special needs, a website was seen as a crucial tool in order to communicate effectively with those with vision or hearing problems:

> An easy-to-use website. It's got a sound reader on…it's accessible so we can change the font, change the background, have the screen-reader on it, that kind of thing.

Some groups mentioned that they used Twitter, although some were slow adopters because they were unfamiliar with the protocols. Another group tweeted 'by default' by employing the automatic tweeting facility linked to Wordpress:

> I started with Twitter, several months ago…I wasn't sure what the protocol was around tweeting. I hadn't even realised until recently that you can only use 140 characters.

> We're on Twitter now and are using that quite a lot and I think we came to understand the value of Twitter when we were doing some campaigning earlier on in the year, really the immediacy of it.

Another oft-mentioned communication technology was Facebook: again most groups had a page:

> I work with young people, so we use Facebook to contact people and set up events and things like that

> If I make contact via Facebook or email with twenty community groups, I know then that they are going to share that information with women who access their services

One group also used a particular group site called Ning and also Googledocs which allowed it to share information internally. Some groups also used text messaging to connect with each other and with their client groups:

> Sometimes we'll text the client group to let them know our availability or if there are changes [as] the majority of our women don't have access to the internet.

Finally, two of the groups used filmmaking to get their message across, with one group producing and uploading films to YouTube and another in process of doing so. Also, one group used Wikipedia, and Flikr 'to build up a sense of place and a sense of belonging.'

Rationale for use of technologies

There was a general sense that use of technology was unrestricted in that most groups used whatever technology they could that would get the message across:

> Any method where people get it - whether it is throwing an Apple [computer] at someone or if it's showing them a film, if it gets the point across in a way that they'll understand or, more importantly, they'll remember, then we'll use it.

Most groups recognised that having a website was an essential tool in their communication strategies as this was usually the first place people looked for information. In addition, being able to post information on a website was attractive in terms of cost and monitoring opportunities:

> 70 per cent of people that are looking for something are looking on the internet now, so you've got to have a presence.

> There was no other option for us rather than the technological route – in terms of cost then no, so it was technology or nothing.

Twitter was adopted enthusiastically by most, as it was seen as an 'easy' technology in terms of use and time allocation and also its ability to reach beyond local boundaries:

> Twitter is dead simple, short and sweet, you know. We could use more short and sweet technologies.

> I think that Twitter works for us because we have a bunch of people who are devoted to putting something on it and getting replies.

> If you follow someone, they follow you…nationally people get to hear what were doing

For one particular group, Twitter was adopted quite slowly at first, but then usage grew after useful information was found:

> I've found Twitter to be really useful… I came across Platform 51, the old YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association)…because I picked up their campaign on Twitter, they have contacted me and I'm going to be promoting their campaign via our website.

> We are developing links and connections literally through email, Facebook and through Twitter. You know, if those connections had not been made, I doubt we would be at the stage that we are at now.

As well as email, websites and Twitter, most groups recognised that Facebook was useful as a way of having a web presence - 'everybody kind of knows how to use Facebook', especially for young people:

> We do [Facebook] live chat with the young people or we send them messages about when we are meeting tomorrow, that kind of thing

However for one group contacting their client group was quite difficult because the majority did not have access to computers:

> It's been hard. The majority of the young people that we work with may not have access to computers at home or might not be able to access them independently anyway. So, um, we've given them all training on using Ning and set everyone up with an account.

Technology decisions

Two of the group's technology decisions were made on a 'suck it and see' basis by the group's founder with some help from an external expert:

> Sadly its all mine, all my decision…at the beginning I set us up on a Type-pad blog as that was the cheapest thing to do. Then we went onto a Wordpress site, driven by the website designer.
>
> Our chief executive is really into social media. He's brought in new ways of contacting people and things like that. He's always on the look out for new things and trying new things out.
>
> Operationally I (as the chief exec) take those decisions

However, overwhelmingly the decision about which technologies were used by the groups was made by 'who has expertise in any given moment': only one group 'bought in' technical support, and even this group's choices of technology were made predominately by the staff.

> I've got some IT knowledge, so people ask me to get involved. We've got a guy…he's really good at the life stories. So, like, he would be somebody you would say, could you sort this out or…

This reliance on in-house 'experts' proved negative in one case - if a senior staff member was against a certain technology, then it would not get used, although this was primarily due to the time cost involved:

> There is a limit to what you can be fiddling around with…in my view, chat and Facebook are time wasters unless that is what you want to do.

The majority of groups had no access to technical support and, due to cost, this was 'way down the list' of priorities. Even when money was found for technical support, the experience was not always a positive one:

> It is quite an ad-hoc thing in response to needs; we have no finance and limited training for IT, but it's way down the list after confidentiality, health and safety and other issues that have higher priority for us.
>
> It's all down to me. I did have someone who set up the website for me, but it was very very difficult to get the individual to do the work. We'd handed over a significant amount of money to get the website developed using Wordpress. Unfortunately, they really strung us along… Basically, what I've had to do now is pick up the pieces and start working on the website myself, even though I've got no IT experience whatsoever. It's been really difficult.

Barriers to the use of technology

Audience not ready

One of the barriers identified was that the audience may not be ready to embrace certain technologies, for example one group's membership were resistant to using email. Another group talked about how useful Twitter was, but their client group was not accessing it:

> Twitter for example - it was causing us more time and more energy and not something that our women were accessing, so it becomes pointless its not achieving anything and its taking us longer to update it and faff around with, so the overhead is greater than the benefit.

For another group, there was a problem with the clients not being able to follow instructions – maybe because they didn't feel comfortable with technology in the case of those resistant to emails as outlined above, or because clients had special needs. However in the case of the latter a group became more creative in thinking about communication channels:

> The greatest barrier is working with someone who can't follow instructions and who can't read, but that can also make you be more creative about how you use the technology.

> I think a lot of times you can be surprised at what people can do and that makes you have better aspirations for that person.

Overextending

Another issue for the groups was time: using too many technologies took a lot of time to service and this affected how well they were being used. Therefore, some groups would rather focus on one or two technologies and use them efficiently, rather than spreading themselves too thin:

> Overextending is an issue, Facebook being a case in point. I'm not against it, but I do think we need to do things well.

Technical support

One of the more obvious barriers for not-for-profits was money for technical support: only one group could afford to buy-in technical support, and another group talked about how difficult the online service was becoming due to the need for a new server. There was also a worry that the 'wrong' technology would be purchased:

> as we have grown, we need a dedicated server now…sadly that's expensive, so we need money to fund that…so at the moment it's difficult as people complain it's slow, and crashes etc.

> I've seen other organisations, especially when you need to make an investment in terms of buying systems or software, rushing in

Because of the lack of technical support, most groups appropriated technologies on an 'make do and mend' basis, which was time-consuming, and two groups talked about the lack of information about where to go to for free or low-cost help:

> I think it would have been really helpful if I had had some technological support from someone and some advice and guidance. That definitely would have freed me up and helped me through this process which has been really tough.

> I'm not sure where volunteer sector goes to find out what's there, so there's a lack of information of what technology can or can't do for you, in terms of costs and funding.

Even when one group managed to get some free help from some students, after the students had left, they were unsure how to maintain the system that had been implemented:

> A good example is where we had students coming in and setup a network so we could share files between machines, we do not have the skills if something goes wrong, we don't know what were doing, so we've been left out on a limb.

Recommendations

Getting help early

When talking about recommendations for other groups, two of the groups felt that getting help early on in the process was important:

> Seeking external help early enough to see what you could do with it.

Keeping informed

Another group mentioned keeping on top of the technologies available and using information from other sources:

> We are constantly trying see what else we can use and make our presence known in different ways

> Being open and willing to receive feedback and seeing what others have done.

Time-management

But the main message that came across related to time-management, both in terms of not choosing too many technologies and also being aware that time and resources would need to be allocated to using the chosen technologies efficiently and effectively:

> First of all choosing a good platform, learning enough how to use it, using it rather than making the technology the be all and end all.

> The idea about resources, especially time - not being overwhelmed by too many things changing at once. Technology can be really frustrating if it doesn't work or blips, so keep to one thing.

> The online is a toll to do stuff in the real word. And time is critical, people start these up and then they give them up because they didn't realise how much time they required.

3. COMMUNITY GROUPS (WORKSHOP)

Five non-profit groups based in the United States took part in a virtual workshop using the Second Life software. These included a group supporting a wide range of people with disabilities via a virtual online environment; a group which provides training and technical assistance on the inclusion of people with disabilities to participate in all streams of national service; a group that provides support and information to transgender veterans; a group representing native American veterans and a group using virtual worlds and related technologies to facilitate communication within and between Native American communities.

What technologies?

Four of the groups used technology from their inception, with one coming into being through Second Life and then going onto developing an 'off-line' presence. This is in contrast to another group which began face-to-face but then developed an online presence.

> Our community actually formed first as a support group in Second Life. As we grew, we realized we needed a real world infrastructure to support our work in the virtual world…We have been in existence almost four years in Second Life, and 3 as a corporation.
>
> When our project first started, particularly before the "Web 2.0" culture of social media and online presence, training was conducted primarily out-world and face-to-face.

Commonly used technologies

As well as some groups using Second Life, all the groups had a website and used a variety of other technologies such as email, listserves, Yahoo Groups, Skype, CrossLoop, Facebook, Twitter, Moodle and video conferencing and streaming.

For one group the most used technology was 'in-world communication', a function provided by Second Life involving the use of group notices, group chat, exchange of notecards and a voice/text presentations. For the other groups, email listserves were used and email with Yahoo groups, as these were felt to be well–established and easily recognisable by their audiences.

> We have email listservs that we use weekly to introduce regular topics on disability inclusion. It regularly generates strong discussion from the field. This medium is time-tested and well accepted by users Email is a medium which is well-established. It's accessible and there are few barriers in place
>
> An argument we've heard from the field is why should we use a new technology when the existing means of communication (email, phone) works just fine?

Technology decisions

The decision on which technology to use was generally made on a consensus basis internally, using criteria such as accessibility for the audience and cost. However, for one group the decision was based on what technology each volunteer possessed:

> We use Skype and CrossLoop for training because they are free and reliable.
>
> Accessibility is our number one priority We would test it against accessibility standards html web standards, readability by screen readers, etc
>
> We had to use a communication technology [website] that was reliable, inexpensive, and simple.
>
> The technology used was based on each members ability to provide their own technology based equipment, i.e. computer, laptop, facsimile machine, phone, printer, etc

Technical support
The choice and driver behind the IT choices was generally one or more people within the groups with the requisite skills. For example, one group's vice president was an executive at a computer firm; others employed the skills of community members. Only one group paid for external IT support:

> We allocate funds of our grant toward marketing and communications in our larger institute. This includes production of video, online courses, and web page content internal to our team,

> One member of the board took care of the website. We use the website sort of as a billboard.

Barriers to the use of technology

Accessibility
For these groups, accessibility was the main barrier, both in terms of audiences being able to use the technologies in cases of disability, but also in terms of geographical location.

> There is no way to use sign effectively in SL.

> Some members do not have access to Internet due to location (such as living rurally or on a reservation)

Internet speed
Related to the geographical problems was internet speed, which could preclude the use of content-heavy software.

> Is the person potentially in a rural or otherwise distance setting that makes high-speed Internet applications more difficult?

Audience not ready
In addition, there was the perception that some of the groups' audiences were not 'ready' for some technologies, and so the use of communication technologies was used in conjunction with more traditional communication:

> Most of our board is Vietnam Veterans so we are sort of between the phone/snail mail generation and the Facebook/Twitter groups

Lack of time and money
Lack of time and finances were also a problem as a lack of confidence in technology:

> A lack of faith in modern technology sometimes due to cultural background.

Lack of knowledge and training
Also the groups themselves were sometimes not knowledgeable enough about social media, and so felt that training 'becomes a very real issue'.

> A lack of understanding of the mechanics of social media is our biggest barrier: a benefit we see to eventually using Social Media is informing external audiences about our work and the potential benefits to our mutual audiences of participation in virtual worlds.

Recommendations

Training
As mentioned above, training and access to knowledge was felt to be a real issue in adopting new communication technologies, in particular social media:

> The biggest help would be some specific training on the mechanics of using Facebook, Twitter, and other social media
> Funding, education, and access to a dedicated technology base.

Understanding audience

Another issue mentioned related to finding out what the audiences were using in that 'it is important to understand the audiences, and know what technologies they use'.

Planning

Planning was felt to be important, in terms of planning the message and then selecting the appropriate tools. Also important is thinking about how the technologies fit together:

> Plan the message as well as the tools. Some messages fit better with particular tools.

> Have a clear mission, maintain a sense of wonder and pace yourself

Traditional communication

It was also felt important that the use of communication technologies were seen as part of a 'tool-box' of methods to communication with audiences:

> Accept that not all users will buy-in

> Simultaneous availability of other, accepted technologies will keep communication in place

4. DECISION MAKERS

Four decision makers agreed to be interviews and include a local MP, the communications leader of a local authority, two managers leading a local authority project to provide one electronic data source for all public and voluntary sector organisations for past, future and present consultations and a researcher who interviewed several local authority planning managers.

Technology used to consult

The four decision-makers used a variety of technology in order 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:

> You use technology because your [audience] use it and so you keep pace with what they are doing and it allows you to gather a much broader range of information from the community.

This meant that the technologies routinely used tended to be the free, commonly known communication methods chosen by small teams who 'decide what social media tools they want to use':

> I think, we certainly…we use Facebook for consultations. Twitter, Tweets and we get about 2,500 followers on Twitter. And we use a software called […], which means when you put something up, it goes on Facebook and Twitter at the same time.
>
> And [Second life] enabled the library to demonstrate [a new design] to its staff
>
> We've got a website separate to the city council […] and the last two and a half to three years, we've had a blog sitting on the site.
>
> You can feed back in three ways: a comment to the editor of the consultation, which goes directly to their inbox; or you can do a link to something like SurveyMonkey or social media like Facebook

For one decision-maker, the choices of technology happened because an knowledgeable persons was employed 'by accident':

> I have a fantastic e-comms editor who, she would call herself a geek, but she is much more than that. She understands about e-comms and has been teaching us all about how to do it. I think that having someone who 'gets it' and who supports it is a brilliant thing.

However, there was some bespoke software being used in relation to formal consultations:

> We saw [the software] on [name] County Council site and we bought the coding from them.
>
> A policy document using software called [name] is put up on the website and it can been broken down into the sections, people can search relevant sections if they want to leave comments.

For one decision-maker the choice of technology used to consult with the public was very much driven by the positive encouragement of the Chief Executive, which opened the door to working collaboratively on a public consultation with a commercial technology company:

> Our chief executive is into using new media to find ways of communicating with people. So when [name] approached us, we knew this might be an opportunity. We kept it simple really, we started with conversations, and from there got it more focused about the areas we went into.

There was some concerned expressed by one decision-maker that the use of technologies in his experience was not based on evidence of increased participation, but rather because it tended to be lower cost and less resource-demanding:

> What was interesting in these interviews was that there wasn't the analysis of the quantity and quality to back that up, because the reasons for doing this were different. I think it does save money. If you can get 50 comments through Limehouse and 50 comments through a 300k leaflet distribution, then you are going to use the technology**.**

IT Support

The IT support that the decision-makers had access to was typically provided by an in-house IT department.

> We have a variety. We are supported [in-house]…We have a hosting and design company for website…And then I give some technical support to the team as well.

> We have an IT department which has just been brought in-house, actually. We had been contracting it and we've just brought it back in house to save money.

> I have a web team of three people, which is the e-comms editor and two people working with her. They are a bit geeky, techie, but actually they are comms people and that's really important.

The only exception to this was the decision-maker who was not part of a local authority: in this case the equipment was chosen by head office every five years, but in between this any purchases were made on an individual level:

> I think it is once every 5 years…they pay for some of the [new] equipment, but in between we have to pay for it out of the budget we get. No [advice] you do that yourselves – there are rules about what you can spend it on. Under the new system you really have got to clear it before you do it.

Effectiveness of digital consultation methods

The use of digital communication methods was felt to be a positive move in that it encouraged more participation from the public and all of the decision-makers treated the information in the same way 'as comments that would be given through traditional representations':

> It obviously has [increased the contact from the public], through the technology we are probably getting more enquiries and more case-work than we had before we had that – it is a logical thing.

> Well, that depends on how you measure success, whether you are talking about hits on a website or, so if you are talking about hits, we actually got our fund evaluations through just a couple of months ago. It went to the board and project board, which is continuing after […] It was a very good and optimistic report on how successful [the website consultations] had been

For one decision-maker, a particular consultation event was hugely successful and crossed local boundaries:

> People spent about two-and-a-half hours logged in. Twenty-eight per cent were over 50. And we had 74,000 page views from nearly 1,000 total log-ins. While they mostly came from [local city] we had people across 105 cities

Another positive consequence of the increased contact was the increased breadth of information that was available to the decision-makers and this had the potential to affect subsequent decision- making:

> Because of the diversity of subjects you are able to build a picture of what is actually going on in communities, it is like little snapshots and you realise though that, that the community has got a broader interest in things than you actually thought.

> The information [that the consultation department] got back from the respondents actually raised issues about the draft strategy document that they'd never even considered before. So they went back and rewrote the strategy as a result of that.

Also, one decision maker mentioned that one consultation produced a 'conversation' rather that a static feedback process:

> What is interesting and great about [this city] is that you can start a discussion and you see people chipping in and having a view, so it was quite a lively conversation and it was a two-way thing. It was quite exciting.

In addition, the use of digital technology was seen to be a positive move for the decision-makers themselves, in that it allowed both monitoring and consolidation across the organisation of consultations:

> Well, before [the consultation software], we didn't have a handle on how many consultations we did each year. So, the information wasn't coordinated centrally... Each team or each directorate would just do a consultation […]. Whereas we now know, during the last two, well, three and a half years been producing a summary overview of all the consultations: what we've been told, what we've done as a result, and what we intend to do that we haven't done yet.

In one case this monitoring lead to a significant saving of time and money, which would not have been possible before the introduction of digital technology:

> [A housing consultant] identified that two consultations were quite similar. So she contacted the two officers who were organising the consultations, saying, 'Have you spoken to so and so? Do they know what you are doing?' They joined up resources and re-thought how they would do it. They saved something like £24,000 alone in resources for facilitation, hiring out rooms, saving on post, the consultation rooms.

One decision-maker also raised an issue of accountability in that the public's access to technology had made his office much more accountable due to the increased knowledge that was available and also the facility for monitoring:

> Someone wrote to me about a question I had asked in Parliament and they had actually got a copy of the question - so it shows that people through technology - whether it be through television, the parliamentary channel or though IT or whatever - they are a bit closer than you think.

Traditional consultation methods

Although each decision-maker felt that, overall, digital consultations were a positive move both for engagement with the public and also for internal monitoring purposes, each one also stressed that digital consultation was another 'tool in the box' in terms of engaging with the public, and should only be used in conjunction with more traditional methods.

> There can't be one contact route. There's got to be a variety in the way that people choose it. I

> I think there is a big debate in the public sector and with the government at the moment about, 'Is social media the answer?' The answer is that it is another tool that gets an audience that you haven't had before. But some people would always rather do face-to-face or different forms of that.

Typically, an older age group, which did not engage with technology, used more traditional methods:

> We have a city centre shop, and we asked people who came in to express their views. And, they were mostly older people. So it was the very traditional face to face, with officers talking about the plans for older people [whereas] 50 per cent of our Facebook users are between 13 and 25, which is a young group that would be hard to get to otherwise.

> But I think before 50 [technology is more] in use than over 50s – you will get a proportion obviously and then you get beyond the age about 65 it is even less. They like to ring you up and talk to you, or write to you.

Part of the preference for face to face was the need for confidentiality and not wanting to go on 'record':

> Sometimes they feel they have got to see you at times - it is confidential but they would rather see you and you use your discretion as to what you use the information for, so a certain amount of discretion ought to be used as well

Although age was felt to be a factor in whether or not a member of the public would communicate digitally, there was also a comment relating to the lack of access to IT and social-economic issues:

> There is a recognition that that [the digital divide] isn't the issue, the issue is the socio-economic issues that are deeper than whether people have access that affect participation and those issues were recognized by the people who I interviewed and the internet was not see as an answer to those issues.

These socio-economic issues also involved a lack of general literacy, rather than just IT literacy:

> So one [planner] said while actually going out in the communities to talk to people about participation in projects he was quite shocked at people – he was encountering people who couldn't write down a comment, not couldn't write down an email but just couldn't write down a comment, and didn't know how to formulate a comment

Time

Time was an issue that was mentioned, both in relation to servicing the use of digital technologies and also the response times to members of the public:

> There's time and resources and energy and commitment in doing it.

> With a letter, it is 'We want a reply in ten working days', but if there is a complaint on Twitter, people want a response in half an hour. The challenge for us is responding to that urgency that you have with social media, which means you can't respond in 'ten working days' or whatever […] and that's what we face.

> There are probably a variety of ways of getting information and then [the public] rate you - your response times and all that sort of stuff

Risks

There were some concerns expressed that the accessibility the digital technologies offered in terms of consultation and communication with the public, also brought inherent risks.

> Because there are risks around social media, particularly if you are a council that is used to communicating in traditional ways.

These risks related to the potential for inappropriate comments, both by the decision-makers and the public. Because of this, protocols had been developed in terms of using digital technologies in order to minimise potential problems for the organisations:

> All partners have signed a memorandum of understanding that sets out what they will do on [the consultation software]

> As a partnership organisation, we've had […] 'Yep. Set up a blog. I'll take the flack. Don't say anything daft.' You don't go on there and make remarks that you wouldn't make if you were talking to somebody in public – you are covered by the same code of conduct.

> You've got to fill in the forms. You've got to get signature from your head of service and that is sent off to a team that acts as a conduit between [the organisation] and the city council […]to actually set up the protocols for allowing you in.

Turning to the public, there was a worry that comments would be derogatory, off topic and potential reputation damaging:

> If you've got a blog, some people say anything they want to. You've got to think of reputation damage. And there are, unfortunately, people who will take every opportunity to mock the council and get their views out there. And that happens.

> One of the councillors had started a Facebook group based on planning and I don't know if this was for a specific area of planning or just general policy and all that and the idea was, the assumption was that younger people were more likely to use it, but what he found was that younger people were not using it, comments being left were basically rants against the council and were irrelevant to the topic and the quality was really poor.

Although on decision-maker felt that comments could become 'self-regulating' it was felt that here was still a monitoring process that needed to be in place:

> We can whip stuff off [Facebook] if it is libellous or bad language.

> Big companies trawl Twitter, they crawl through Twitter comments all the time to see if there is a negative post about their company. And if there is, they'll be on there sorting it out.

The future

There was an overall sense that the use of digital technologies would only increase in relation to public consultations, and this meant that organisations needed to 'keep an out' for emerging technologies:

> I think it isn't just about the skills that you have now, it's about knowing what's coming and keeping an eye out and being an early adopter

Also, having robust monitoring and evaluation process in place to justify increased use was mentioned. However, it was felt that, on its own, the use of digital technologies would not address socio-economic issues:

> I think it will be used more and more in the future… What was interesting in my interviews was that there wasn't the analysis of the quantity and quality to back that up, because the reasons for doing this were different. It may increase participation it may not, it is not going to do anything negative, it is just another channel that is easier to use but it won't solve the big issues of participation, social economic, motivations for younger people.

> But, who are the council's greatest users? Probably the more socially excluded people. Then there is the question of which of those groups are more likely to have internet access or access .

5. DISSEMINATORS

Two of the groups interviewed - both not for profit - have been categorised as 'disseminators' in that one was disseminating the benefits of social media to the public, and the other was involved in using technology to engage the community, but both were encouraging the public's views to be heard.

The first group to be interviewed were disseminating information to the general public/community groups about how to use social media to enhance their message and had a firm focus on providing free 'surgeries' for non-commercial organisations. Entitled Social Media Surgeries, they were founded by Pete Ashton who set them up as a result of Blog Action Day 2008, Nick Booth, who agreed to be interviewed, commented that the ethos of the surgeries is to help people to identify relevant social media for their purposes:

> I'm trying to help them learn how to use social media to amplify their voice and organise and connect and collaborate. The emphasis of the Social Media Surgeries is that they be freely available to those who need them.

Therefore, the surgeries are free – using free venues with free Wi-Fi – and informal: people come along, sit down and ask for advice on how to use social media. They are delivered by a group of people who are experts in social media but give their time for free. Sometimes, it is not necessary to have a laptop:

> I mean you can run a social media surgery without computers or Wi-Fi, you can just sit and talk to people and take them on quite a long journey. Obviously it helps to be able to show them, but a good surgeon always asks the question tell me about yourself, what are you trying to achieve, tell me about your organisation, how do you use the web at the moment? And then once they've given somebody a chance to talk, once they understand what somebody wants to achieve, then they can start showing them things that they think might be useful to them.

According to Booth, most of the people who attend the surgeries are not interested in being told that they need to be part of this or that website, such as Linked-In, rather 'they want to be able to use what's useful to them, it's the skills they've got and the tools they've got.'

Further Booth sees social media as being about a 'conversation' in contrast to the typical broadcasting model that goes one way only. Therefore, some people seem quite resistant to the messiness and the immediacy and informality of social media. However this tends to change once they have been shown what is available:

> When we show them all the things you can do if you have open access to the internet, which isn't being controlled by somebody, and you have relatively simple tools that are about openness and not control, they're astonished, like what can be done, relatively easily

For Booth then, the open access ethos is important in terms of the success of social media as is providing the surgeries on a gratis basis, after an unsuccessful try at running funded surgeries:

> [Place] was a funded neighbourhood surgery and often in very small neighbourhoods you need a funded surgery because there aren't enough people with the digital skills, a high enough concentration of people with digital skills to run their own surgery if you know what I mean. But we found that the people I was working with were so desperate to make the surgeries work they'd almost turned into a sales team where they were phoning people and saying are you going to come to the surgery?

Instead, Booth has found that a relaxed and informal environment where people can talk to each other and learn from each other and sometime people come along just for the social contact. In addition it provides an opportunity for community groups to make contact:

> It's a natural network environment, you're connecting the local community groups to each other anyway.

The second group to be interviewed were based in a University and were carrying out a project linked to the Research Council funded Digital Economy Programme, which is focusing on the idea that digital technology could be socially directed as much as industry directed and that design was a critical part of this.

This group were exploring how to use digital technologies to capture people's stories and thoughts, firstly through a project that was using QR tags onto second-hand clothes in a well-known chain of charity shops.

> If you pop into one of those shops you'll be asked to take away one of these unique stickers and then using your iPhone or an android you can drop your memory onto that thing. When you drop it back into the shop anyone else can read the memories associated with your thing… they found a 52% spike in profits because memories that are associated with things.

Secondly the group were through the installation of 'totem poles' in a remote village of Scotland. The totem poles would replace the need for the public to feed back to the local council through websites or by phone for example. At the moment, it is intended that the poles have eight codes 'carved' on them and each code will link to a different aspect relevant to that community:

> One of the codes could take you to jobs in the community, one just might be help, 'I need help', 'I can give you help', 'I need some babysitting', 'has anyone got a car that I can borrow on Thursday?"

As such then, the totem poles will become the place where conversations relevant to the community take place. Underpinning this project is the ethos of allowing the community to dictate how it is used, rather than trying to restrict the use of the technology.

> We're curious as to how they might use it and leave things on it. And that's our point really, that rather than trying to presuppose or guess what the communities want and patronise them by saying well what you really want is…

This is in contrast to what the project workers see as the usual 'institutional' barriers that are traditionally put in place by councils for example.

> If you go and join them where they are, then they're going to learn to trust you and like you and be interested in you, and if you tell your story or better still tell the stories of the people you're helping, you're going to earn the respect of people and the interest of people who are interested in the same things as you are, and from there you're going to get support

APPENDIX 1: ONLINE SURVEY

1. Contact details:

Contact details: Your name:	
Group name:	
Your role in the group:	
Group website:	
May we contact you further? (Yes/No)	
Preferred mode of contact?	
Email address:	
Phone number:	

2. How long has the group existed?

How long has the group existed? less than 1 year 1-2 years 2-3 years 3-4 years	4-5 years 5-6 years 6-7 years 7-8 years	8-9 years over 10 years

3. Can you give a brief description of the group.

4. What is the approximate size of the group in terms of members?

What is the approximate size of the group in terms of members? less than 100 between 100 and 500	between 500 and 1000 over 1000

5. What are the main purposes, goals of the group?

Raise awareness			
	Often	**Sometimes**	**Never**
Telephone			
Websites			
Email			
Google/Yahoo groups			
Blogs			
Twitter			
Forums			
Text chat			
Wikis			
Social bookmarking			
Online surveys (e.g. survey monkey)			
Live chat			
Voice over IP			
Podcasting			
Technologies to create:(flyers, posters, leaflets etc)			
Avatars			
YouTube			
Films			
Television			
Video walls			

Facebook			
LinkedIn			
Virtual meeting software			
Influence council / government policy			
Support advocacy			
Attract new members / affiliate groups			
Connect to other communities			
Run a campaign			
Information sharing			
Other (please specify)			

6. How did your group first form?

7. What role did any internet-based digital technologies play in the group's formation process?

8. Has your group connected with other like/similar groups? If so, how?

9. What digital technologies has your group used in order to support it's aims?
Other (please specify)

10. Given the technologies which your group currently use, how was that decided on? For example; at what stage, by whom and why?

11. How has your group used digital technologies to organize itself internally?

12. What types of problems or barriers have been faced by your group in using any of these technologies?

Cost Insufficient expertise Incompatible system Steep learning curve
Other (please specify)

13. Do you feel that the way your group uses digital technologies has changed over time at all? If so, how?

14. What has your group learned from the way other groups have used digital technologies to achieve their aims?

15. How do you feel your group has influenced other groups with the way that you use digital technologies?

16. How has your group selected and used technologies to disseminate your outputs in digital form e.g. to other interested communities or to influence decision makers?

17. What contribution has digital technology made to achieve the aims of your group?

18. Given your experiences, what are the top three pieces of advice you would give to new groups planning to use digital technologies?

1.

2.
3.

19. Given your experiences, what are the three things new groups planning to use digital technologies should avoid?

1.
2.
3.

20. Are there any other comments you wish to make about how your group has used digital technologies to meet your aims and goals?

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Domain (structure)	Question
Profile of organisation	How did the group originate/ form? Was any technology used to support/promote the formation?
Aims/ objectives	Please describe the aims/objectives/ goals of the group/ community you represent. What are the mechanisms by which you achieve these? In terms of your aims/objectives, what are the 3 most importance activities your group engages in?
Membership/ volunteerism	Please describe your membership
Management/ Leadership	How is your organisation managed/ led? How are decisions made in relation to (a) which technology is used (b) how that technology is used?
Use of Technology (application, access and infrastructure)	In what way(s) have internet-based digital technologies been used by your organisation? Please describe: **(a)** the activity **(b)** the technology **(c)** why it was selected **(d)** any issues (or limitations of) arising/ particular benefits **(e)** any resulting changes in practice (expected/ unexpected) **(f)** any external influences affecting this **(g)** any adaptations required in order to make the technology work for you? How do you use digital technologies to disseminate the results of your activities?
Use of Technology (support)	Are specific staff allocated to support/promote your organisation's use/adoption of technology? How is the technology your organisation uses/adopts (and any related training) supported and/or financed?
Time	Do you feel your organisation's use of technology has changed since its formation? How? Do you have plans to adopt/make use of further technology in the future?
External relationships	In terms of use of digital technologies; has your group developed relationships (coordinated) with/ learned from other community groups? How?
Barriers and enablers	During your time using digital technologies, what would you consider to be the factor(s) most critical to your success? Equally, what have been the greatest barrier(s)? Have you been able to overcome these? How? Please consider the activities you have described and your experiences more broadly; What have been the primary benefits, experienced by your group, that have resulted from the use/application of digital technologies?

APPENDIX 3: VIRTUAL WORKSHOP SCHEDULE

(1) Introduce your organization and your role in it.

(2) Describe your group formation. How did your group originate/form?

(3) Membership. How is your organisation managed/led?

(4) Goals. Describe the 3 most important aims/objectives/goals of the group/community you represent.

(5) Technology. Was any technology used to support/promote the group?

(6) How were/are the decisions made in relation to

(a) Which technology was used?
(b) How that technology was used?

(7) Were/are there specific staff allocated to support/promote your organisation's use/adoption of technology?

(8) Which technology do you use the most and why?

(9) Technology barriers and benefits. What is/are the biggest barriers facing your groups in relation to using technology to

(a) Communication with members
(b) Effectively get your message across to external audiences

(10) What would help overcome these barriers?

(11) Is there a communication technology that your group would like to use but currently do not? If so, what is it and why don't you use it?

(12) Which technology do you think has given your group the most benefit? For example, allowed effective communication internally/externally.

Open discussion (30 minutes)

APPENDIX 4: FACT SHEET

This fact sheet has been developed using the information gathered from the Digital Technologies, Connecting Communities project, an AHRC-funded study that took place in 2011.

The information contained in this fact sheet is not meant to be exhaustive; rather is meant to be a guide to some of the issues community groups can consider when thinking about the most appropriate and effective communication technologies to use to get their messages across to their target audiences.

1. Choosing technologies

When thinking about which technologies to use, consider:

Allocating sufficient time for discussion
- Decisions about which technology to use needs careful and often lengthy discussion
- Treat the decision-making process in relation to technology as important as other issues
- Make sure you implement time to manage the technologies as a legitimate work issue

Agreeing on clarity of purpose
- Be sure about the message the group is trying to get across

Contextualising the audience
- Who and where are the group's audience
- What technologies are they using?
- Include disability access issues

Surveying the market
- Find out what is out there already, and what is free and what is not

Getting expert free advice and on-going support
- From members of your group: survey each member for expertise
- From other groups
- From advice services for not-for-profit groups
- From social media surgeries

Paying for advice
- Get recommendations from other groups who pay for IT advice
- Find out how much this would cost for your not-for-profit group

2. Once technology is chosen

Communication technologies need constant servicing so consider:

Training
- Encourage group members to undertake voluntary IT training
- Source free/low cost training for non-profit groups

Diversifying roles
- Resident experts can leave the group: have more than one available
- Make sure more than one group member has access to passwords/log-in details

Accepting trial and error
- Be open to trial and error: technologies change and so do group aims

Allocating sufficient time management

- Be aware that managing several communication technologies (email/facebook/twitter/websites) for example can be time consuming, so allocate time to this

- If you have a website, take control of it so that you are not reliant on an external website developer to upload the latest news, for example

Consistency of message
- Decide if your message needs to be consistent across all technologies
- Regularly check that consistency is not being lost

Responding to your audience
- Interact with your audience if possible to ensure loyalty and connection

Investing in backup equipment
- Use an external hard drive to back up data regularly

Updating information across platforms regularly
- Keep your message up to date and professional-looking

3. Selected sources of free information for not-for-profit groups

Please let us know of more free sources and we will gladly include them here.

Charity Technology Trust
http://www.ctt.org/
CTT aims to work in partnership with the third sector to support and guide charities and not-for-profit organisations in the UK to use technology to enhance the way they work and collaborate.

ICT Champions
http://www.ictchampions.org.uk/
Website which contains downloadable resources and answers to frequently asked questions about Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and how it can help organisations. It is aimed at staff and volunteers from charities, community groups, social enterprises and other not for profit organisations. Although the project has now closed, there is till a wealth of information available on the site.

National Council for Voluntary Organisations
http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/advice-support/ict/managing-ict
NCVO website containing resources on ICT (information and communication technology), including:
- Getting started
- Budgeting and buying
- Policies and procedures
- Effective collaboration
- Training and support
- ICT and your role
-

Social by Social
http://www.socialbysocial.com/book/a-to-z
Social by Social is a practical guide to using new technologies to create social impact. It makes accessible the tools you need to engage a community, offer services, scale up activities and sustain projects. Whoever you are, it shows you how to take technology and turn it into real world benefits. Includes a useful Jargon Buster.

Social Media Surgeries
http://socialmediasurgery.com/
Social media surgeries are free informal gatherings of people who want to learn how to use the web to communicate campaign or collaborate. They take place all over the country and are aimed at not-for-profit groups.

APPENDIX 5: COMMUNITY GROUPS

The following groups indicated that they would be happy for their names to be included as participants in this study.

Association of Christian Counsellors (ACC)
http://www.acc-uk.org/
The Association of Christian Counsellors is a national umbrella body that seeks to facilitate provision by Christians of quality counselling and pastoral care.

Birmingham City Council
http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/

Community 2.0: Creative Control Through Hacking project
www.communityhacking.org
Critiques the Big Society's use of only the positive aspects of social networking, and offers hacking as a creative strategy for communities to develop identities and sustain connections.

Coventry Society
http://www.coventrysociety.org.uk/
Coventry Society is Coventry's civic society, affiliated to Civic Voice, and a registered charity . The Society is a membership organisation open to anyone who supports our objectives:

CRASAC
http://www.crasac.org.uk/
Since 1981 CRASAC has provided a free confidential female only support and counselling service run by women for women and girls who have been raped, sexually abused or assaulted.

FolesHillfields Vision Project
http://foleshillfields.org/
FolesHillfields Vision Project is a VCO working to build lasting bridges between communities, and promote intercultural understanding in a super-diverse, deprived neighbourhood in Coventry.

Ghostsigns
http://www.ghostsigns.co.uk
Ghostsigns Project, a collaborative national effort to photograph, research and archive the remaining examples of hand painted wall advertising in the UK and Ireland.

Grapevine
http://www.grapevinecovandwarks.org/
A charity that helps people with learning disabilities to grow their lives

Hostels Liaison Group (HLG)
www.hlg.org.uk
HLG is a registered charity providing training, information and support services to organisations working with homeless people and others in need of supported housing throughout Nottinghamshire.

Inspiring Greatness
Developing Financial Literacy, Entrepreneurship b& Personal Development"
Email: info@inspiringgreatness.org.uk

Jigsaw Support Scheme
http://www.jigsawmansfield.org.uk/
A registered charity based in North Nottinghamshire providing a range of social care projects that enhance independence and can vastly improve people[1]s quality of life.

KairosWWT
http://www.kairoswwt.org
Kairos WWT believes in the value and dignity of all women. We aim to support, empower and give a voice to vulnerable women in Coventry. We provide safe women-only spaces, a listening ear and development opportunities.

Transition Sherwood
http://transitionsherwood.weebly.com/
Transition Sherwood is a group of local people (Nottingham, UK) coming together to help our communities reduce our impact on the environment, become less dependent on fossil fuels, and more resilient.

The Urbis Research Forum
http://urbisresearchforum.wordpress.com/
An informal space for diverse discussions exploring urban issues. Established in the summer of 2009, the forum is not-for-profit and brings together anyone interested in cities and urban life. The Urbis Research Forum links people together by hosting regular meetings in Manchester for those who live in cities, people who work trying to design, manage and improve them and people who study or analyse them.

Woodhouse Parish
http://woodhouse.leicestershireparishcouncils.org/
The Woodhouse Parish Plan comprised a 2004 survey of all parish households on a wide range of topics, from traffic speed to dog ownership and from views on litter to comments on village hall facilities. The report [2005] led to new community groups and activities e.g. a Traffic Watch group obtained speed monitoring equipment and a new hand-delivery system for a re-vamped village magazine.

Women's Views on News
www.womensviewsonnews.org
The daily women's news and current affairs service: building a world where all women's voices and experiences are heard by all

Virtual Ability, Inc.
www.virtualability.org
Virtual Ability, Inc. is a non-profit corporation based in Colorado, USA. Our mission is to enable people with a wide range of disabilities by providing a supporting environment for them to enter and thrive in online virtual worlds like Second Life®.