'No such thing as community': mapping discourses of digital transformation and expectation in the cultural and civic spaces of Leeds

Dr Helen Thornham and Dr Katy Parry, University of Leeds

MeCCSA conference | Derry | 2013
Research contexts

- Formal avenues of engagement.
- Technology
- Cultural and civic practices

- What findings?

- Open democracy, transparency, economic cuts
- Big data, data mining, social media
- Localism agenda, big society, rationalization of assets

- Initial findings from interviews, policy reports and focus groups
‘First, the Big Society is a catalyst to social action, with ‘millions of people... giving their time, effort, even money, to causes around them’. Second, there is a public service reform: reducing centralisation, putting more power into the hands of local professionals, and opening up the service delivery to charities, social enterprises and private companies ‘so that we get more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need’. Third, there is community empowerment ... ’neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny’. (North 2011: 818)
Three themes

– User/individual/community members
  • experiences of community centre visitors

– Visible technologies and tensions
  • Imagined levels of expertise and autonomy
  • Building in technology

– Community places and spaces
  • Senses of belonging, ownership, control, buildings as ‘assets’

Through:

• **Focus groups** with community groups (U3A, reading groups, baby yoga groups, karate group, school nurses)
• Interviews with Environment and Neighbourhoods (Leeds Council) and Communication Officers
• Analysis of Leeds Council-related websites & community centre websites
• Analysis of **policy documents** – community centre review, asset transfer policies, localism agenda, new deal for new communities
• **Observations** and walk through of community centres/service centres with centre managers
User/individual/community members

- Are all digitally literate.
- (But no one is an expert)

- Perception & discourse
- Navigation
- Authority

Doesn’t mean that the social, cultural, economic issues have dissipated – means we need a better question, and focus, beyond the technology

My four year old grandson/child is better than me

Frank, over there, he will talk to you about that. He knows about computers: he’s the expert
We have a service level agreement with Leeds City Council to provide 137 hours of community use each week – and this is widely taken up by a number of support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, WEA, and local residents groups. Additional rooms and conference space provides the income to support the running of the building and we have welcomed a range of different hirers from the public, private and voluntary sector... Our innovative co-working space Pulse has proved very popular with a wider range of local enterprises – one of which grew so successful it is now employing 8 people and had to expand into fixed office space elsewhere. (Headlingly Development Trust Report 2011)

http://www.headlinglydevelopmenttrust.org.uk/annual_report.php accessed on 27.10.12
Community places and spaces

Woodhouse Community Centre:
‘The local community will benefit hugely from this redevelopment of Woodhouse... The fact that Oblong are led by local volunteers makes this a really exciting project for the community to be involved in.’ Penny Ewans, local Lib Dem councillor

Oblong as both separate from and as symbolic of the local community
Community places and spaces

The GIZZAJOB PROJECT comes to Meanwood.
*Helping to gain skills for work and life.*
Details.

ENDS MEET? DEBT & BENEFITS ADVICE
ENE Homes free advice service at Stainbeck Church.
*For people who are struggling to make ends meet.*
Details.

COMMUNITY CAFÉ
*Each Thursday, 11 am to 2 pm.*
Light refreshments, Internet access
All welcome.
Details.
Karate focus group at Stainbeck Church:

‘There’s a real community element to [karate].... one of the little boys that goes there has been fostered, and he didn’t talk for a while but since he’s started karate you can see him develop and his confidence has improved. I think that's what community spirit’s about. You find that after a week, friendships are there and people start to connect and support one another.’

‘If you get there early we’re all just helping each other. You know, I’ll come to you and ask some advice. All the kids are in their little groups teaching each other the katas, I mean I think that's fab. And we have a bit of a laugh as well.’
Concluding comments

- Technology emerges as a central rhetoric to, and evidence of, change
- Is being built into buildings to demarcate difference between -
- Individual = good (social enterprise, consumer, customer, civic enterprise)
- Community = bad (done to by all the above, fixed and located, feelings and emotions that problematize the above)
- Not new (Young 1999, Bauman 2000, Sennett 1970, Hobsbawn 1994) but increasingly being built into new community spaces
- www.communitiesandculture.org