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# Public Engagement and Culture of Expertise

## RCUK DE Communities and Culture Network+ Scoping Report

Prof. Stephen Coleman, Dr Julie Firmstone, Dr Helen Kennedy, Dr Katy Parry, Dr Giles Moss, Dr Helen Thornham, Dr Nancy Thumim

### ABSTRACT

This scoping project investigated public, civic and cultural engagement using Leeds as a case study for a wider snapshot of British culture and practices. The scope is broken into three sections. The first looks at formal modes of engagement such as consultation and the power relations of institutions and their publics. The second investigates data itself and the claims made on behalf of digital content in the name of engagement. The third investigates everyday practices of engagement from the perspective of community groups. What is engagement in a digital environment and what does it look like? What new modes and practices of engagement are emerging, and what kinds of cultural products result? What are the implications of these new forms of engagement and new cultural products for communities and cultures?

## Executive Summary

Dr Helen Thornham



The Executive Summary detailed below sums up each themed section of the research before offering some overall comments and suggestions that are directed particularly at the Public Sector and Third Sector Organisations with whom we collaborated, and who are interested in the possibilities and potentials for using digital resources for engagement purposes. As academics we found that we critiqued the notion of engagement far more than we thought through the potential of the digital for engagement purposes, and so the latter section is an attempt to rectify this. However, our overall approach was not to separate the digital from other modes of engagement, but to stimulate discussion around engagement *per se*, in order to locate the digital within (rather than produce it as transformative of) existing practices. We feel this is a far more useful approach, not least because it allows for genuine concerns, working practices and lived realities to enter into the equation. Indeed, given the meta narrative of the austerity measures, which came through so prominently during our research, it would be fruitless to think of the potential of technology, if there were neither the means nor organisational structure to implement change.

### **Public Engagement within Organisations: A Role Analysis (Prof. Stephen Coleman & Dr. Julie Firmstone)**

[Modes of public engagement within Organisations: Perceptions and practices.]

- A number of different contexts shape Public Engagement within Organisations, and each context constructs both engagement and understanding of success in different ways:
  - A UK-wide context of an end of the patrician politician and a move towards greater public engagement in decision-making and participation. Successful engagement is understood as participation and related to *process*.
  - The current economic climate has created a financial need for citizens/publics to do more for themselves. This is exacerbated by the Localism agenda of the current government and the New Deal for Communities of the previous government. Successful engagement within this framework relates to the *delivery of information* (which ‘empowers’ these groups to act).
  - The statutory requirement of 2009 for local authorities to consult on decisions legally obliges Councils to consult on any issues. Success in relation to this framework relates to *amount* and *visibility* of engagement activities.
  - Long history of engagement and consultation practices within the Council understands engagement on more of a sliding scale from information at one end, to empowerment at the other end. Attached to this scale are longstanding understandings that emerge through experience and perception. Notably that: (a) publics who self-select and have a specific reason for engagement claim and demonstrate success based on the fulfilment of their desired outcome. (b) Those who have resources and skills (middle class, key areas and neighbourhoods) also claim successful engagement as outcome orientated and unsuccessful engagement as lack of consultation or undesired outcome. (c) Some groups are perceived as notoriously difficult to engage, and engagement is understood as process and encounter (rather than outcome).

- These frameworks have a number of implications for the transformative potential of technology for public engagement:
  - There is potential to increase modes of engagement through the provision of digital and online platforms to voice opinion if engagement is understood as *process*. However, there are two issues to note here. The first is that digital resources for the construction of such platforms have been available for some time, which means we need to ask why there has been limited take-up to date. The second issue is that shifting public engagement to digital realms would potentially only speak to one understanding of engagement (as *process*).
  - Technology clearly can be used as demonstration/claim of, and promotion for, engagement: but this doesn't account for the nuanced and wider reaching understandings of engagement (or successful engagement) as described by the findings above.
  - There is increasing pressure with both the economic and policy changes to rely on digital technologies as both a means through which to engage and a demonstration of engagement (where the digital is understood as more efficient in terms of: speed, visibility and reach; cost efficiency; promotion of outcome). This exacerbates claims of digital potential for public engagement – claims that are not supported by the empirical work (where the potential of digital technologies for public engagement is understood much more sceptically by the actors within institutions).
  - There may be some potential for digital technologies, if used locally and as an underpinning tool for other face-to-face engagement strategies.
  - Given the increase of data mining for commercial ends, there is a serious ethical and civic question to be asked about the plausibility of constructing a digital public space. This means that the digital could be used in a top down manner (as a promotion of events or activities). As a bottom up space for consultation or expression, however, ethical and civic questions around what is done with the data that is produced in these spaces, needs to be asked (along with the length of time such data is stored, where, to what ends etc).

### **Measuring Digital Publics: Organisations use of Social Media (Dr. Helen Kennedy & Dr. Giles Moss)**

[Social media as a potential tool for public engagement within Organisations: Perceptions and Practices.]

- Within Public Sector Organisations, social media and social media monitoring are used unevenly and for a variety of purposes. There is much hype particularly around social media as a tool for engagement, and a greater desire to know and do more within organisations, but this sits alongside a critical scepticism in terms of what might be offered for engagement, and a lack of resources for implementation.
- In relation to a broader consensus for using digital tools as a method of engagement, there are two main arguments: (1) it will provide access to social groups who may not participate in formal engagement processes (this relates to the notion of a greater reach detailed above). (2) It may widen our understanding of engagement per se, capturing real-time or naturally occurring

interactions and behaviour that may fall outside normative and established understandings of engagement.

- In terms of understanding existing use of digital tools in relation to organisational and financial structures, there are three main findings:
  - There is little organisational strategy for the use of digital tools as a means of engagement (unlike traditional media). This means the use of digital is both uneven within organisations and across organisations. It is usually dependent on an individual and their individual knowledge, expertise or desire to use these tools. Selective outputs from digital methods are fed elsewhere in organisations, this data is usually relates to traffic through websites.
  - Resources and budgets differ across organisations, and this translates into a varying degree of autonomy over the tools, methods and technologies used for engagement via digital means.
  - There is a difference between the perception of social media as a technology and more traditional media, which is perceived as *media*. This means the former is understood in relation to the individual, and associated with key expertise and skills. The latter can be approached as a strategy, and everyone is perceived as knowledgeable.
- The critical scepticism around what digital resources might offer relates to three key issues: (1) a critical understanding of engagement per se; (2) a concern around rapid changes within social media and how to build sustainable models within that; (3) knowledge about organisational infrastructure and therefore what implementation would mean in terms of workloads, responsibilities, and existing pressures.
- In relation to the transformative potential of technology:
  - There is potential to develop a technological response to the second issue above (building a sustainable model within a rapidly changing environment).
  - However, understandings of what engagement looks like (iterative dialogue, sustained interaction and communication) means the scepticism around what social media might offer should not be negated.
  - Social media is used by all the organisations within this scoping study (albeit at varying levels). But not all data gathered through mapping or analytic tools is deemed useful. This means that there is already a filtering process that is shaped by external factors (organisational structure, interests). Data is valued differently and this means there is an ethical and social question to ask about the value being placed on data and the claims made in its' name.
  - Social media and social media monitoring in and of itself is understood as offering a limited scope for engagement with publics by actors within organisations. This understanding emerges from a deeper and embedded understanding of the organisation, the sector and the publics to whom they speak. While we may want to account for this as limited vision or understanding of what the technology might offer, it is dismissive to do so.

### **Public Engagement from the Perspective of the Publics (Dr. Katy Parry, Dr. Helen Thornham & Dr. Nancy Thumim)**

[Perceptions and practices of public engagement by existing community groups and publics.]

- Use of digital technologies is widespread, across generations and different populations of Leeds. While this in and of itself may support a claim that digital technologies may be a viable method for engagement, use is specific, and routine.
- Engagement for public or civic aims is understood in relation to *outcome*. This is in direct comparison with the way engagement is understood by actors within Public Sector Organisations (above), and has clear implications for online engagement.
- Engagement is usually motivated by dissatisfaction and this shapes perceptions of both the Public sector organisations themselves and perceptions of engagement processes.
- Online engagement tools in existence such as questionnaires or message boards are understood cynically as an attempt to mine information without responsibility to respond. This relates to the perception of engagement as outcome-orientated.
- Existing networks and trusted sources are used for information. These are established over time, while they may be online, they are usually offline. This limits the potential for online strategies to be persuasive.
- Online engagement is understood as directed by the individual who is seeking specific information. There is a presumption of power here on the part of the user in terms of using digital resources that sits in direct opposition to their understanding of their own power relations with Local Council.
- The council and public sector organisations more generally, are perceived as homogenous entities. When this perception is not met (Leeds Council has innumerable websites that are perceived as difficult to navigate); it is seen as an avoidance of responsibility and gives credence to further cynicism about the operations of the Council.

### **Suggestions For Public Sector Organisations:**

It is quite clear that there will be an increased pressure of Public Sector organisations (and organisations in general) to rely on, use and implement digital technologies for engagement purposes. This is the result of a number of converging factors: (i) the austerity measures that put pressure on organisations to use digital resources as a more cost-effective, faster and wider engagement tool, (ii) increased take-up and engagement of digital resources by the general population that is claimed as evidence<sup>1</sup> of literacy and therefore makes possible the shift to digital as an engagement tool (iii) a wider digital use, that necessitates a digital presence for most organisation.

Given this pressure, what functions relating to engagement, can they claim?

- Digital technologies speak to a small fraction of what is actually understood as, and done in the name of, public engagement. Realising this is clearly the most important step. Digital resources that are used as data gathering tools (such as online questionnaires or 'like' buttons, discussion forums or responsive bottom up platforms) may offer an introduction to a wider consultation process. However, the residents of Leeds are very cynical about such attempts to gather opinion because they do not feel that their contribution has any effect on process.

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<sup>1</sup> The 'Universal Credit: Local Support Services Framework' document (DWP 2013: 19) argues that as 78% of the population use the internet, it is more than feasible to shift welfare provision online: this is just one example of how use is conflated with literacy, when they are not the same. (Doc. no: UCLSS\_V1.0)

This means that only using digital resources would disengage residents. Such methods only speak to a limited account of engagement – as process.

- If such digital tools were designed better, along with a timeline (or equivalent) that indicated the stage of this particular method in a wider consultation process, this could be used as an introduction and promotion of a consultation process. This means it would not be the entirety of the process, but would indicate the start and highlight the timeframe for the process and the way the data would be used.
- Such methods could therefore be improved, but will not replace offline and face to face engagement – they have to operate as a support.
- If engagement is process, output and iterative dialogue, then a single digital platform or resource cannot replace offline processes. Engagement is also about locating oneself within a process – and this is achieved through a combination of information exchange, iterative dialogue, linear and circular processes, outputs – all of which needs to locate the individual.
- A clear sense of which elements of engagement digital can speak to is clearly the next step – and embedding the digital into formal strategies of engagement (as a connected and supportive element) is also crucial.
  - If the digital continues to be perceived as a technology for individuals within organisations, it will be shaped by very specific expertise, and emerge in very uneven ways. This also exacerbates the hyperbolic claims made on the part of the digital because individuals are routinely asked to defend such digital tools within a framework of individual workloads or individual factions of an organisation.
  - Recognising the limitations of digital is not to denounce it wholeheartedly, but to use it as a strategic tool. This also speaks to the scepticism within organisations about what online resources might offer engagement, and builds the digital in as a sustainable tool. It might only be useful as a promotion or dissemination tool; to advertise face to face events, or to highlight why people should become involved. But these are also important for promoting events, offering opportunities to participate, detailing processes and changes, and making the Council more visible to people.
  - Data mining, the current trend relating to big data, offers insights into new conversations and opinions – but also has serious limitations in terms of the manipulation of data. It does not offer motivations or rationales for contributions. We might want to question the ethics of such tools.
  - None of the methods or modes discussed above are democratic in the sense that none of them will offer a genuine and open place to debate and discuss. The internet and related technologies are not blank canvasses – they are embedded with power relations, commercial and corporate mining and ownership: they offer very particular forms of participation to users, that are designed, created and navigated in certain ways.
- The perception of Leeds City Council by residents is not in keeping with its operational structure. Local residents think of the council as homogenous, they go to the Council to seek information, and each off and online resource is perceived as Council-ran (even if it is not).
  - A clearer aesthetic connection between all council-related websites would visibly and immediately clarify Council involvement. However the central Leeds website needs to be useful as a landing page and the navigation from and to here is uneven. All

related sites need to direct traffic back to the website (and vice versa) – and the central site needs to operate more as search tool rather than a document repository. Given that most people are looking for specific information (rather than browsing) – the information needs to be clearly marked. An example of this would be the difficulty in finding swimming timetables at leisure centres.

- Most local residents only engage with the Council when there is a problem. This means that they are searching firstly for information, secondly for information about process, and third – they are looking for very specific outcomes. A simple visual timeline or chart that indicated length of time, location within a process, and possible outcomes would offer users a framework and help manage their expectations.
- Local residents also assign a disproportionate amount of power to the Council which contradicts the more popular conception of the user of digital technologies as having power. Users feel competent and that they have agency when they search for information online. But this sense is replaced by a feeling of powerlessness and frustration when they are unable to navigate certain websites, or information is difficult to find. This might not be an unfamiliar feeling per se, but the difference is that they assign it to the Council, which is then perceived more negatively.

Digital uptake on the part of the Council needs to be done with full awareness of what is on offer and the limitations of such offerings. Some easy and visible markers that can locate the user in relation to a process, aid navigation, and promote events and activities should be done. The Council needs a clear and coherent digital presence, but a digital presence is not the same as a wholehearted shift online. Given the wider pressures to use and rely on digital as a means of and support for, engagement, the scepticism and cynicism of both the actors within the organisations, and residents, around what the digital actually might offer, should be heeded.

## **Next Steps**

There are a number of ways we would like to move this project forwards. In relation to digital technologies, a new project has started, led by Dr. Helen Kennedy and Dr Giles Moss, investigating how data is used within organisations. This will advance the theme of this project that investigated social media in particular, and will answer some of the questions around when data is made meaningful.

While we have highlighted many issues around perceptions and understandings of engagement, we have not investigated processes of engagement that are already in existence and have a number of rationales. This is one of our next steps over the next year. We will map out and critically investigate the processes of engagement around a key issue over the next year. Here we understand engagement as process, information exchange and output and will work to expand this definition. We understand actors as those within and without the council – and we hope to look at an ecology of decision making and engagement processes that might be both digital and non-digital.

A further project looking at the impact of the Welfare Reforms is also being constructed, and we would like to include LCC in this as well as those directly impacted and support services within and without the Council.

We are planning on reporting to the LCC and co-designing the next steps.

# 1. Public engagement: a role analysis

## A summary report to the Communities and Culture Network +

Prof. Stephen Coleman and Dr. Julie Firmstone

### **Aims and Objectives:**

Our scoping study aimed to explore the role of a local council's engagement and communications strategies in engaging the public in local democracy. Using Leeds City Council (LCC) as a case study we aimed to explore perceptions of the Council's engagement and communication with citizens from the perspective of a range of actors involved in the engagement process. Our research aimed to explore the importance local governments assign to communicating with citizens through new digitally based forms of engagement such as websites, social media and citizen journalism in context with traditional modes of engagement. The research explored perceptions of the Council's online and off line practices of engagement with different publics, and focused in particular on their interactions with journalists and the news media to explore how digital engagement changes traditional patterns of communication.

The need to encourage public engagement in politics at all levels has increased in recent years due to consistently falling voter turnout and other indicators of participation, which threaten the legitimacy of democracy. Turnout at local elections is even lower than at general elections with only 32% of citizens voting in the latest

local elections, the worst turnout since 2000. It is argued that the disinclination of citizens to vote is indicative of the distance between local citizens and politicians. Greater engagement is seen as an important way to try to change citizens' perceptions that they lack the power to change things and that they are not listened to by those in power. In addition to low electoral turnouts, local councils are being encouraged to engage more widely with citizens for several other reasons. First, some suggest that the era of the patrician politician is coming to an end and that politics in the UK is moving towards greater public engagement in decision making and participation, and even to co-decision making. Second, the current economic climate creates a financial necessity for citizens to do more for themselves as councils have to make more and more cuts to non-statutory services. Finally, a statutory requirement for local authorities to consult any party directly affected by decision from local authorities was introduced in 2009, meaning that councils are legally obliged to engage on many issues. Alongside recognition that councils need to engage more effectively with their publics, there is a drive towards pursuing digital modes of engagement.

## **What we did - methodology:**

The study used two methods to address our research questions. The main method was to conduct twenty-three face-to-face semi structured interviews to explore perceptions of the Council's engagement and communication with citizens from the perspective of a range of actors involved in the engagement process. Secondly we conducted a desk-based analysis of documents referring to LCC's public engagement strategy, national level engagement policies, and the engagement strategies and policies of other comparable local government authorities.

### 1) Interviews

Drawing on the idea that there are a variety of actors who fulfil differing roles in the public engagement process we constructed a typology of actors to structure our selection of interviewees. This included a set of actors who represent differing functions within the Council - elected politicians, Council Executives/strategists, Council communications specialists, Heads of Directorates, Frontline Council workers, and, as the lowest tier of local government, Parish Councils. Within each of these categories we selected at least two interviewees in order to cover different functions and responsibilities, and to allow for us to compare and contrast two areas of service delivery – Youth and Leisure Services. These areas were selected in order to explore the idea of engagement with different publics and drivers. Based on advice from Council executives we wanted to explore the differences between an area that is not considered problematic for service delivery such as leisure services, with an area with complex needs, vulnerable and hard to reach citizens such as the youth directorate. Given our interest in investigating the use of digital modes of engagement, we selected one Parish Council with an Internet presence and one without.

Outside of the Council the sample included other key actors in public engagement from NGOs, mainstream local news media (TV, press and online) and new digitally based forms of local journalism. Given the limitations of the pilot study we chose to focus on NGOs linked to one area of service provision (Youth) and to consider the difference between national and locally based organisations. Two journalists from the main local newspaper the YEP were selected – one whose main role is to report on the Council and one who reports on the Council in relation to a specific geographical area. BBC television's Political Editor for Yorkshire and the main journalist from BBC Leeds Online were interviewed. Representatives from the two main hyper local news websites and one prominent local political blogger were also interviewed. The interviewees are detailed in Table 1 below. Each of the interviews were conducted face to face, recorded and transcribed.

### 2) Document analysis:

The document analysis aimed to provide us with an understanding of our case study of Leeds City Council in the context of local authorities' approaches to public engagement nationally. Although we have focussed on Leeds, this analysis will help us to consider how public engagement in Leeds can be taken as an indicator of engagement activities across the UK. Two

main aspects of councils' public engagement were reviewed: 1) the engagement strategies and situation of LCC over the last decade; 2) a comparison of public engagement in four other cities across the UK. The review used reports and plans published by local authorities to compare the activities and strategies of councils in Manchester, Bristol, Cardiff and Glasgow with those in Leeds. Key themes, similarities, differences and points of interest were highlighted, as well as any specific national drivers for engagement.

**Table 1- Interviewees split by role and comparative element**

Number interviewees	Role	Comparative element
3	Elected Representatives (Councillors)	Parties - Labour/Cons/Lib Dem
2	Council Executive	None
2	Directorates	Publics (Youth/Leisure)
2	Frontline Council workers	Publics (Youth/Leisure)
3	Communications Team	None
2	Parish Councils	Online/offline presence
2	NGOs/Interest groups (Youth)	National/local remit
4	Traditional local mass media	Traditional/Non-traditional media
3	Traditional/Non-traditional media	Traditional/Non-traditional media
Total = 23		

**What we asked and some preliminary findings:**

**A) The interviews:**

The interview questionnaires were designed to investigate a set of three thematic areas drawn from literature and existing research into democratic participation. First, questions were constructed to explore normative perceptions of public engagement at a local level. This enables us to evaluate perceptions of what public engagement looks like, who gains what (range of actors) and what public engagement should achieve. Second, a set of questions were designed to establish ways in which public engagement can be evaluated through performance indicators and consideration of target publics. A third set of questions about the role of the news media enabled us to consider perceptions of digitally based communications alongside perceptions of the role of mediated communications. A key aim of the scoping study was to gather some preliminary findings to explore the role and perceptions of digital modes of engagement in comparison to non-digital strategies. Questions about this were incorporated into each of the thematic areas.

**Theme 1: Normative perceptions of public engagement - contested meanings**

The interviews established that a variety of interpretations of the meaning of engagement exist among professionals involved in different spheres of public engagement. These contested meanings have different outcomes for the potential voice and influence given to citizens in the

city's democratic existence. In one form, public engagement strategies are understood as a way of empowering citizens, whilst in the least active understanding, engagement with citizens simply seeks to inform. On another level engagement is viewed as a necessary part of implementing efficiency strategies, something which is at the top of the agenda of all UK cities due to the current economic climate. Our analysis will ask what the differing motivations behind the Council's communications and engagement strategies mean for the way that decisions about the city are influenced by public engagement and how decisions are communicated to citizens. It will also explore the link between these motivations and the strategies of the Council to enable citizens to fulfil a contributing role to the democratic life of the city through new digitally based sources of communications as well as the traditional news media. The potential role of journalism, both mainstream and citizen, in the engagement process is also dependent on these contested meanings of engagement.

## **Theme 2: Performance indicators and targets**

A set of questions was designed to assess if any common characteristics exist in examples of public engagement given by interviewees. Here we aimed to identify how people working in different roles within the engagement process measure outcomes as well as to gauge if there are any patterns in the engagement strategies that are perceived to be successful. The perception that the Council has increased and improved its engagement with the public over the last five or more years was widespread among all actors, and attitudes towards LCC's engagement were very positive. Our initial review of responses to these questions suggests that the following perceptions are commonly held about the performance of public engagement strategies:

Characteristics of failed engagement include:

- When the Council does not involve citizens in decision making from the beginning of the process. This included instances when the Council has attempted to engage, but has begun the engagement process with a set of existing proposals. In these cases, citizens often felt the main decisions had already been made and their contribution to the engagement process would not have any effect, or make a difference. In these cases citizens feel they are 'having things done to them not by them'.
- Engagement examples where the public is concerned about a lack of efficacy are seen as unsuccessful – engagement is seen to have failed if the public perceive a lack of integrity from the Council in asking for people's views because they doubt that their views are going to be listened to.
- Engagement is also seen to be a failure when there is a lack of follow up communication from the Council which allows the public to evaluate the efficacy of their contribution and to demonstrate how their views have been taken into consideration. A lack of feedback, particularly on more general engagement issues where a specific tangible outcome is not clear is therefore seen as a characteristic of less successful engagement.

Characteristics of successful engagement include:

- Specific issues – there was widespread recognition that it is harder to engage citizens in dialogue about general ideas and concepts such as the future of the city, than in issue specific engagement efforts such as reforming particular services.

- It is perceived to be more difficult to detect a successful engagement strategy than a failed one since problematic engagement attempts tend to generate complaints, and satisfaction tends to be silent.

Perceptions of the performance of public engagement strategies in engaging particular target groups of citizens provide some interesting insights into the challenges of engagement. Three main target groups were seen to be hardest for the Council to engage: 1) the general public, 2) the disenfranchised, 3) the very young, old, or minority groups. Perceptions of the easiest groups to engage, and those that the Council are most successful in engaging with, reveal a strong link to motivations for engagement in three ways. First, those who have a specific reason to engage – something that they want or need to change. Second, those who have the resources and skills to engage (tend to be middle class). Third, groups and organisations with which the Council has a strong motivation to engage such as business and companies who can bring investment to the city.

### **Theme 3: Role of digital communications and the news media:**

Digital communications:

A preliminary analysis of the interviews shows that there is a strong desire and willingness to utilise digital modes of engagement more effectively within the Council. However, the Council and others recognise that the Council lacks the resources and, in some cases the expertise, to pursue the full potential of digital engagement strategies. For example, the potential to use social media or comments on the website as a measure of public opinion is recognised, but outside the reach of the Council at the present time. The interviews also established the following key characteristics of LCC's current modes of digital engagement:

- Offline engagement is dominant and perceived, as most successful - online methods were never given as examples of successful modes of engagement. Neither were they given as examples of failed attempts.
- Online engagement is recognised as one of many modes of engagement – all have limitations, including widespread recognition and concern about the implications of the digital divide in Leeds. Inequality of access to the Internet among citizens was a recurring theme.
- Whilst online engagement is seen to have various advantages (speed, ease of access, cost efficiency), it is recognised that in itself it is unlikely to motivate citizens to become engaged in local issues. The transformative potential of the Internet was questioned and it was often suggested that regardless of the method of engagement used, public engagement is primarily dependent on motivations to engage.
- Online methods of engagement – the LCC website, Twitter and Facebook are treated as a technology and are not seen as communications media in the same way as newspapers, TV and radio. This is characterised by a separation of engagement strategies and approaches between 'the press' (traditional news media) and digital communications mediums. Communication and engagement through the traditional media is seen as separate from communications on the website, or social media.

The news media:

Our initial analysis suggests that two different perceptions of the role of the news media in public engagement exist. Actors outside the executive and directorates of LCC – delivery level workers,

Parish Councils, NGOs, and traditional news media perceive the local mass media to have an important role in engaging the public and as a key site of engagement with the public. In contrast, LCC executives and directorates and to a lesser extent, the Communications team, see the mass media as a vital part of communication with the public, but do not appear to assign it a key role in engagement strategies. Perhaps due to the organisational routines in place for dealing with the media (through the press office), news media do not appear to be treated as an integral part of the engagement process and are regarded as a separate platform.

News media in Leeds:

There was consensus amongst interviewees in their perception of the roles of different news media organisations in the city in communicating with the public:

Television news (BBC Look North and Calendar): Overall television news is recognised as having the potential to reach wide audiences, but it is seen as the least accessible media because it requires pictures/a big story. Furthermore, its regional rather than local restricts the amount of time that will be given to Leeds based stories.

The press: There was widespread recognition that the importance of newspapers in general is diminishing due to falling circulations. However, newspapers remain the easiest media for the Council to get coverage in. Leeds daily newspaper the Yorkshire Evening Post was seen as the key news media in local engagement. Many actors gave examples of the YEP making useful contributions to engagement in publicising consultations and events in recent years.

Radio: BBC Radio Leeds, and to a lesser extent Radio Aire, were as seen as helpful in publicising events and sometimes stimulating debate through phone ins, but were assigned a secondary role to the YEP in engaging Leeds citizens.

Summary from the document analysis:

- 1) Leeds and engagement: the review of documents relating to LCC's engagement strategies established the following background to LCC's current approach to public engagement:
  - Engagement is an important part of managing change – LCC recognise the necessity to manage the budget cuts they have to make and resulting changes to service provision, and the value of ensuring that the public feel they have been involved in these decisions.
  - The Council's level of engagement has increased greatly in the last decade with the former focus on consultations around planning applications extended to include engagement strategies are implemented across all departments, especially when decisions require engagement according to the 2009 'Duty to Involve' Act.
  - During this time, the Council have adopted a wider range of engagement methods and have moved away from the concentration on planning consultations to utilise many different forms of engagement including workshops, street kiosks, and surveys.
  - There is a desire within the Council to harness the potential of the internet due to its potential to improve the effectiveness of engagement and the recognition that it is something they should be doing.

- 2) City comparison - the review of documents relating to public engagement in four other comparable cities in the UK established the following similarities and differences between Leeds and the other cities:

Similarities: a) Engagement for the councils forms part of a wider policy drive, for example Birmingham's 2026 or Leeds' 2011-2030; b) Documents have striking similarities in their construction, with all of the updated plans referring heavily to the current economic climate as a driver for ensuring engagement is conducted in an efficient, cost effective manner; c) It is noticeable that engagement for local councils appears to be done in partnership, not internally. Toolkits for engagement often outline partnership schemes (such as the Leeds Compact) indicating that Councils work closely with the third sector, voluntary and charity organisations in order to apply their visions.

Differences: a) One of the most interesting comparisons across the council literature is the terminology used for the citizens. They range from Glasgow calling citizens "customers" and "stakeholders", Manchester referring to them as "residents" or "communities", Bristol calling citizens "services users" or "public", and Birmingham referring to citizens as "local people" or "stakeholders". Whilst these differences may appear to be aesthetic, the differentiation between "customers" and "residents" is one that could suggest a distanced public from their local authority; 2) there are significant variations in techniques used to engage and the level of resources allocated to engagement strategies.

#### **Next stages:**

Following on from this very revealing scoping research, we shall publish two articles; one on contested meanings of civic engagement in Leeds council (including extensive extracts from our transcribed interviews) and one on the role of local digital and mainstream media in relation to civic engagement. The next stage of our research will take two forms:

- We propose to monitor and evaluate three engagement exercises conducted by Leeds city council.
- We shall work with the Voice and Influence team in Leeds Youth Services to explore ways of developing participatory skills amongst future citizens.

# Measuring digital publics: public engagement and cultures of expertise

Dr. Helen Kennedy & Dr. Giles Moss

## *1. What we asked & why*

Our strand of the scoping study, 'Measuring digital publics: public engagement and cultures of expertise' aimed to examine how digital data methods are used and could be used by public sector organisations to measure public engagement, and to explore what the implications of such methods might be.

A vast quantity of data is generated as a result of everyday Internet use, whether it is through browsing the web or interacting via social media. Data gathered from web traffic logs and social media content is analysed by public and private organisations for a wide range of purposes, from crime prevention and national security to developing more targeted and personalised forms of advertising. Our research investigated how new digital data methods (social media monitoring, web analytics and the data visualisations they generate) are and could be used by public sector organisations to measure public engagement with and opinion of their services, initiatives and content.

Governments and other public authorities adopt various methods to measure public opinion and engage the public, such as surveys, consultations and citizens' juries (Barnes, Newman & Sullivan 2009, Mahony, Newman, & Barnett, 2010). Compared with these direct forms of public engagement, the analysis of secondary data from web traffic logs or social media content may have certain advantages. It can provide access to social groups who may not participate in formal public engagement initiatives. It may also allow insights into different aspects of public engagement, capturing, for instance, real-time and naturally occurring interactions and people's behaviour around content and services as well as their attitudes and opinion (Ruppert & Savage 2012).

The use of digital methods is a new and emerging field of expertise. While digital

methods are attracting growing scholarly attention and interest (Law, Ruppert & Savage, 2011, Ruppert & Savage, 2012, Latour, Jensen, Venturini, Grauwin & Boullier, 2012), our understanding of the specific uses and impacts of digital methods in different contexts is limited. One of the aims of our research was to investigate empirically whether digital data methods are currently used by public sector organisations and to examine what role they play. However, given the developing and emergent nature of this field, we were also interested in how digital methods *could* be used and what role they might play. A second stage of research therefore examined and characterised the broader field of expertise in this area. We aimed to identify key companies working in social media monitoring and web analytics and to review the services they offer and analyse the types of claims they make about these services. The final stage of the research brought together representatives of these companies and relevant members of public sector organisations in a workshop in order to encourage reflection on what might be possible through digital data methods and what the implications of this may be for public sector organisations and their current and future practices.

## ***2. What we did & what we found***

### **Methods**

We carried out our research with two councils and two museums all located in the north of England, as well as the official tourism board for a northern county. The tourism board was funded largely through membership fees and staffed primarily by marketing professionals. As such, it could be expected to be more advanced in its uses of digital data methods than the other organisations. One of the museums operates as a trust and is therefore fairly autonomous in its decision-making in relation to digital data methods, whereas the other is much more integrated into the local council and therefore less autonomous.

The first stage of the research involved the study of existing digital data practices within our partner public sector organisations, for which an analysis of the existing web and social media presence of the organisations was carried out. Following this analysis, we (Helen Kennedy and Giles Moss) carried out one interview in each location, of approximately one hour. We engaged with communications officers in the two museums and one of the councils, the head of the web team in the other council, and the director of digital marketing at the tourism board. We asked whether digital data methods were currently used by public sector organisations and explored what role they play. A list of interview questions can be found in Appendix 1. In addition, we placed an undergraduate student intern in one of the organisations and asked him to keep an observational diary, making notes about examples of public engagement, who the organisation sees as its ‘publics’, what the organisation appears to think ‘engagement’ is and how it mobilises digital data methods in order to enact that engagement (an observation guide for the intern/research assistant can be found in Appendix 2). The tourism board was the only organisation that could accommodate an intern during the summer of 2012 when this activity was scheduled. Whilst we may have discovered more about *public sector* engagement and uses of digital data methods through a placement in one of the other four organisations, this method was nonetheless illuminating.

The second stage of the research identified key companies working in the area of social media monitoring and web analytics, focusing, where possible, on organisations that target and work with the public sector and on public engagement. We categorised the services offered by different organisations and explored the claims they make about their practices and expertise. We employed a research assistant to carry out desk research searching for companies offering digital data analytics services (using terms such as sentiment analysis, opinion mining, social media monitoring/marketing, web analytics and web metrics) and another research assistant with more advanced technical skills categorized the services offered.

The final stage of the research aimed to foster reflection on what is possible through digital data methods and what the implications of these methods might be for public sector organisations and their existing and future practices. We hosted an afternoon workshop with members of the public sector organisations who engaged in our research and digital data methods experts from companies identified in the second stage of our research. Seven staff members from four public sector organisations (excluding the tourism board, who did not attend) participated in the workshop, which involved two presentations: one from a

social media analytics expert from a London-based social media marketing organisation, and another from a communications manager at an NHS trust with particular expertise in the use of digital methods for engagement. This was followed by a discussion about the presentations amongst all participants.

## Findings

Through our interviews and preliminary analysis of the existing web and social media presence of the organisations, we found that the following social media and analytics tools are used:

Social Media	Analysis Tools
Twitter; Facebook; YouTube; Flickr; AudioBoo; Instagram; Get Glue; Pinterest; Foursquare; blogs.	Google Analytics; Museum Analytics; Google Alerts; Rate This Page functions; Postling; Hootsuite; One Riot; Site Improve; Storify; Crowdbooster; iTunes download monitoring; internal Facebook/Twitter tools.

These tools were used with varying degrees of regularity and therefore varying success in terms of engaging publics and measuring public engagement. All organizations had accounts across several platforms, and none maintained all accounts regularly. In some organizations, one platform was used regularly and others more sporadically; in other cases, a particular Twitter feed, for example, would be regularly maintained, whereas other feeds were less frequently utilised.

Interviewees in the four main public sector organisations felt that their organizations were under-resourced and therefore dedicate limited resources to social media engagement and analysis. Some succeed in managing social media despite limited resources because of their small scale or autonomous structure, whereas others would like to do more with the limited resources that they have. Some organisations pass on top-line quantitative data to funders or senior managers, using tools such as Google Analytics and the website [www.museum-analytics.org](http://www.museum-analytics.org), which produces weekly summaries of social media activity for specific museums, including, for example, new page likes, posts and comments on Facebook, new followers, tweets or mentions on Twitter. It is not known what, if anything, becomes of this data, and some of our interviewees questioned the extent to which quantitative data can measure ‘real’ engagement, believing instead that more emphasis should be placed on qualitative data and feedback. Other interviewees felt that it was difficult to persuade senior managers of the value and benefits of social media monitoring. One of the councils monitors social media for both customer services and reputation management purposes, and identifiable actions sometimes result from this kind of monitoring – for example, changes to the structure of a section of a website as a result of complaints about difficulties in finding certain information.

On the whole, however, it did not seem that digital data methods or analytics were used strategically by any of the organisations, even the tourism board, according to our intern/research assistant. Monitoring of social media and the web does occur across the organisations, but it tends to be informal and there is a lack of a systematic approach. Some saw a gap here, believing that monitoring would allow the organisations to pick up on and respond to local issues and concerns before they escalate, while others seemed less convinced of the need. Raising interesting questions about the ethics of monitoring and the rules of engagement, some interviewees felt that there was no need to go ‘fishing for debates or conversations’ and expressed anxiety about ‘delving into someone else’s space’. There was also uncertainty across the organisations about whether to intervene in external conversations or not and what the advantages and disadvantages of this might be.

Social media was viewed as a means to promote conversation and dialogue as well as a publicity tool by our interviewees. However, as our analysis of the web and social media presence of the organisations indicated, the extent to which interactive engagement with the public is achieved by the organisations in practice is limited and most interviewees expressed a wish to do more. One interviewee described how commercial sector companies are more effective and creative when it comes to generating conversation and community: ‘I think it’s more impressive what some of the commercial people are doing [...] it should be quite easy to talk about museum and gallery collections and in a way it is, to create a social media presence around like Marmite, you know, which they are stunningly successful at [...] creating an entire online debate around yeast extract is very impressive...’. However, while these commercial organisations may have ‘massive resources’, our public sector organisations lack capacity and are operating on small budgets and so there is a need to ‘do creative things with not very much’.

Indeed, all organisations identified further social media analytics and monitoring activities in which they could engage. Aspirations expressed by interviewees included:

- Exceed people’s expectations;
- Gather qualitative information;
- Develop an online sounding board;
- Integrate social media monitoring into customer services;
- Sort out governance, for example regarding how long to keep data;
- Move towards using apps.

On the whole, the major obstacle to achieving these aspirations seemed to be a lack of resources. In addition, difficulties encountered when attempting to persuade managers of the value and benefits of social media monitoring, limited understanding (from managers) of related technical/human resources and a lack of strategy also impeded further use of digital data methods by the organisations.

With these findings in mind, we sought facilitators from social media monitoring/marketing organisations to lead our planned workshop who could identify how our organisations could build on their existing social media and web analytics. Our search identified 50 such companies, most based in the UK, with

only a small number highlighting that they worked with public sector organisations already. Of the 50 companies, 32 offered some form of social media (SM) management service (such as establishment of a SM presence, building of community or SM training) and 43 offered some sort of SM monitoring service (such as SM ‘buzz’ analysis or analysis of community structure). There were lots of different monitoring services available, which seemed mainly to be aimed at developing an insight into community behaviour or opinion without claiming to provide any action based upon the insight. The majority have a very commercial application – driving sales, maintaining brand – although clearly some of these services could potentially be used for more civic minded purposes. Much more analysis could be done on this data, but this has not occurred as part of the scoping study due to limited time.

From this search we identified one company as particularly interesting, given its work for a range of clients, including public sector and charity, and its stated commitment to ethical questions relating to web analytics, which we invited to present at the workshop. After a series of conversations we agreed that the workshop would present our interviewees with free or cheap tools which would help them advance from their existing uses of analytics. These included social network analysis, machine learning and natural language processing tools. During the workshop, participants were presented with these tools, as well as hearing from an NHS trust on a similar journey in terms of the use of digital data methods for public engagement. At the end of the workshop, all four public sector organisations agreed they would be interested in experimenting with the tools presented, but that they would need support to do so because of their limited resources. This is something that could be explored in further research.

### ***3. Issues and questions for further research***

It was clear from our brief scoping study that the public sector organisations who participated make some use of digital data methods, such as social media monitoring and web analytics. However, they all have limited resources, which constrains their further exploration of such methods. This raises the question of how actors who do not have the economic means to pay for digital data and who want to use it for the public good can access it. This question applies not only to users of services, and to excluded and marginal social groups, but also to large public sector organisations such as councils and museums.

A further question to arise from our scoping study was: what is the potential application of novel forms of digital data analysis for understanding and engaging publics? Our interviewees expressed an interest in using more novel and extensive forms of data analysis in order to measure public engagement such as those presented to them at our closing workshop (social network analysis, machine learning and natural language processing). They acknowledged the advantages of accessing and analysing qualitative digital data. However, public sector organisations would need support (in terms of resources and expertise) in order to employ these methods.

It was apparent that uses of digital data within the organisations were neither strategic nor systematic. The organisations collect data and conduct some basic quantitative analysis, and that data is circulated within the organisation (to senior management and specific departments) and outside (to funding bodies).

However, we do not know whether or how this data is then interpreted and acted upon, how it relates to data gathered via more conventional methods (such as surveys, consultations and on-site evaluations), whether it is used in the service of public engagement, or whether it is useful. We need to know more about how (and whether) digital data is used, and the impact of its uses, especially in the light of the bold claims that are made about big data, what it represents, and what can be done with it. In short, we need more in-depth research than this brief scoping study allowed, to develop a better, deeper and more nuanced understanding of digital data methods. And given that methods are 'socially shaped' - both by who is asking the questions (boyd & Crawford 2011) and by the situatedness of all knowledge (Haraway 1997) - we also need to investigate how digital data methods are shaped by actors within specific organisational contexts (Law 2010, Law, Ruppert & Savage, 2011). This would suggest a need to explore how the meaning and purpose of data are interpreted and constructed. So not only is a better understanding of the potential use of newer forms of digital data analysis needed, but also this needs to be balanced with normative/critical analyses of such methods, which hold up to scrutiny the bold epistemological claims that are being made about them.

### 3. Practices, Places & Perceptions Of Digital Communities

Dr. Katy Parry, Dr. Helen Thornham, Dr. Nancy Thumim



#### *Aims and Objectives of Scoping Study*

This strand of the scoping study aimed to understand processes and practices of information gathering and ‘public’ engagement from the point of the user. We wanted to ascertain the quotidian routes through and to information, as well as general practices of digital and non-digital use. Such understandings of localised use allow us to identify target areas, issues and modes of address for institutions, but also firmly locate the digital within a wider and broader community based context.

#### *Research Context*

Much work has been done on digital ways of engaging publics on civic issues (Coleman 2007, Papacharissi 2010, Loader 2007, Gilchrist 2009, Boler 2009). Often, such work begins with a premise that civic engagement has changed in the advent of the digital era, or that interest in public or civic issues has declined as neoliberal ideologies are increasingly promoted (Fenton and Barissi 2011, Dean 2009, Facer 2011). At the same time, the advent of mobile technologies and digital take-up has prompted a certain amount of expectation in terms of engaging disinterested groups in new and innovative, digital ways. Usually such work focuses on the *potentials* new media offers – particularly for young people – and seeks to elucidate ways of using (popular) technologies for civic or public aims. Our scoping study suggests that such approaches are counterintuitive insofar as they assume certain literacies for certain populations, and continue

to imagine the technology as the facilitator of social, cultural and civic change. The demographic populations in Leeds that we interviewed all had technologically facilitated access to the kinds of information institutions promote via a range of different technologies. Whether this was via mobile or located technologies, digital or non-digital information, transport infrastructure; it was clear that *access* to the information was not a major concern for the demographics we interviewed. Technological access to information and the potential of the technology are fully – if not overly - realisable in an increasingly messy jumble of information that is now readily and potentially available online. In theory, this information combined with technological literacy and ubiquity, should provide a rich and sustainable base for engagement, for knowledge exchange and for public interest.

Our scoping study was built on the premise that we should take stock of practices and processes of information gathering and public engagement by ascertaining what Leeds residents and communities are already doing (and *how*). Given that many of the potentials of technology have been realised at an access and design end; that our frameworks for engagement are digital; and that an increasing amount of information is available to institutions for more targeted approaches, what are local communities and individuals actually doing on and offline in the name of ‘public engagement’? Have digital innovations transformed communities?

## ***What we did***

- 1) We ran a number of focus groups with existing community or activity groups across Leeds, in a variety of locations. These included focus groups with retired populations, working populations and mother on maternity leave. A notable absence is young people, and hope to rectify this in future work. Here we were interested in perception of digital technologies, existing activities and practices (digital and non digital), perceptions of local council and routes to and from information about events and activities in their area. This was accompanied with observations about Community Centres and tours of Community Centres by key personnel.
- 2) We supplemented these focus groups with a number of interviews with Leeds Council, that aimed to offer a broader context for our interviews and understand how they understood the groups we were talking to.
- 3) Finally, an RA was employed to analyse and quantify the web and digital presence of Leeds Council starting from a position of little knowledge. Here, she was asked to attempt to search for key information pertaining to specific council responsibilities; information about events and activities for a variety of groups, and information about policy change. The idea was to gain a broad sense of the overall visibility and navigability of Leeds Council and also analyse how it represented itself online.

## ***Summary of Findings***

Our key findings are centred on four key themes. The first relates to the user /individual/community member and their everyday engagement, issues and concerns. The second relates to community spaces and places and how these have been redesigned and reconfigured in recent years. The third relates to engagement with Leeds council, its resources and provisions and the context in which such comments emerged. The fourth relates to moments when the technology, the discourse or the ideologies of digital technology become visible, and the tensions this produced.

### **1. User/individual/community members**

#### *Everyday Engagement with Digital Technology*

- All the focus group participants used digital technologies so it was immediately clear that access to technology or information is not the issue here in terms of engagement. Even when broadband was not connected in domestic households (as with a small minority of the pensioners we interviewed), they all had smart phones, which they could use to various levels. Many of the pensioners had kindles or other tablet devices and could use touch screens. If they didn't have broadband, they could use public computers in libraries or community centres. While this wasn't a representative sample by any means, our sense was that to consider this demographic as unconnected is woefully inaccurate. It was clear that smart phone technology has radically altered issues of connectedness.
- Digital technology was used in two clear ways: (1) in established and routine ways (to connect with existing friends, shop online through established routes and platforms); (2) to search for information. It was always the latter that produced unease and disquiet.
- When interviewees used digital technologies as part of their working practice, examples were prompted by instances of failure on the part of the technology. This is the moment when the

technology becomes visible. Successful integration was rarely noted. We think this highlights issues around perceptions and articulations of technology.

### *Perceptions of Technology*

- Conceptions of the technologically expert as ‘not me’ are widespread, so that technological literacy is rarely admitted to or claimed. It was far more likely that each group member across age groups said they were not expert, literate or advanced, before revealing the extent of their technological use. This suggests to us that ideologies and discourses of the technological literate remain, continuing to produce a discourse of the digital native even when in practice, digital technological use is widespread.

The issue is not about access or practice, then, but about perception and navigation. Some technologies are perceived as advanced, so that even when they are used, focus group members suggested they were not used to their full extent. Secondly, even though technology was used and appropriated, there was a sense that information remained difficult to find – because of plethora, the inadequacy of search engines, lack of authority (by comparison to, say disappearing libraries or community centre where an ‘expert’ could be asked), or more traditional routes to information such as local papers or notice boards not being adequately replaced by the digital. For the new mothers in particular, this produced a real tension when neoliberal practices of consumption met with a lack of authority as we discuss in section 4.

## **2. Community spaces and places**

This scoping study naturally segued with a community centre review that was underway at Leeds Council, not least because the issue of where and when community groups met became increasingly paramount. The localism agenda of the current government has had profound consequences for community centres as Leeds Council detailed in our discussions, and we became interested not only in the variety of community centres, but also in how each was perceived. A number of issues conflate here:

- a) The localism agenda and the requirement for local communities to ‘take control’ of their own resources. This has produced an uneven spread of local enterprises into more affluent areas as the processes through which control can be gained favour educated & literate populations with experience of form filling, meeting management and mediation (See also North 2011).
- b) The economic context and the need for Leeds Council to rationalise its ‘assets’. This places pressure on the council to source management from elsewhere as it becomes increasingly unviable for the council to fund these resources with their decreasingly budget. It has resulted in partnership agreements, consolidations of a range of resources under one roof, and a new form of community centre that is social enterprise first, and community ‘facing’ second.
- c) More traditional community centres/social enterprise where rooms are multi purpose and rented out for particular groups continue, and it is difficult to ascertain how these have been affected by the issues above given the short time frame of the scoping study. However, reading the minutes from meetings that are available online, it is clear these places operate on a hand-to- mouth basis. By comparison with the third or private sector centres, which have emerged through the transfer of asset management discussed above (and which have ‘community facing’ elements), these buildings are certainly in a worse state of repair. Our interview with Leeds Council’s

Environments and Neighbourhoods directorate supported this general observation and indicated their own awareness of such issues.

- d) Tariffs for hiring rooms have increased, so that many of the smaller community groups now meet in domestic settings or cafes. **They have not moved online.** The focus groups also discussed the increase of forms they were now required to fill in for room use – health and safety primarily, but also insurance and other legal requirements, they found both cumbersome and time consuming.
- e) The council has resourced one-stop community centres where local services are increasingly housed under one roof. In theory this produces a purpose built local space to discuss health, benefits, educational and local issues. However, when coupled with the austerity measures discussed above, many of these have closed so there is less rationality for the resources and fewer local one-stop centres. While they occasionally house libraries and Internet cafes, they are not understood as community centres, but as ‘service centres’, certainly by their managers – thus producing a very particular notion of community and locale.

For us, these issues have produced a two-tier environment for community centres as either social enterprise or service delivery at their ‘best’ (i.e. rationalised) or as outdated, unsustainable and even a drain on resources at the other end of the spectrum. Perhaps unsurprisingly it was in these latter places that the participants talked about meaningful engagement, support, friendship and community. The social enterprise buildings and service centres were discussed instead along more consumerist lines – where activities would be booked and paid for, or specific information would be sought. The second issue relates to how this newer environment constructs community – even in the social enterprise buildings there was a clear distinction between the well-resourced social enterprise (the hireable wireless desk spaces, the conference facilities or the cafes) and the community facing rooms (multi purpose rooms with a jumble of furniture in corners). For us, this continues to construct community in problematic ways, and ways that are increasingly separated from the individual (see Thornham, Parry and Thumim, forthcoming).

### **3. Examples of Engagement with / of Leeds Council**

As part of the community centre review process, we were specifically asked to ascertain perceptions of Leeds Council from members of our focus groups. We did so in a number of ways – the first related to information about activities, resources and support in local areas. The second related to places, spaces and activities. And the third related to moments of civic intervention or action. In relation to this latter issue, civic intervention was discussed in a similar way to technological expertise insofar as the first response by focus group members was that they were not interested in politics, had not done anything that could be classed as civic-related, and did not think there was any point, because their voices were not heard (were disillusioned with local council and politics). However, when we discussed these issues in more depth, it often transpired that people had become engaged or were engaged, but just did not consider these practices as civic. For us there is a real disjuncture, then, between perceptions of civic activity and everyday civic activity.

- a) As suggested earlier, information about local activities, resources or support was difficult to find. The majority of the focus group members said that they found it increasingly hard to find what they wanted to find on or offline. In relation to the former, this was because of the plethora of information, the inadequacy of search engines and the lack of cohesion for the Leeds Council

website. While the council itself does not have a cohesive identity in terms of its management or organisation (as our interviews detailed), it nevertheless perceived as having one, by Leeds inhabitants. This makes the multitude of council-related websites incoherent and difficult to navigate, and it is exacerbated by the perception of homogeneity by the general public. The closure of local libraries, community centres, newsletters or local papers, has also meant that information along more traditional and non-digital routes has become problematic. Those who continued to use these resources talked about outdated information and dusty leaflets that misdirected them.

In conjunction with these issues, it was also clear that it was trusted relations and networks that were relied on for accurate information. Family, relatives, schools, friends, were usually the first point of contact for finding out something. Again, because of the short time span of the scoping study, it is difficult to ascertain whether this is a new or continuing practice, but it certainly suggests for us that trusted authority remains important and that the digital needs to work within these parameters. Information 'itself' needs a context and needs to be verified by a trusted source before it is acted on or accepted. Simply providing many routes to information is inadequate, and the incoherence of the Leeds Council website (or lack of cohesive and related identity) is a problem for these reasons.

- b) Even when buildings were leased or the asset management was transferred, it was often presumed that they were council ran. This meant that the council was considered favourably or not often for reasons beyond its control. But the second issue related to the assumption that there should be a caretaker or manager for each building and that the better thought of spaces were those with such a person in place. Key holder systems may be more cost effective, but they clearly impacted onto a sense of disorganisation, which was presumed to reflect the council (even when it was not a council ran resource). While the state of the building was not a major factor for use, hygiene and the toilet facilities could play a major role in terms of determining return visits. People used or didn't use certain facilities based on word of mouth or friendship groups. So if a friend, a particularly good facilitator, trusted community nurse/midwife, parent, trusted Facebook or Mumsnet group recommended a resource, then it would be visited. People rarely went to a building on their own initiative unless by chance: so use depended on the kinds of facilities, key people running those facilities and existing members. We found that promotion of a particular resource in and of itself was not sufficient to guarantee use without the more traditional lines of communication – teachers, parents, friends all recommending it first.
  
- c) Many of the focus group participants had become involved or were involved in civic issues even while they said they were not interested or involved. In one case, a wheelchair user took a member of the local council around their local area in order to demonstrate how difficult wheelchair mobility was. It resulted in alterations to ramps in the curbs and better pedestrian crossings. In another, a local resident took a councillor to the side of the road to witness the size of the potholes during a local campaign visit. In another instance, local offices were visited to complain about the lack of pedestrian crossings. In all of these cases, the focus group participants said they were not interested in civic issues, that it was a waste of time complaining, that the council were unresponsive and even corrupt. It suggests to us an overriding popular perception and discourse of local power within which such individual acts minimally figure amongst a overriding sense of disaffection or lack of power for individuals. In other words, people feel like

they have little say, even when they have effected change. This is exacerbated by the length of time it takes to change local environments, so that successful interventions required a much longer view. Online questionnaires or information gathering on behalf of the council or other bodies only adds to this as our focus group members felt like they were being mined for information but were still not effecting change. In other words attempts to ascertain public opinion were treated with scepticism. We suggest this is a local issue *as well as* much wider issue about perceptions of what engagement might look like. Both have to work in conjunction with one another.

#### 4. Articulations of need

This last issue refers to moments when technology became visible or information had the opposite effect from the intended one. It relates to the notion of technology ideally being invisible – so that technology ideally should be a support for a mobile user rather than a cumbersome barrier that has to be overcome. Invisible or ambient technology makes articulations of (technological or other) need difficult insofar as users are rarely asked to consider the limitations of technology for meeting civic or welfare related needs. When technology is used routinely and becomes invisible, there are few considerations of its limitations: it is only when technology fails that it becomes visible. But even here, need is understood in relation to what the technology could provide, not in terms of a greater sense of a civic, community or welfare related need. It means that need in and of itself is emerging in relation to utility of technology and in relation to the individual.

In a related issue, moments when the technology becomes visible has massive implications for perceptions not just of the technology itself, but also of self-understanding and reliance. The construction of the neoliberal consumer is so prevalent, that when this ideology is revealed as a construct because the technology becomes visible, it has massive implications. For these reasons it is worth recounting some of these issues.

The first relates to age and failing health. So for the older demographics, technology becomes visible again at the point they can no longer use it in a familiar way – so vision failure, or mobility failure that results in existing technologies (transport, digital, domestic) becoming problematic. It is at this point, we argue, that the discourse of the digital native and expert emerges as ‘not me’. And even when new technologies or practices overcome this initial moment of visibility (such as the kindle replacing books so that font size can be increased, or wheelchair friendly buses increasingly replacing older models) the perception remains. Socio-cultural factors such as retirement and a sense of decreased value in terms of societal contribution also play a part here.

The second relates to life events, such as pregnancy and childbirth. Here the perception of self as mobile, resourceful and in control (at least in terms of choosing medical help, locations for childbirth, information) become more and more unviable as the pregnant mother is increasingly classed in medical terms – as a patient. At the same time, and on a more individual scale, the information that is sourced and read by expectant mothers is found to be increasingly useless, conflicting and even disruptive so that the initial perceptions of self become blurred. The focus groups we ran with new mothers, talked about moments of powerlessness, when their sense of their own autonomy became questionable. We suggest that this process, in a similar vein to the example above, is a result of

technology becoming visible – technologies of the body, medical technologies and information technologies.

Visible technologies and tensions is perhaps the least formed outcome of our scoping study, and perhaps the most interesting for what it suggests about the relationship between technology, everyday and the body. It is noted here for these reasons and it is the issue we would like to pursue in further studies.

## Summary of the Scope:

The scoping study used Leeds as a case study to explore cultures and practices of engagement. We should note that some of the wider contexts such as the economic climate and the need to rationalise processes, or long-term practices of engagement that go beyond the immediacy of political agenda but are the result of established working relations and practices, have not been at the forefront of this report. However, it was immediately clear that the context for this research is technological, political, economic *and* social, so that to address only one element will not solve some of the issues we investigated. Despite this, we would suggest that in relation to the digital, one of the major issues is that social media and new technology is firmly tied to the individual – key people who are known to be interested, and have consequently taken on the role. Other media, however, is approached more strategically, and has well established modes and processes underpinning it. It is an interesting convolution – one that sees new technology as related to the individual, and media *per se*, as a wider organisational strategy. It has obvious consequences both in terms of the possibilities for change and uptake, and for the future of engagement. While controlled spaces for engagement can be incorporated into an outward facing website (for example), local residents are both aware and cynical of such attempts, which they see as overt and visible attempts to represent engagement, without actually engaging. Their sense of powerlessness is both the result of being ineffective in the past around local issues, and the result of feeling like they are being ‘mined’ – which is to do with the meshing of wider media and consumerist strategies with civic engagement – an online consumer questionnaire looks and feels the same as a council one (for example). People understand the council as a homogenous unit – which makes the online representation, and the organisational process harder to comprehend from a user perspective. It makes accountability more difficult, but even though the council may not have any centralised power, this perception is the most dominant one – so that when localised or outsourced issues are raised, it is the council, and the civic sphere *per se*, which is blamed. In other words, disengagement and disinterest is not the result of technological barriers, but a complex series of wider issues to do with experience, explanation, perception and interpretation. Long term strategies and measurements of engagement that go beyond the technology are seen as the most successful, so it is worth reiterating that the technology cannot replace face to face. In the case of Leeds Council, the online spaces are becoming more obscure and harder to navigate, not less so – information is genuinely hard to both find and validate whether its about building control, community activities, leisure centres, child centres or council-related organisations. At the same time, social media can be used effectively to promote engagement activities – but this needs to become a strategy, thought through and planned for across the entire council, rather than being reliant on one or two individuals in certain sectors.

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## APPENDIX For Section 2

### 1: QUESTIONS FOR PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

#### 1. GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT WEB & SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

- What current web presence does the organisation have?
- What current social media presence do they have?
  - Facebook?
  - Twitter?
  - LinkedIn?
  - Tumblr?
  - Pinterest?
  - YouTube?
  - Others?
- Who is responsible for the organisation's web presence? What does this entail?
- Who is responsible for the organisation's social media presence? What does this entail?
- How are decisions made about the delegation of responsibility for managing social media presence?
- What kinds of skills are deemed to be necessary to be responsible for managing social media presence?
- Does the organisation have a social media strategy, or some other form of organisational social media governance?

#### 2. ENGAGEMENT WITH DIGITAL (WEB & SOCIAL MEDIA) DATA ABOUT PUBLICS

- What would you say is the purpose of the organisation's website and various social media pages/accounts?
  - Do you see user activity in these spaces as a form of engagement?
- Does the organisation monitor data from web traffic? If so, how? Is it required to keep data of this kind? Is it willing to share data of this kind?
  - Some examples of what could be monitored or analysed:
  - Web logs
  - Popular search terms
  - Popular referring sites
  - Paths through sites, popular pages, time spent on pages
  - Links
- Does the organisation monitor data from social media content? If so, how?
  - Some examples of what is possible:
  - monitoring numbers of mentions of key terms (eg Leeds City Museum) with free tools like [www.socialmention.com](http://www.socialmention.com)
  - measuring online influence/authority with tools like PeerIndex or Klout
  - purchasing the service of social media monitoring companies who can provide you with data about what 'publics' are saying about you in (some) social media spaces
  - purchasing the advice of some social media companies about how to intervene in these conversations
- Does the organisation intervene in online discussion, either on the web or in social media forums, that relate to it?

- Are there any (ethical) limits to what the organisation would do in terms of intervention in online discussion.
- What motivates the organisation to participate in digital data methods (fear? cost cutting? doing what everyone else is doing in order to look modern?)
- Does the organisation engage the services of social media consultants, analysts, strategists etc to assist with such activities?
- Would the organisation consider doing so?
- Why/why not?
- Does the organisation monitor or measure engagement in physical museum/gallery spaces, either qualitatively or quantitatively, with or without digital technologies?

### 3. USES/UNDERSTANDINGS OF DIGITAL DATA

- What role do digital data methods play within the organisation?
- If digital data is gathered, what happens to this data?
  - Is it having an impact somewhere in the organisation?
  - What do other areas in the organisation think about these kinds of activities?
  - Is there any sense of when it might *not* be useful to engage with the social media activities of 'publics'?
- What do you want to know about users through these methods?
- What meaning and significance is attached to digital data and digital data methods? Is the digital seen as a cost-effective solution to current funding cuts?
- Are there digital data analysis activities that they would like to engage in? If so, what? What are the barriers to doing so?

## APPENDIX 2: MEASURING DIGITAL PUBLICS: INTERN OBSERVATION GUIDE

- Note down examples that could be deemed to constitute public engagement
- Note down examples of discussions which reveal who the organisations see as their 'publics'
- Note down examples of what the organisations appear to think 'engagement' is
- Note down examples of what expertise the organisations appear to be interested in accessing (and who they consider to be experts, and in what).
- Note down examples of the use of digital media technologies to enhance this 'engagement'
- Note down examples of assumptions that people seem to have about what digital technologies might do / offer etc
- Note down examples of what people seem to think social media content/activity of 'publics' might represent / be
- Note down examples of what expertise the organisations appear to be interested in accessing (and who they consider to be experts, and in what)
- What do the organisations appear to assume about the social media 'expertise' of the interns? Note down anything that would seem to help answer this question.