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Interrogating the complexities of digital communication for young people engaged in social action

Final report

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Executive Summary

Engaging more young people in social action is an important policy objective for the current government. Communication is fundamental to achieving it, and digital communication in particular, in the form of social media, websites, mobile technologies and apps, is commonly viewed as a cost-effective means both of enabling young people to communicate using tools they are familiar with, and of reaching large numbers of people in targeted communities. However, neither digital technologies nor their usage are value-neutral or independent of material constraints. As such, they are contested communication tools, inseparable from conditions in the material world. The context in which they are used, including the social, cultural and technological environment, the objectives of the communication, and the skills and abilities of people who use them, all shape fundamentally the impact they have within and between communities.

This exploratory project was designed to answer two questions. First, how do the complexities of digital technology facilitate or constrain narratives deployed by young people as interventions in their communities? And second, how do the complexities of digital technology affect young communicators' sense of voice and recognition, and of being able to make an effective intervention in their communities?

A case study approach was adopted: five social action campaigns supported by one charity (Young Citizen UK, YCUK¹), were analysed in depth. Interviews were carried out with the campaigners and with the YCUK CEO and Head of Communications as part of the study.

The findings revealed that digital technology is fundamental to the construction and dissemination of powerful, personal narratives that can create change. First, in the construction of actual campaigns resources, the ability to combine multiple media forms (music, sound, visuals, text) allows the message that participants want to communicate to be delivered on multiple levels. Digital technology allows emotional and rational dimensions of experience to be interwoven in a narrative, strengthening the impact of the resource. It permits a more fluid use of time and space in the representation of experience: rather than having to physically accompany the campaigner, the audience is presented with key experiences that communicate a sense of what 'life' or a 'day' might be like for people in this situation. Finally, digital technology also provides flexibility in the way resources are structured, so that they are presented in formats that appeal to the audience (e.g. in the style of presentation or the flexibility of access).

¹ Names of organisations and individuals have been changed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality

Digital technology is also vital for the dissemination of campaign resources, which in turn leads to greater awareness and more opportunities for intervention. Networking and distribution online can lead to more opportunities offline through the conversations emerging from digital interactions. This link to offline events is crucial for successful social action, since the effects of a campaign as something that has prompted genuine material change in the way people think, feel or act can only really be evidenced in embodied interactions. Online visibility certainly made the participants feel valued, and encouraged them to continue their work, but they consistently said that the most important evidence of success came from their face-to-face interactions. Digital technology is necessary, but not sufficient, for making an effective social intervention.

Digital technology also has limitations, particularly if institutional support for communication is lacking. The campaigns in this study were successful because YCUK provided the necessary expertise to construct the campaign resource and maintain it for a period of time. They also disseminated it widely. But participants noted that the more complex the technology, the more difficult and the more costly it was to maintain. It was unlikely they could have created the resource independently, and some participants found it difficult to find the time to continue to disseminate it.

The findings illustrate the dialectical relationship between voice and recognition. The articulation of voice, in a context where voice is genuinely valued, kicks off a response and dialogue with individuals and institutions that constitutes recognition. Recognition generates increased confidence and self-esteem, empowering the speaker to a new articulation of voice. The dialectic begins at the point at which participants' voices are actively listened to and validated – in the case of YCUK, it is the moment when the YPC meets participants and confirms that their ideas can form the basis of a powerful communication process. This individual recognition makes campaigners more confident to pursue a campaign. As they do so, they talk about their ideas to more people, enjoying more recognition in the process. The more they use their voice, the more visible they become and the more they are recognized. Their voice becomes stronger, it is disseminated more widely through the connections they make, and their interventions are more powerful as a result. Voice, then, is a process that requires practice and work in order to develop over time, and in parallel with the confidence and self-esteem generated through recognition.

In summary, this study found that digital technologies were fundamental to supporting social action for participants, by helping them to construct a more powerful message and disseminate it more

widely. Combined with offline activity, they opened the door to genuine engagement and reflexivity among both audience and the participants, thereby supporting the development of voice and recognition as part of the social action process. However, voice and recognition were experienced most powerfully when the participants had evidence that their social action was creating real change in their communities. Recognition in the online world, in the form of 'likes', 'shares', and 'retweets', without any foundation in a material relationship, were a relatively poor substitute for face-to-face relationships.

1.0 Background and Academic Context

In an age of austerity, government policy has emphasized the role of the voluntary sector in improving social outcomes for various groups. The topic of ‘Social Action’ appeared in the Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition agreement, including measures to encourage volunteering, charitable giving, active citizenship and making more space for third sector involvement in public services. Since the coalition has been in office, a range of measures has been introduced to deliver on these promises, including the ‘Decade of Social Action’, and the Centre for Social Action (see: [Promoting Social Action](#) and [Centre for Social Action](#)).

Encouraging social action among young people has been a particular focus, with the Prime Minister ordering a review of the quality and quantity of youth social action for 10-20 year-olds in 2012 (see [In the Service of Others](#)), a process which resulted in the ‘[Step up to Serve](#)’ charity being set up in 2013, and the #iwill campaign being launched in 2014. The campaign describes youth social action as ‘led, owned and shaped by young people’s ideas, needs and decision-making’ and has ‘a clear intended benefit to a community, cause or social problem’ (<http://www.iwill.org.uk/about-us/principles/>). It should also help young people realize their potential – a personally transformative ‘journey’ that can also support the development of social mobility and employability skills. Framing social action in this way positions young people themselves at the centre of the activity; while communities benefit from their work, the choice and direction of activities undertaken is driven by young people themselves, and they are also recognized as a key beneficiary. Theoretically at least, their voices, opinions and experiences are the driver of change in a bottom-up process.

1.1 Digital communication and youth social action

Communication is fundamental to the engagement of young people in social action initiatives, and digital communication in particular, in the form of social media, websites, mobile technologies and apps, is commonly viewed as a cost-effective means both of enabling young people to communicate using tools they are familiar with, and of reaching large numbers of people in targeted communities. For example, The #iwill campaign recognizes the importance of communication (see <http://www.iwill.org.uk/resources/communications/>), and provides a wide range of documents, infographics, logos, press release templates, and key messages for participants to use. It also puts particular emphasis on digital channels, with an active Twitter feed, YouTube channel and Facebook page, a hashtag that people can link to, and a twibbon that they can attach to images to demonstrate their support for the campaign. The emphasis on communication as an integral part of *social* action reflects the reality that ‘mediated sociality’ shapes people’s everyday lives, and has become ‘part of society’s institutional fabric’ (van Dijck, 2013: 6). At the same time, our use of online

media is increasingly both strategic and reflexive: '[r]elationships are constantly chosen, established, maintained and renewed and personal media are employed to establish and maintain social relations actively.' (Lüders, 2008: 697). Indeed, 'ICTs provide a reach and an immediacy that is not possible when only face-to-face interaction is possible' (Schroeder and Ling, 2014: 797). In this context, to envisage youth social action without communicating through digital tools has become an impossibility. Digital communication is deeply embedded in the ways we present ourselves, our activities and our relationships and the personal narratives that populate social media appear authentic: 'open and honest and close to a 'true self'' (Lüders, 2008: 697). As a ritualized system of mediated routines (Schroeder and Ling, 2014), it has the potential to help the progress of social action initiatives by increasing solidarity, but also constrain that action by prioritizing some norms of communicative practice over others.

Van Dijk makes a distinction between two dimensions of 'social' interaction in the digital ecosystem: human connectedness, driven by people and focused on personal interaction, and automated connectivity, or the 'systems that engineer and manipulate connections' (2013: 12). There is a tension between the two, as the celebration of connectedness via social media is undermined by the technical complexities and commercial interests that shape the online world. In the context of the #iwill campaign, for example, participants are encouraged to share their progress in a wide variety of ways, including via their social media presence. In the process, they not only construct a close identification between themselves and the action they are taking, but they also 'lend' their identity to the organization, and thereby encourage others like them – their friends, family, social networks - to participate. The strategy may help young people to feel recognized for their work (albeit on a relatively superficial level), but it simultaneously delivers to the charity's own self-interest by helping it to achieve the government's policy objective of growing engagement in youth social action by 2020.

Clearly, digital technology is an important tool for promoting social action. Yet its promise may be difficult to realize in practice. Neither digital technologies nor their usage are value-neutral or independent of material constraints (Papacharissi, 2002, 2009). They require access to specialised hardware and software, particular forms of communication literacy and particular formats for delivery (see, e.g. Lundby, 2008, Lance Bennett, 2008). Connective technologies manage and measure popularity in quantitative terms; those who are 'liked' and 'shared' most are positioned at the centre of networks, leaving others marginalized. All these conditions set parameters for who is able to communicate, what kinds of narratives can be constructed, and in what form (Thumim, 2012,

van Dijck, 2013). In this sense, digital technologies are contested communication tools, inseparable from conditions in the material world. The context in which they are used, including the social, cultural and technological environment, the objectives of the communication, and the skills and abilities of people who use them, all shape fundamentally the impact they have within and between communities (Lüders, 2008).

The same applies to the effects of digital communication. In the context of social activism, for example, social media is used to call out support for material changes in the organization of society. Those changes take place on the ground, in specific places and spaces, not in the virtual space of the internet (Gerbaudo, 2012). In a world where mediated sociality is the norm, digital communication is a vital symbolic tool through which the force of both emotional and rational argument can be communicated in the context of human relationships, fostering connectedness (rather than only connectivity) across space and time. It is a form of media practice that 'prepare[s] the terrain, or set[s] the scene, for people coming together in public space.' (Gerbaudo, 2012: 40). In the context of youth social action, then, the content and form of digital communication will play a role in shaping the agenda for action and the form that action takes.

1.2 Evaluating digital communication in youth social action: Voice and recognition

Given the centrality of young people's voices and experiences to the way youth social action has been framed, an important consideration when evaluating the impact of digital communication on any kind of youth social action campaign, is the degree to which young people feel that digital technologies enable their voices to be recognized and heard by society.

Couldry (2010) argues that acquiring 'voice' is not simply a matter of disseminating information, or 'voice as process', but should rather be an experience of 'voice as value' (Couldry, 2010: 2), where one's unique perspective and narration of the world is valued in the social and political systems that structure our lives. Enacting voice therefore involves self-representation, including the representation of one's lived, embodied experience, in order to prompt a reflexive dialogue with an audience about the way society is organised. As Thumim (2012) notes, self-representations in the digital world are always mediated by their form and function; they may be made on behalf of an individual or a community, speak for others or speak as them. These mediating factors also play a role in how representations are constructed; self-representation is never complete, but is a strategic decision about which aspects of the self to present, and how to present them, in order to achieve a particular goal at a particular time (Thumim, 2012). In the context of voice, where reflexive dialogue is the goal, the presentation of self will be designed to prompt reflexivity among the audience in

relation to specific aspects of their own identity and experience, which in turn will drive dialogue in a particular direction.

Understanding self-representation in the context of voice highlights its inherently political nature, a means of delivering 'authentic accounts of individual 'ordinary people' in the context of power-laden social relations' (Thumim, 2012: 4). Using narratives of the self as a form of political discourse challenges power by equating the voice of the speaker with the gaze of the audience (Thumim, 2012); in this sense, articulating voice is a means of contesting existing norms and challenging patterns of discursive and material authority.

In a world where voice as value persists over voice as process, individuals who are able to enact voice receive recognition. Honneth (1996) argues that the need for recognition is part of what makes us human. On an individual level, recognition emerges in the context of one-to-one relationships, where unconditional acceptance of the other generates self-confidence in both parties. At the 'rights' level of recognition, collective recognition of an individual is expressed through the legal system and confirms the individual as a 'morally responsible person [with]... the qualities that make participation in discursive will-formation possible' (1996: 120). This level of recognition is fundamental to self-respect and the belief in one's validity as a citizen. Finally, the solidarity level of recognition refers to the 'social esteem that allows [individuals] to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities' (p. 121). This form of recognition is constantly negotiated as part of struggles over the definition of societal norms, values and goals, and the role played by different subjectivities in realizing them.

Taken together, the three levels of recognition empower individuals to enact voice, and also reinforce the value attached to voice as a societal intervention, once it is articulated. The relationship between recognition and voice as value can be expressed in terms of narrative and discourse: voice as value privileges individual *narratives* of the self and of experience as important societal interventions, while recognition, particularly at the highly contested solidarity level, pays attention to and values the different *discourses* about self and society that are contained within those narratives.

2.0 Aims and objectives

Given that the online world, and social media in particular, form ‘an arena of public communication where norms get shaped and rules get contested’ (van Dijk, 2013: 19), and given the taken-for-granted nature of mediated sociality, particularly among young people, it is fair to assume that digital technologies will have a significant impact on young people’s experience of voice and recognition during the social action they undertake. However, the nature and extent of this impact is as yet poorly understood. The project aimed to fill this gap in knowledge by answering the following questions:

1. How do the complexities of digital technology facilitate or constrain narratives deployed by young people as interventions in their communities?
2. How do the complexities of digital technology affect young communicators’ sense of voice and recognition, and of being able to make an effective intervention in their communities?

3.0 Research design and methods

The pilot project was conducted in partnership with one UK charity, Young Citizen UK (YCUK), which helps young people (16-25 years old) from across the UK to develop communication campaigns in order to inform and educate other members of their communities about the issues that concern them (e.g. homelessness, disability, eating disorders, teen suicide). At the heart of YCUK’s work is a belief in the transformational potential of communication and, in particular, the importance of giving voice and recognition to young people as a route to building healthier and more cohesive communities. In other words, YCUK helps young people develop a public ‘voice’ and have it heard by the right audience. The campaigns generate substantial media coverage and frequently provide a platform from which campaigners can engage with community institutions (police, schools) and decision makers (MPs, councillors, policymakers) to create additional practical change in the communities they care about.

A case study approach was adopted for the research. In-depth interviews were conducted with the CEO (Maria Hepworth) and Head of Communications (Gabrielle Solder) of YCUK, and with five young people who had completed campaigns that included social media, online videos, websites or other digital communication channels. The interviews explored the rationale and purpose of the campaign, the process of developing the campaign and the choices made about the technology used, the ways in which the technology shaped the messages being communicated, and the role played by non-digital communication channels as part of the campaign. The discussions also focused on the development of voice and recognition for campaigners, as a result of their campaigns. Interviews

took place at a location convenient for the participant, and lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours.

In parallel with the interviews, the finished campaigns carried out by the five participants were analysed using visual discourse analysis to explore how digital technologies shaped the messages being promoted in the service of stronger communities. Rose (2012) argues that in any analysis of visual or multimedia data, three sites need to be taken into account. The site of production refers to the technologies used, the processes of production and the political, social and economic contexts for the work. The site of the image refers to the ways in which the artifact is constructed, the aesthetics used and the ways in which its design relates to other genres. The site of the audience refers to the analysis of the audience being targeted, the way the material is constructed in light of that, the degree to which meaning is clear or opaque, and the options for interpretation by the audience. Each of these sites is reflected in the summaries of each campaign found in appendix 2, and they formed the basis for structuring the analysis of the resources. Findings from this analysis were reviewed in a dialectical engagement with the interview findings to produce the conclusions of the study.

3.1 The campaigns

A summary of the campaigns is below. Campaign names are omitted to protect the identity of the participants.

| Campaign | Topic | Format | Approach |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| A | Bullying | Website | Information dissemination |
| B | Road safety | Public information film | Personal story |
| C | Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder | Animation | Personal story |
| D | Tourette’s syndrome | Documentary film | Personal story |
| E | Homelessness | Mobile app | Information dissemination |

The campaigns were chosen because they had all used digital technologies in the construction and/or dissemination of the campaign resource, and they had been successfully launched and received. The campaigners were invited to participate in the research by the Head of Communications for YCUK via an email that gave them an overview of the study, explained why they were being invited to participate and confirmed anonymity and confidentiality. All accepted the invitation, after which they were contacted by the researcher to arrange an interview.

All the campaigners had certain things in common: they were very familiar with digital technologies and used social media (mainly Twitter and Facebook) a great deal; they were motivated to change the way people think and / or behave in relation to their campaign topic; and they wanted to improve the way young people were perceived by society, demonstrating the good they do in order to counter the negative stereotypes in the media. They had all experienced some kind of marginalization prior to their campaign, and this was a crucial part of their motivation to act.

Campaign formats varied depending on the requirements of both the campaigner and the subject matter. All campaigns were designed to generate some kind of change in behavior or attitude among their audiences, and all originated from personal experiences. All campaigns had a lead campaigner, who was the person being interviewed, but they also involved a team of other people, ranging from friends to institutional contacts (charities, the police, local councils), all of whom contributed to the creation and dissemination of the final resource.

3.2 The campaign development process

Campaigns are developed through a series of steps. Campaigners are recruited via a Young Person's Coordinator (YPC), who visits local organisations (e.g. schools, youth clubs, community organisations) to tell young people about YCUK and invite them to come to the organisation with any ideas they might have. Young people who want to do a campaign then approach the YPC with their initial idea and over a series of meetings (the **planning phase**), they discuss and refine the idea as much as they can. A lead campaigner emerges through this process, but a team of young people – usually friends – support the project. Throughout this process, the YPC's focus is on what the campaigners want to say and how they might best say it – there is no attempt to impose a narrative or reinterpret a message. However, to make a campaign effective the focus has to be specific rather than general (e.g. 'how having autism affects schooling' rather than 'all about autism'), so campaigners are encouraged to be clear and precise about the message they intend to communicate.

Once these first meetings are over, the campaigner, their team members and their YPC meet with a member of the creative team from YCUK, to discuss the message, content and format of the core campaign resource in more detail (the **creative phase**). Ideas are usually finalised in this meeting, and the campaign resource is created collaboratively between the YCUK creative team (usually with the skills and technical ability to create what the campaigner wants) and the campaigner (who owns the 'narrative' or story around which the resource is created). During this time, the campaigner and their team, with the help of the YPC, establish connections with local organisations who can help

create and/or disseminate the resource (e.g. by providing content or distributing it to their contacts, either online or offline) (the **engagement phase**).

An important condition of engaging in a campaign is that the finished resource is presented to a face-to-face audience. At these formal ‘launches’, campaigners receive live feedback, gauge the success of the resource, and explore how conversations might develop about the issue (the **launch phase**). The launch also gives them the opportunity to speak to an invited audience about the issue that concerns them, and as such it gives them visibility and voice among people who they believe are important to changing the situation. Local and regional journalists may be invited to this event as well.

Following the launch, and with the help of the YCUK communication team, the resource is circulated very widely through digital channels run by the campaigners themselves, as well as through YCUK’s own website and social media networks (the **dissemination phase**). Some campaigns are selected for coverage on regional news programmes², in which case a broadcast-ready film is made by the YCUK broadcast team, specifically for distribution to the TV station. Similarly, if a campaign merits attention from the national media, or justifies an approach to local or national government (e.g. councilors, policymakers or MPs), then the YCUK communications team will lead that initiative with the agreement of the campaigner. All media engagement and public affairs work is led by the campaigners themselves so that they retain control over their message and voice.

Many campaigns spark new or related initiatives, but at that stage YCUK withdraws from the formal support process. YCUK staff (particularly the YPC and the communications team) do try to keep in touch informally, to maintain the relationship.

4.0 Findings

The findings are divided into two sections. First, an overview is given of the ways in which voice and recognition developed through the social action that the campaigners are engaged in. The focus is on how participation in a communicative process that centres the participants’ experiences and narratives, facilitates the development of voice as value and ultimately leads to opportunities for recognition. Against this background, the second section examines the effects of digital technology and communication on the development of the resources and the dissemination of the campaigns.

² The charity has a partnership with a chain of regional TV stations, where campaigns from the regions are regularly featured in the evening’s local news bulletins.

The focus is on the ways that the technology affected the quality of the intervention being made, as well as how it shaped the experience of voice and recognition for the campaigners.

4.1 The emergence of voice and recognition in social action

Key points

- **Experiencing voice as value in the course of engaging in social action is a transformative process for campaigners and audiences, grounded in both discursive interaction and material change.**
- **The reflexive nature of voice changes the way people think about their own identity, the way they think about others, the way they feel they are perceived and understood.**
- **The interaction inherent to voice as value generates opportunities for recognition to emerge: confidence improves and participants develop their belief in their right to be heard as a citizen, and the value of their intervention to society.**
- **Institutional support is also essential to voice as value; recognition from individuals is important, but when institutions that shape society – the media, local government, the education system – actively engage with what campaigners are saying, recognition moves to another level.**

The CEO of YCUK emphasized the fact that the charity exists to facilitate voice and connections for young people engaging in campaigns. The approach is the opposite of many social action programmes, where the form and focus of social action is pre-defined by an institution. As the CEO put it:

'We just turned it on its head and said, "Shall we just take a risk?" And we said, "You can do anything you want to, provided you make a difference to at least one other person". So that's the deal. That's the deal that still stands.' Maria Hepworth

The organisation's approach empowers the campaigner from the very beginning of the process, supporting what they want to say, rather than imposing a message on them or making them fit their message to a pre-existing agenda.

'we could freely do what we wanted to do which was another good thing about YCUK, is that they wanted to give you a voice so they were quite happy to go with what you wanted' Ed

This commitment to listening to the individual and prioritizing their message is an expression of 'voice as value' in Couldry's (2010) terms – value is attached to the participants' lived experience and the narratives that emerge from it. For the campaigners, experiencing voice as value starts in the planning phase, where they meet their YPC to discuss their focus and realise that their stories are a valid starting point for taking action. At this point, recognition at the individual level gives them the

confidence to continue their journey. As Gabrielle Solder pointed out, the initial contact sets the tone for the rest of the relationship.

‘that’s when [...] whichever campaigner it is, I suppose finds the courage to go, ‘Well, me,’ and say that for the first time and start exploring with [the YPC] what it is that they want to say. [...] I think that that’s quite interesting, because probably it’s not very often, certainly if you’re around the age of 16, that you are asked what it is that you want to say and how you want to say it.’ Gabrielle Solder

In the creative phase, the collaboration with YCUK’s creative experts resulting in an artifact that reflects the campaigner’s narrative, creates a powerful sense of agency. Transforming voice from a narrative to something material and tangible added a new dimension to the participants’ communication. They were both proud of and happy with their resource. However, this pride was conditional: the important thing was that the resource should be a force for change in individual attitudes and behavior, or in institutional systems, as Theo explained: ‘[t]he resource itself has to help someone in some way. Like what it’s set out to do it has to do.’ Thus, the empowerment participants felt through being genuinely heard, was inextricably linked to the specific social purpose that underpinned their campaigns. More generally, it provided important evidence of the good work that young people do in society - countering the negative stereotypes that they felt pervaded the media.

‘[O]ur voice would be showing people that [young people] do have a right and they do have the ability to change something and it’s not all bad things that you hear about young people doing. Like we are doing some amazing things that adults wouldn’t think to tackle.’ Fiona

In the launch phase, campaigners see and hear the audience reaction to their resource. Face-to-face interaction is crucial, since it permits a conversation to emerge about the issue that the campaigners are addressing. At this point, voice becomes both dialogic and reflexive – participants noted how audiences visibly changed their perception and attitude towards the issue, based on the new perspective articulated through the campaign resource. Because that perspective was based on participants’ own lives and experiences, positive audience reactions also constituted a solidarity level of recognition, with the potential to improve participants’ self-esteem and encourage them further.

'At first it seemed that they weren't interested to be there, I'm not going to lie, because that's how it came across to me anyway. And we were stood up at the front and we were like, 'We made this, with the help of YCUK,' and then once we sort of ran through it you could see that their attitude changed like that ((clicks fingers)) and they sat upright and were paying attention to us. And that gave us more confidence and we presented it even more, oh yes, it can do this, it can do this, and it can be used for this and X, Y and Z.' Theo

Audience reflexivity was complemented by a process of self-reflection. Some participants were surprised that audiences reacted positively, since their experience had previously been one of marginalisation and dismissal, being 'shut away' because of the generally negative media portrayal of young people in society (Ed), or being perceived as an embodied problem because of their condition (Vince). Having received recognition and experienced voice as value during the campaign, the assumption that they would be marginalized again was proved wrong. Instead, they were prompted to focus on what they offered society based on their experience, rather than what they could not do or be. Vince, for example, identified an opportunity to start a consultancy business to teach organisations how to accommodate the needs of employees with disabilities, while Theo discussed the possibility of starting a social enterprise with his friends, on the basis of the work done with YCUK.

The dissemination phase complements the launch phase. Online dissemination that prompted reactions in the form of retweets, likes and visits to websites all contributed to the feeling among participants that their resource was valued. Two participants commented on the number of retweets they had had, and interpreted this interest very positively. Being 'liked' or retweeted is an indicator of popularity and value in the digital world (van Dijk, 2013), and it created a powerful contrast with participants' previous experience of being ignored or not heard. Instead of being positioned at the edges of the world, they were at the centre of events. Even if temporary, it was a powerful form of recognition that further enhanced their confidence.

Media interest and coverage played a particularly important role as a form of institutional recognition for campaigners. Journalists speak to and for society, and their support for the participants' work was experienced as an eloquent expression of voice as value. The fact that many of YCUK's campaigners overcome difficult circumstances to do good is, in itself, a good media story and journalists' interest further validated the importance of their lived experience. Participants commented on the ways in which their face-to-face encounters with journalists and presenters were

characterised by a genuine interest in them, their opinions and their work. Positive media coverage also increased the visibility of their message among targeted audiences, and gave them a degree of symbolic status as a valued member of society with a positive contribution to make.

This institutional recognition was reinforced for participants when staff from other organisations (councils, schools, health services, related charities) saw the resource, or found out about it via the media, and subsequently invited them to take part in related initiatives. Indeed, Theo went so far as to argue that institutional recognition was absolutely fundamental not only to the value of their intervention, but to its success on the ground.

'[T]hat reception was our make or break moment. Although the young people from the hostels had said, oh, it's great, it's great, it's great, but as awful as it sounds it's sort of up to them, the council etcetera, the authority figures, whether this is going to sink or swim. Because they have the power. The young people, the homeless people, everyone can say this is great, but if the council and the NHS etc weren't as nice to us [...] as they were this could have been a failure; they could have said, no, that's awful, it was a bad idea.' Theo

4.1.2 Individual and social transformations through voice and recognition

The findings on voice and recognition show that experiencing voice as value in the course of engaging in social action is a transformative process, grounded in discursive interaction and material change. The reflexive nature of voice changes the way people think about their own identity, the way they think about others, the way they feel they are perceived and understood. The interaction inherent to voice as value generates opportunities for recognition to emerge: confidence improves and participants develop their belief in their right to be heard as a citizen, and the value of their intervention to society. The different dimensions of this transformative process can be summarized as follows:

| Before experiencing voice as value | After experiencing voice as value |
|--|--|
| Isolation <i>Feeling of being alone, poorly understood, remaining at home rather than going out</i> | Connection <i>Finding others who relate to or understand their experience; developing awareness and understanding of oneself and others; being heard and responded to</i> |
| Child / Dependence <i>Not trusted; being guided by others; having little agency</i> | Adult / Independence <i>Being recognized as expert and authoritative; capable of action; taking risks</i> |
| Inaction <i>Passive coping strategies; lacking confidence to change situations</i> | Action <i>Taking concrete steps towards change; experiencing a change in oneself and acting upon it</i> |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Edge <i>Experience life at the margins of society; being judged as inferior / not 'normal'; being ignored</i></p> | <p>Centre <i>Taking centre stage (sometimes literally); being the focus of positive attention; being a source of guidance and expertise</i></p> |
| <p>Uncertainty <i>Of one's place in society; of others' opinions and judgments; of one's own identity; of the value of one's own experience to society</i></p> | <p>Certainty <i>Of one's place in society; of others' opinions and judgments; of one's own identity; of the value of one's own experience to society</i></p> |
| <p>Controlled <i>By a stigmatized situation; by the discourses associated with their situation; lacking options for change</i></p> | <p>In control <i>Separating self-identity from the situation; exerting agency and choice; discovering and creating options for change</i></p> |

The findings also make clear that institutional support is essential to voice as value and to recognition. The participants were empowered by their first encounter with YCUK, when they were told they could do 'anything they want', but it was the fact that this promise was lived up to throughout the process that caused their voice to develop and grow. YCUK's commitment also ensured they had the material wherewithal to create a resource that reflected their experience. Other institutional support was also essential to voice as value; when institutions that shape society – the media, local government, the education system – actively engaged with what participants were saying, recognition moved to another level. They lend their symbolic power to participants' voices and strengthen the potential for social change on the basis of the campaigns. This, in turn, is the basis for solidarity recognition.

4.2 Constructing the resource: Expressing voice through digital technologies

[This section should be read in conjunction with the descriptions of each resource given in appendix 2]

Key points

- **Decisions about the digital format used for the resources were based on the purpose of the campaign, the required content, and the type of audience that participants wanted to target.**
- **Structure, cost and accessibility were key considerations.**

4.2.1 Overview

The process of actively choosing a particular technology to create the resource is fundamental to its effectiveness both as a piece of communication in itself, and in terms of how it will be received by audiences. Decisions about the type of resource to be developed emerged from discussions with YCUK's creative team and the YPC, and were based on the purpose of the campaign, the required content, and the type of audience that participants wanted to target. The structure, cost and accessibility of different digital formats were taken into consideration in light of these factors, before the final decision was made. In terms of campaign purpose and content, for example, participants who wanted to tell their personal story used formats that allowed for a narrative form that could

effectively communicate their experience – a film or an animation. For the campaigns focused more on information dissemination, the chosen formats lent themselves to structuring and categorizing information under relevant topic headings – a website, an app.

Digital technologies helped participants to integrate their communication into the lifestyle patterns of their audience – the time they have available, the attention span they have, their access to technology, and their existing knowledge about the topic being addressed. For example, the anti-bullying website was aimed at teachers. A website was chosen in preference to a film or leaflets because it had longevity, and it fitted with teachers' busy lives: it did not require them to give up significant amounts of time to read or watch, they could access it at any time, and content could be layered so that they could access the whole site, or just the pages they needed.

Similarly, the mobile app was chosen over a website because of the needs of the target audience: young people facing homelessness could usually access a phone, but did not always have enough credit on their phones for data use, so that a website might be beyond their reach when they needed it most. In contrast, the app, once downloaded, was free to use and 'always there' (Theo). In the road safety campaign, a video was chosen because the aim was to disseminate the resource through schools and show it during assemblies; the team of campaigners involved in its development avoided a standard presentation because it would be quickly forgotten, but felt that a high-impact film would secure students' attention effectively.

The choices reflect the fact that different digital architectures facilitate some types of communication, and not others (Papacharissi, 2009; Luders, 2008). The structures of websites and apps, for example, can deliver large amounts of information in manageable chunks, and can easily connect readers with other sources through digital networks. They are also flexible: readers can use some of the content, then return to explore other information at a later date. In contrast, a film communicates a story via narrative and performance that explains something in a way that is new or different. It is the narrative, rather than individual facts and figures, that attracts attention, creates an emotional response and has a lasting effect on the audience. Connectivity and organizing information for easy access is not so easy. Instead, the major objective is to jolt the audience into thinking differently, and that can happen in a moment or over time.

4.2.2 *The construction of voice*

Key points

- **The different types of resource construct voice through a range of techniques, combining affect and rationality to produce a powerful challenge to normative understandings of the topics being addressed.**
- **The use of multimedia formats, contrast and personal narrative increase the impact of the filmed resources.**
- **All the resources facilitate voice as value by constructing digital and symbolic connections between audience and campaigner as well as between the campaigner and others who have shared their experience.**
- **By using their personal experience to exemplify a broader social issue, participants construct a collective need that justifies the campaign.**
- **The authority to construct and develop comes from the creator's particular, embodied and affective experience in the material world, an experience that is usually marginalised. Creating the resource challenges this marginalization by making it visible both online and offline. It puts the needs of people with that experience at the heart of a powerful narrative.**

Voice is grounded in embodied experience and effective voice should prompt reflexivity on the part of the audience and the speaker (see also section 4.1). The film genre (campaigns B, C, D) helps develop this reflexivity by engaging the audience on multiple levels: rather than simply listening to a story, we see it unfold before us and we hear music that indicates how we are supposed to feel. In the case of the animation, for example, the relatively rational tone of the narrative communicates the seriousness of OCD, and the images that accompany the words illustrate their meaning – isolation and depression are translated into a child curling up and trying to hide from our gaze. Similarly, in the Tourette's film, we hear Vince talk about his feeling of being alone and excluded: 'People definitely treat me differently', he tells us – this is a fact, not a claim. We see the emotional impact of this reality as the camera follows him, alone on his journey even in spaces that are usually busy – a train station, a train carriage. In the road safety film, we are drawn into the excitement of party preparation as a text exchange between friends unfolds before us, making the shock of the accident at the end of the film all the more intense.

The films also make extensive use of contrast in order to increase the power of their communication. In the OCD film, we hear happy music and see brightly coloured pictures, but these contrast with what we are told about the difficulty and suffering caused by the condition. In the Tourette's film, we see how people look at Vince, but we hear that those looks are based on a false reading of his identity. In the road safety film, the insistent noise of the text alert (the digital world) – contrasts

with the peace and quiet of the real world, and the discussion of what to wear, how to 'embody' attractiveness, contrasts with the broken body we see following the accident. These contrasts repeatedly challenge our interpretation of the narrative and require us to think actively about what we see; they demand that that we listen to - rather than simply hear – what is being expressed through multiple media forms.

The process of actively listening to, or reading, the resources transforms voice as process – the act of communication – into voice as value – an articulation of experience that is meaningful and matters to others. Through the personal narrative that runs through each film, both affective and rational dimensions of the campaigners' experience (e.g. the suffering and the reasons why such an experience emerges in the first place) are claimed as powerful and authentic forms of knowledge that can provide a sound basis for interventions to help others. The construction of identity through the narratives also allows the audience to follow the protagonist's lead in separating the condition or situation from the person being subjected to it. In both the OCD animation and the Tourette's film, the campaigners separate themselves (and, by extension, their voice) from the condition and, in doing so, secure agency and power over the interpretation of who they are and what they can offer the world around them.

The resources also facilitate voice as value by constructing connections between audience and creator as well as between the creator and others who have shared their experience. The website and app are perhaps most explicit in this, because they are set up specifically to meet a social need that has emerged because homelessness and bullying are experienced by a lot of people, and those people's needs are not being met. The collective need (and the implicit claim that current institutional norms fail to meet that need) is what justifies the resource, while the authority to construct and develop it comes from the creator's particular, embodied and affective experience in the material world, an experience that is usually marginalised. The act of creating the resource challenges this marginalization and puts the needs of people with that experience at the heart of the narrative. In the case of the films, while they are constructed around individual stories, they still connect with a wider community through the statements that pop up at the end of the piece. These indicate the size of the community (e.g. 'As many as 1 in 100 people suffer show some symptoms of Tourette's syndrome') and provide links to places or organisations that can help. There is power in stating this collective reality, and in calling on the normative authority of other institutions to shore up the claim to recognition that it entails. The right to voice is transformed from an individual

matter, to an issue of societal importance; it is the starting point from which recognition emerges, because it makes the voice of the creator much harder for the audience to ignore.

4.2.3 The construction of recognition

Key points

- **The resources are explicitly designed to directly challenge the audience’s patterns of thinking about the issues being addressed and provides the basis for a solidarity level of recognition for participants.**
- **The resources prompt audiences to recognize that the experience of those on the margins are part of the world that everyone inhabits, by depicting (visually or in written form) a ‘geography’ of common experience as part of their narrative.**

The resources are explicitly designed to directly challenge the audience’s patterns of thinking about the issues being addressed. In doing so, the embodied experience that underpins the message in each resource becomes recognized as an experience that has some kind of value for the rest of society, and provides the basis for a solidarity level of recognition. Each resource targets a relatively specific group of people. For example, the website is aimed at teachers, and has a structure reminiscent of the teaching process. Definitions of bullying are followed by explanations of its effects, how to identify it, how to tackle it, and examples. The ‘pupil’s perspective’ that underpins it is interwoven with resources from other institutions and charities. This, combined with the rational tone of the site and the structured way in which information is presented, constructs it as a formal body of knowledge and reverses the teacher-pupil relationship. Readers are prompted to ask themselves how much they really know about bullying, how much they do to stop it and what they could do differently. Similarly, in the road safety film, the target is young people the same age as the protagonist, and her fate prompts them to reflect on their own behavior when texting and crossing roads, as well as the importance they attached to the digital world as compared to the material world they physically inhabit.

The most explicit challenges to the audience come in the OCD animation and the Tourette’s film. An important focus for the animation is to change the way people use the term OCD almost as a joke. Mary, as the narrator, tells us she knows what we are thinking, and we see our thoughts about OCD depicted by a supercilious man, who flippantly claims OCD as part of his ‘wacky’ personality. Mary rejects this – there is no such thing as being a little bit OCD, we are told – and her reclamation of the term and the condition, leaves the viewer wondering how often they have used the phrase ‘a bit OCD’ to describe themselves or others. Similarly, in the Tourette’s film viewers are granted the perspective of strangers: they watch Vince from afar, and recognize his rejection even as they experience his distress. They are left wondering – whether they have caused that kind of distress; do

they make things worse for people, excluding them for no good reason? Could they understand Tourette's – and other disabilities - better?

Finally, the resources prompt audiences to recognize that the experience of those on the margins are part of the world that everyone inhabits. They are part of all communities. People affected by these conditions and situations are our co-workers, fellow pupils, visit the same cafes as us, know some of the people we might know. The experiences being presented through the resources are not alien worlds; on the contrary, the geography of common experience is made very visible. This opens up space – both physical and cognitive - to consider what role communities play in constructing the marginalisation and invisibility that have marked campaigners' previous experience, and how that role might be changed for the better.

4.3 Dissemination of the resource: Awareness and impact

Key points

- **The connective technologies of social media meant that dissemination was very rapid and potentially very widespread.**
- **Digital communication was vital for raising awareness of the resource.**
- **Participants recognized the importance of making particular institutions and individuals aware of their work via social media or digital platforms, and actively targeted them in their dissemination efforts.**
- **The fluidity, mobility and connectedness of cyberspace meant that participants felt it was easier for them to be heard and be visible, even if visibility did not obviously result in change.**

A major characteristic of digital formats is their mobility. In the digital ecosystem (van Dijk, 2013), campaign resources can be disseminated via a wide range of interdependent and interoperable communication platforms. Because the internet is accessible from a wide range of devices, on the move, at work or in the home, this makes the resource easily accessible for audiences to view, like, and post onwards at any time and in practically any space. All the participants took advantage of this and distribution via social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube, as well as linked websites, was fundamental to the dissemination phase for all of them. The connective technologies of social media meant that dissemination was very rapid and potentially very widespread. In the case of the OCD animation and the Tourette's film, retweets and shares on Facebook rapidly reached thousands of people – far more than the participants anticipated, or that they could have reached purely through face to face communication.

'I sort of shared [the resource] everywhere on Facebook and Twitter and wherever else; it was kind of – it was unbelievable the response from it. ' Mary

Thus, digital technology was vital to the process of raising awareness of the issue that participants were trying to address, simply by ensuring it was widely available to people. An explosion of interest also increased the likelihood that new audiences, beyond the local context, might find and use the resource – thereby increasing its impact. Participants were not always able to see whether this kind of material impact had been achieved; as they pointed out, sharing something on social media, or downloading an app, does not equate to the change in attitude or behavior that their campaigns were targeting. Nonetheless, the very visible nature of sharing and liking on digital platforms does reinforce the idea that audiences are finding the tool valuable – or at the very least, of interest to them, and some participants had concrete evidence that their work made a difference.

'I'm trying to sort of tweet as much as possible, I mean I find a lot of people will connect with us through Twitter as well and so things like that got us loads of people. And I was getting loads of e-mails from people going, oh this is great because this animation has made me think about getting treatment; or, now I don't feel so alone.' Mary

Participants had to work actively at dissemination – creating visibility in cyberspace is a strategic endeavor and in cyberspace just as in the real world, some voices are more powerful than others (Castells, 2009). Participants recognized the importance of making particular institutions and individuals aware of their work via social media or digital platforms, and actively targeted them in their dissemination efforts. Where institutions or individuals with power became engaged, participants saw the results immediately. A celebrity retweet of the OCD campaign link, for example, resulted in thousands of retweets, and an association for OCD sufferers used the resource as part of their own awareness campaign about the condition.

While the institutional structures of power in cyberspace may not be too far removed from those in the world of bricks and mortar, the fluidity, mobility and connectedness of cyberspace meant that participants felt it was easier for them to be heard and be visible, even if visibility did not obviously result in change. Institutional awareness of their work, generated via online visibility, sometimes led to concrete actions, with participants contacted to get involved in related activities. Thus, digital networks helped to enhance networks on the ground and created more opportunities for the participants to articulate voice.

'I think they'd seen it on Facebook and she contacted me and said it would be really good if you could join our Beat Bullying strategy group. So it was purely through the social networking that they found out about it.' Ed

4.4 Limitations of digital communication for voice and recognition

Key points

- **Digital communication without anything material attached to it, was insufficient for a substantive articulation of voice.**
- **Digital communication did not necessarily create dialogue; participants talked about its value in terms of the response it generated, but their most rewarding interactions were based around face to face engagements.**
- **Practical limitations of digital technologies included their complexity, the cost of maintenance and support, and the time required to manage a digital presence.**

While participants were actively engaged with using digital technologies as much as possible to create their resource and make their campaign successful, it was also clear that digital communication on its own, as a stand-alone strategy without anything material attached to it, was insufficient for a substantive articulation of voice. The tangibility of the resource was what made the participants' communication important and valuable. Simply stating their opinion would not have had the same effect; the resource allowed for a nuanced, but detailed articulation of voice, and became evidence that they could make a valuable contribution to society.

'[It tells them] that we're committed to what we're going to do. That we've done all this and that it is there and what we set out to do we've hopefully achieved.' Theo

Similarly, digital communication did not necessarily create dialogue; participants talked about its value in terms of the response it generated, but their most rewarding interactions were based around face to face engagements: launches, presentations, and meetings for example. The reward was not only in the mostly positive responses and recognition they described, but also in the ability to use their new-found confidence to assert their right to space and voice, their right to 'be' in a world where they had previously been regarded as the embodiment of a 'problem'. Digital technology created some opportunities for face to face interaction, but it did not offer the same quality of dialogue for the participants.

Digital communication also had quite practical limitations that participants worked around. For example, while creating a web site was relatively easy, the need to maintain it and constantly keep it updated meant it required a long-term commitment from the participants. The sites therefore had to be relatively straightforward in their design, removing the possibility of including the richer

communication technologies (multimedia, interactivity) that are frequently celebrated by digital advocates. In the context of these campaigns, such technologies might have endangered the quality of voice – a website that is out of date, or an enquiry left unanswered, could very well leave the campaigners' message vulnerable to criticism. Ed noted how the website was easy to manage precisely because it was so simple.

'it's quite easy and nice to maintain, whereas if you'd have gone more complex then we might have had to look at making it more accessible, whereas because it's just pages with text on them I'm pretty sure that the Google or the search browser accessibility things allow for that to be changed anyway. [...] With the amount of pictures we've got on there as well there's not too many pictures and so it's easier again, it makes it load faster and everything like that.' Ed

The complexity of digital technology also had the potential to challenge YCUK's commitment to let young people freely choose the type of communication they wanted. For example, while the YCUK creative team agreed initially to an app for homeless young people, they subsequently tried to suggest an alternative. An app is not only relatively complex to build, but also requires support from an online store, and has to be regularly updated. In the end, the app was successfully created, but at the time of the research it wasn't clear that it was going to be possible to keep it available, because of the cost and time commitment required for its support.

Participants also brought up the issue of the cost of digital technologies in the context of being able to evaluate their campaigns. They tended to assess whether they had been successful based on people's reactions, or on the scale of sharing on social media. However, any robust evaluation of online responses to their work had to be paid for – Google analytics only permits a certain period of time to be monitored without charge. Without additional financial and technical support, participants could only ever arrive at an approximate assessment of the effect of the digital dimensions of their campaign. In contrast, material forms of recognition (awards, invitations to be involved in related activities, face to face reactions, media coverage) were much more reliable as an indicator of whether their resource created the change they wanted.

The online world has several other limitations that the participants had to work around. First, the resource, once launched, has a permanent presence online. However, it does not necessarily remain visible – the volume of content and the continual change in the digital world means that individual communications slip quickly out of sight, even if they were popular and well-received at launch. As

both the CEO and the Head of Communications at YCUK noted, in an information-driven society, helping people find the information they need is as important as creating the information in the first place.

'you've got to be pointing to it from other platforms, you've got to be sharing it with the right parties, you've got to be making sure it's seen, people know about it. Because just because it's there forever doesn't mean anyone's going to look at it forever, it's just going to get lost.' Gabrielle Solder

Participants had to actively promote their work well after the campaign launch, to ensure that visibility was sustained. They took this responsibility on themselves, since YCUK's work with them generally drew to a close after the launch phase. Promotional work was based on both online and offline activities: strategic social networking online is complemented by tweets and Facebook updates about offline activities, while offline activities are an opportunity to promote online activity. For some, managing their online presence became a main focus of their ongoing engagement in social action, but for others, the need to juggle that commitment with other activities was challenging.

Second, the resource, while permanent, remains relatively static. This is particularly important when it relates a personal experience. While the campaigners themselves grow and develop as a result of the campaign, the resource remains something created at a particular point in time, in a specific context. It communicates a particular identity for the campaigner, from which they may subsequently prefer to be more distanced. However, online architecture, proprietary and connective, makes it difficult and time-consuming to alter or remove content, once it is there.

4.5 Summary: The role of digital in the production of voice and recognition during social action

The interviews revealed the ways in which digital communication can be a powerful mediator of voice and recognition, as a tool for constructing effective communication and as a means of dissemination. The flexibility of digital technologies meant that the resource could be tailored both to the kind of narrative or information that the participants themselves wanted, and designed with audience needs in mind. Bearing in mind that voice as value requires active engagement between audience and speaker, digital technology in these campaigns laid the foundation for the realization of voice as value and for making an effective community intervention.

Digital dissemination, on the other hand, is a form of voice as process – the technology itself is neutral in terms of the value attached to different speakers in the digital world. However, the scale

and reach of digital dissemination generates high levels of awareness, and a proportion of this translates into genuine attention and engagement with the resource (some people will watch the video, film or visit the website, and share it further). At this point, dialogue and recognition emerge and participants find themselves engaged in conversations where their voice is genuinely valued.

Of the individuals and institutions that engage, some actively reach out to form connections with the participants, generating social capital and prompting feelings of individual and institutional recognition. Importantly, social capital here refers to more than simply numbers of followers: what matters are the substantive connections made with a few institutions and / or individuals – the ‘strong’ ties that produce concrete benefits for the individual (Granovetter, 1983). For the participants, this kind of social capital resulted in further dissemination online via third parties, prompting a new cycle of awareness and attention; and / or new opportunities to engage with people offline, in face to face events, where a new cycle of voice and recognition begins. Figure 1 illustrates this process.

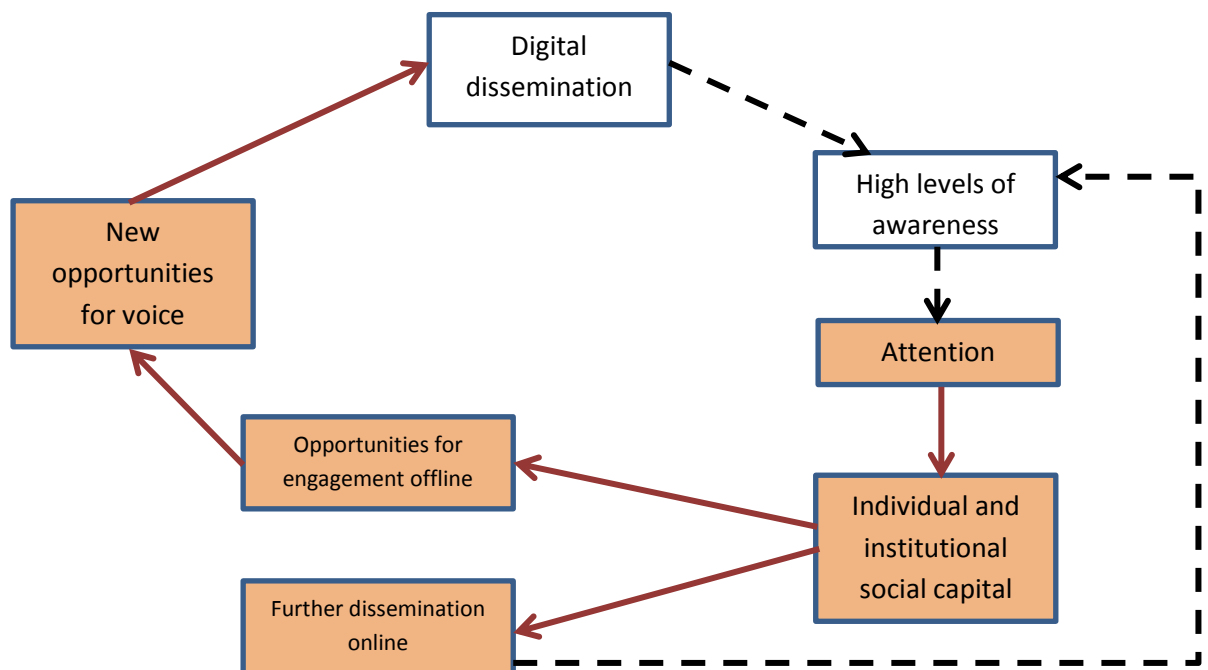


Figure 1: Digital dissemination and the development of voice and recognition

Key



Shaded box

---> Voice as process dominates
 —> Voice as value dominates
 Recognition emerges

5.0 Conclusions

This exploratory project was designed to answer two questions. First, how do the complexities of digital technology facilitate or constrain narratives deployed by young people as interventions in

their communities? And second, how do the complexities of digital technology affect young communicators' sense of voice and recognition, and of being able to make an effective intervention in their communities?

The campaigns and the interviews with the participants revealed that digital technology is fundamental to the construction and dissemination of powerful, personal narratives that can create change. First, in the construction of the actual resources, the ability to combine multiple media forms (music, sound, visuals, text) allows the message that participants want to communicate to be delivered on multiple levels. Arguments – and audience responses - are both emotional and rational, and digital technology allows the two dimensions of experience to be interwoven in a narrative, strengthening the impact of the resource. Digital technology also allows resources to be presented in formats that appeal to the audience, either in the style of presentation or the flexibility of access. Digital also allows for the distortion of time: the narratives we see are presented as a period of time (a 'day', a life with OCD), but in fact *represent* key experiences that communicate a sense of what 'life' or a 'day' might be like for people in this situation.

Digital technology is also vital for the dissemination of resources, which in turn leads to greater awareness and more opportunities for intervention. Networking and distribution online can lead to more opportunities to network and disseminate the resource offline through the conversations emerging from digital interactions. This link to offline events is crucial for a successful intervention. The effects of a campaign as something that has prompted genuine material change in the way people think, feel or act can only really be evidenced in embodied interactions. The 'popularity principle' that defines digital success certainly made the participants feel valued, and encouraged them to continue their work, but they consistently said that the most important evidence of success came from their face-to-face interactions. Digital technology is necessary, but not sufficient, for making an effective social intervention.

Digital technology also has limitations, particularly if institutional support for communication is lacking. One of the reasons the campaigns were so successful was because YCUK, the charity, provided the necessary expertise to construct the resource and to maintain it for a period of time. They also disseminated it widely. But participants noted that the more complex the technology, the more difficult and the more costly it was to maintain. It was unlikely they could have created the resource independently, and some participants found it difficult to find the time to continue to disseminate it.

The participants' experiences illustrate the dialectical relationship between voice and recognition. The articulation of voice, in a context where voice is genuinely valued, kicks off a response and dialogue with individuals and institutions that constitutes recognition. Recognition generates increased confidence and self-esteem, empowering the speaker to a new articulation of voice. The dialectic begins at the point at which participants' voices are actively listened to and validated – in the case of YCUK, it is the moment when the YPC meets participants and confirms that their ideas can form the basis of a powerful communication process. This individual recognition makes campaigners more confident to pursue a campaign. As they do so, they talk more about their ideas to more people, receiving more recognition in the process. The more they use their voice, the more visible they become and the more they are recognized. Their voice becomes stronger, it is disseminated more widely through the connections they make, and their interventions are more powerful as a result. Voice, then, is a process that requires practice and work in order to develop over time, and in parallel with the confidence and self-esteem generated through recognition.

In summary, this study found that digital technologies were fundamental to supporting social action for participants, by helping them to construct a more powerful message and disseminate it more widely. Combined with offline activity, they opened the door to genuine engagement and reflexivity among both audience and the participants, thereby supporting the development of voice and recognition as part of the social action process. The findings are an example of how digital technologies can facilitate a 'co-presence fostered by mediated interaction and shared digital objects', and potentially 'cultivate intimacy and social cohesion' (Schroeder and Ling, 2014: 797). However, voice and recognition were experienced most powerfully when the participants had evidence that their social action was creating real change in their communities. Recognition in the online world, in the form of 'likes', 'shares', and 'retweets', without any foundation in a material relationship, were a relatively poor substitute for face-to-face relationships.

6.0 Next steps

The project opens up a number of avenues for further research.

Understanding the development of voice and recognition in the context of social action

The small size of the sample, limited to five campaigns and one charity, means that there is scope to test the findings further in a larger study. On a general level, the potential for voice and recognition to emerge through social action is clear, but much more work is needed on the circumstances in which it emerges or fails to emerge, the role played by institutional support, and the role played by digital technologies. In addition, the study presented here covers a relatively short time frame. The

campaigns were completed in the previous 12 months, and the long-term effects of the campaigners' positive experiences of voice and recognition had yet to emerge. Longitudinal analyses of young people's experience of voice and recognition is essential in order to establish whether the policy agenda around youth social action provides only short-term benefits or a genuine long-term improvement in societal cohesion.

Understanding the potential and limitations of digital technologies in the context of social action

The study also opens up new avenues for research into the ways that digital technology plays into the development of social action. In particular, more work around the intersection of digital communication with embodied, material interactions, would clarify how we can develop the role of communication in social action projects. Making the most of the potential for digital technology to enhance awareness, prompt reflexivity and generate recognition, is essential. In addition, the clear benefits of digital technology as a means of effective, fast and far-reaching communication, should be maximized. However the celebration of digital should be balanced with the need to ensure that material change is achieved through concrete measures that make life in our communities better and more inclusive. Research that explores how to do this in the context of different types of social action campaigns, activists and audiences, would be of significant value to policymakers and third sector organisations.

Social action, voice, recognition and democracy

Finally, the study provides a starting point for work that could explore how youth social action centred around voice and recognition can contribute to the quality of democracy. While not always policy-oriented, the conversations prompted by the campaigns in this study form part of the 'everyday talk' that is fundamental to democratic deliberative systems (Mansbridge, 1999, Parkinson, 2012). They provide a rich resource for exploring how such talk might cascade through to policymakers over time, generating real changes in policy and practice, and perhaps even altering the all-too-common perception that young people have relatively little to say about the way society is structured.

7.0 Impact

The study's findings are being reviewed by YCUK as part of its ongoing evaluation exercise. A summary of the report will be distributed back to the participants, so that they can see how their participation in the study generated new insights. Finally, the research will be presented and discussed at the charity's annual staff meeting in July.

The collaboration with YCUK has also already resulted in the researcher contributing to funding bids for the charity, aimed at providing further insight into how campaigners' work supports the

development of voice and recognition. Discussions are also in progress about how to use the findings in a policy forum.

The study will also form the basis of a larger research council funding bid exploring the intersection between voice and recognition, digital technologies, and democracy in the context of social action campaigns.

8.0 Dissemination

This report will be disseminated via the CCN+ website. The summary report of the research will be made available via the charity's website and will be disseminated to its staff.

Two academic journal papers are planned, the first focused on the ways that digital technology shapes the communication process in the context of social action (target journal: *New Media and Society*), and the second on the wider issue of how digital technologies play into the creation of voice and recognition (target journal: *Media, Culture and Society*).

The research will form the basis of a case study to be included in a forthcoming book on PR, voice and recognition, authored by the researcher. It will also be the subject of a conference paper on PR, voice and recognition, to be delivered at the end of June 2015.

Appendix 1 – Pen portraits of the participants

Ed

Ed was engaged with his local town council as a Youth representative before he created his campaign. He is very committed to social action and volunteering. He has a good knowledge of institutional systems (police, schools, council departments) in his local area and he engages with them to generate change. His campaign has become part of a broader set of initiatives for change that he is pursuing. He has set up his own umbrella organisation to coordinate work in different, but related areas. He is pursuing a course at a local post-16 college and would like to go into youth work.

Fiona

Fiona has been engaged in social action and volunteering for at least 5 years, as part of her city's Youth Council. She was aged 18 when she did her campaign. Through her work on the Youth Council and through family connections, she also has a good knowledge of institutional systems and how they can be used to support youth social action and create change. She is now studying law.

Vince

Vince is in his early twenties and lives in a city in the north of England. Unlike Fiona and Ed, doing the campaign was the first time he had been involved with any social action, having previously lacked confidence and struggled with day to day life. Following the campaign, he started various courses related to business development and plans to set up a business focused on educating employers and health sector practitioners about how to deal with different forms of disability.

Theo

Theo has been engaged with volunteering and social action for at least four years. Through his friends and partner, he started working for a local charity and joined with other volunteers to create the campaign in order to better meet the needs of marginalized groups. The experiences of his friends and his work with the charity have left him with a very good understanding of local institutions, how they work and why they get involved with some issues and not others. He plans to develop a career in youth work.

Mary

Mary started her campaign shortly after she set up her own charity to address a neglected issue in her region. She also runs her own online business and works in a local supermarket. The charity and the campaign were her first engagement with any kind of social action and were prompted by her

own experience and desire to connect with others in the same situation. She continues to manage the charity as it grows.

Appendix 2 – Summary of the campaign resources

Campaign A - Anti-bullying website

The anti-bullying website provides information for teachers about how to recognize and address bullying in schools. The site is structured horizontally (see fig. 1), and is mainly text-based, with a picture as a ‘banner’ on the top of each page, but no other illustrations. The site is clearly laid out, with a background pattern resembling the paper in school exercise books, a yellow and white colour scheme, and black text.



Figure 1: Structure of the website

The site has the same format throughout: a banner picture loops through 3-4 different stock images of teenagers, suffering or emotionally traumatised in some way. Superimposed on the image is a brief statement telling us what each page is about (e.g. ‘What is bullying? Bullying can take many and varied forms. This section helps to explain the different forms’). Beneath the image is the text. On some pages the text is a narrative – why the site was set up, what the purpose is, or what the law on bullying says, for example. Other pages simply list points relating to the topic (signs of bullying, effects of bullying, links). On every page, the sources of the information included are acknowledged, giving the impression that the site is constructed as a one-stop shop for teachers to use to find the information they need.

Technologically speaking, the site is basic. There is no interactivity, no opportunity for comment or sharing experience, and no feedback opportunity. The structure speaks of the desire to educate the audience, but stay distant from them. This is echoed in the style of writing. The style and layout is formal, rather than casual, and although the site gives teachers advice ‘from the pupil’s perspective’, no names or personal experiences are shared. The case studies come from a secondary source and illustrate celebrity cases of bullying or personal cases where a particular charity has been able to help resolve the problem. With the exception of this page, bullying is presented in the site as a problem that can be solved through rational, cognitive means: better understanding of what it is, and better knowledge about the solutions for it. The experience of bullying is described through bullet-pointed text, thus stripping it of emotion, categorizing its effects and making it more

manageable. It is certainly true that the images of sad and suffering children are designed to evoke an emotional response in the viewer, but because they are stock photographs rather than of real experience, stereotypically posed rather than reflecting the chaotic emotional turmoil that being bullied produces, the affective response called out in the viewer is likely to be formulaic and relatively shallow.

The pattern of distancing the viewer from the content aligns with the site's objective to be a source of information and practical advice for schools and teachers, rather than sympathy without action. The reader is constantly pointed to other sources of information, through links and other contact details. Taking action is the mantra, and the case studies illustrate the danger of not taking action, outlining situations where no action was taken and bullying became extreme. The bullied child is presented as a victim and largely without agency – their action is limited to 'tell someone' about what is happening. S/he disappears from the narrative on the website, other than as the rationale for action – what is happening to the victim is unacceptable, and must be stopped. The emphasis is on the need to wield institutional power effectively, in order to eliminate the problem.

Campaign B - Road safety film

The road safety film is somewhat different from the other resources, in that it does not address the status of a marginalized community, but rather addresses a need to raise awareness of road safety among young people. A change in attitude and behavior is called for by presenting a moral tale. In this, the film mimics the public service advertising genre, acting as an intervention to make society safer.

There is no backing track, and no narration. Instead, the film opens with a young woman, aged around 17, walking away from school and texting her friend. We hear a gentle breeze and soft footsteps as we see her concentrate on the conversation. The texts are displayed on the screen for us to see – the young woman is in a 'crisis' because she does not know what to wear for a party. As we watch her walk along the street, she becomes more absorbed in the conversation, and her phone's insistent text alert repeatedly captures her (and our) attention as the conversation about what to wear unfolds. The camera zooms in on her fingers and the phone screen, reinforcing the fact that the phone and the act of texting are all that matters to her in that moment.

Once on the street, we hear the roar of a car passing her as she continues to text, but, prophetically, this does not distract her from the texting conversation. The only thing that jolts her back into the 'real' world, is a physical collision with another pedestrian, who chastises her to 'watch where you're

going!'. Rather than respond to the real person, she texts her friend, outraged at the intrusion: 'Why are people sooo annoying? I wish people would LOOK where they are going!'

As her walk continues, and with the help of her friend, she comes to a decision about what to wear to impress a boy who will be going to the party. She steps out into the road, still absorbed in her phone, and jumps back, startled as a car zooms towards her, beeping its horn and jolting her, once again, back into the real world. This time, she laughs at her own mistake, texting to her friend 'OMG! Totally nearly got knocked down! LOL'. As she writes the text, she steps out again, and this time is not so lucky. In slow motion, we see her shocked face turn to look at the car bearing down on her, before the screen goes black and we hear the sound of a crash. Slow, dramatic music gradually builds to reinforce the horror we experience as the picture comes back into focus and we see her bloodstained body, the phone lying on the floor next to her hand, and hear the text alert repeating insistently. The incoming text reads: 'LOL Look where you're going!!!'.

As the screen goes to black, statistics about road accidents among teenagers are shown and relevant websites are listed. Through the narrative of the film, and the final statement '(Most road accidents among young pedestrians occur when they fail to look properly', referenced to the regional police force), the viewer is taught that the lure of digital world and the absorbing nature of social media, can lead us to marginalize real-life at our peril. The girl is more connected to her friend's digital 'voice' than to her physical surroundings. As a result, she encounters real physical dangers that escalate the more absorbed she becomes in the digital world, from colliding into a pedestrian, to a near-miss with a car, to an actual collision and major physical trauma. Alongside the overt message about road safety, the film reclaims the material world as most fundamental to our well-being, and challenges the apparent obsession with digital communication that drives many young people's lives.

Campaign C - OCD animation

The OCD animation adopts techniques from the cartoon genre, with the story literally constructed as the viewer watches. Each picture is created by an animated hand, scene by scene, to echo each stage of the film's narrative. The overall feel of the film is created through the interaction of music (a bouncy, upbeat riff looped throughout the animation), visuals (cartoon-style characters and writing), and voiceover (containing the explicit message and narrating the personal story in detail).

The animation places Mary centre stage – she introduces herself as she is drawn, a young girl with a slightly hesitant smile, dark hair and a wearing a pink hoodie and dark trousers. 'My name is Mary,

and I have one question... What if?' The lighthearted tone of the music and illustration contrasts with the more serious tone of Mary's voiceover; the seriousness of OCD is signaled, but the contrast mitigates any fear or resistance to discussing it on the part of the viewer. As the animation continues, the question is explained: we discover that 'What if?' represents the constant doubt and worry that plagues OCD sufferers and changes their behavior. The effects of the condition are gradually introduced: we first hear about worries of catching a disease from a (large, cartoon-style) cat, or other people with colds. We are invited to laugh at Mary's worry that a burglar (cartoon-style, with disproportionately short legs and holding a stick of dynamite) might break into her house, when the burglar's voice interjects in the voiceover, gruffly saying 'I'm going to steal all your tea bags'. But having relaxed the audience through humour, Mary introduces the real burden of the OCD sufferer – OCD 'makes me responsible for everything'.

The narrative then switches from personal experience to medical discourse, invoking an institutional authority that validates Mary's voice. A more complex explanation of OCD is offered, as an internal dialogue that prompts fear and uncertainty in the sufferer, and compulsive behaviours as a response to the pressure. What is usually internal is exposed (Mary's repetitive thoughts and fears) and what is exposed is reinterpreted (the compulsive behaviours are a response to the obsessive thoughts), so that the viewer understands them as a rational response rather than irrational behaviour.

Thus far, the viewer has been learning about Mary's experiences and about OCD as a mental health condition. But then there is a second change in tone, and Mary claims the gaze of the viewer: 'Wait' she says, 'I know what you're thinking...' She challenges the flippant use of OCD to describe slightly odd or 'wacky' tendencies that have no relation to the 'crushing anxiety' that a true OCD sufferer endures. There's no such thing as being a little bit OCD, she argues, and in doing so, she forces the viewer to reflect on how they have previously used the phrase, thereby marginalizing those who are genuinely suffering.

The animation closes with a return to 'Good News' for OCD sufferers, based on Mary's experience of a happy ending, with the discovery of a CBT therapist. 'I've got my life back' says Mary, and the cartoon image accompany these words shows her jumping for joy, confident, liberated, with lighter hair, no longer covered in hoodie and trousers, but wearing a skirt and summer top. The message is intended for others like her – they can get help too. The non-OCD sufferer, who mistakes quirks for the condition, is no longer the target since they should now understand what the condition really

entails. The film itself closes with a black screen, two slogans reinforcing the main messages: OCD is a serious condition, but help is available.

Campaign D - Tourette's documentary film

The film about Tourette's invites the viewer to accompany Vince through a 'day' in his life. Echoing the documentary genre, the camera does not take us through a full day, but selects representative moments that best illustrate the message Vince is trying to convey. We see Vince on the trains, in the streets and in the cafes where he lives his daily life. His story reveals to us what is usually hidden – his own, internal experience as a Tourette's sufferer. Vince himself takes charge of directing the revelation, narrating the film and explaining how he feels as the different scenes unfold. The backing track for the film, a slow, orchestral piece of music that evokes sadness rather than excitement or humour, and the muted colour palette prompt us to take Vince's situation seriously and with sympathy.

As the film opens, we hear him exclaim 'fuck you!' and the camera pans to show him seated with other passengers on a commuter train. He twitches and rocks slightly, as passengers look towards him with disgust, then away; a mother covers her daughter's ears and hides her face, so that she does not have to see or hear the 'spectacle' that Vince is creating. Huddled against the wall, as if wanting to disappear, Vince looks out of the train window, as his voice beings the story by telling us 'every day is a struggle...'. We hear how he has 'got used to' the way people look at him and, separating his identity from the condition, how Tourette's makes him appear to be someone that he isn't. 'I am foul-mouthed. I use language I would never use in a conversation'; 'I flinch and hit myself, but yet I am not an aggressive person'. The contrast is echoed by the calm tone of the voiceover, and by his own physical appearance in the film: his face is calm, even peaceful, only to be suddenly shaken by an uncontrolled jerk, or an involuntary exclamation. His apparent lack of control contrasts with the self-control demonstrated by other passengers.

As the film continues, we see more examples of the isolation Vince is subjected to – on the train, people turn away, in the station, he rides alone up an escalator, and walking along the street, he is unaccompanied. We are told that he knows people are afraid of him, because they interpret his lack of control as the potential to be violent. As we see Vince enter a café, he explains how normal his isolation has become: he is unable to do 'normal' things, like work a 'normal' job, or drive a car. He is not 'cool' and so finds it difficult to make friends. In the café, we see repeated confirmation of his exclusion: young people look at turn away as they notice his exclamations and tics.

Relief comes, however, when he joins a young woman at a table, a friend whose behaviour is quite different. She greets him, looks him in the eye, rather than looking away, she converses directly with him, and she ignores his tics and exclamations. We see him smiling and nodding: he is recognized for himself rather than his condition.

Outside the café, however he is alone again. He walks away from the camera, down the street to an unknown destination. In the next scene, he is greeted by two police officers, who ask whether he has been drinking. This, we are told in the voiceover, is common – people often think he is ‘anti-social’ or drunk, because his behaviour seems erratic and out of control. In response to the police, Vince pulls out a “Tourette’s Action’ card, official evidence – for them and for the viewer – that he suffers from a genuine condition and his behavior can be explained. We hear Vince say ‘if other people could be more aware of the day to day struggle that I face, then my Tourette’s wouldn’t be so difficult to deal with’, and in those words there is an implicit challenge to the viewer. Having seen what was previously hidden, and understanding that Vince’s identity should not be conflated with the effects of Tourette’s, the audience has a choice about how they view Vince and others like him. Would they look away, and further stigmatise and isolate them? Or would they be as non-judgmental as the friend in the café?

The film goes to black before statistics about Tourette’s, and links to relevant associations are displayed.

Campaign E - Homelessness app

The app for homelessness is designed to help young people who have become homeless to find help easily by providing a one-stop digital ‘shop’ for information and advice about what to do. As such, it does not aim to persuade the reader of a particular point of view or change their way of thinking.

The app is structured as a layered tool, with a number of different pages addressing relevant topics (see figure 2).

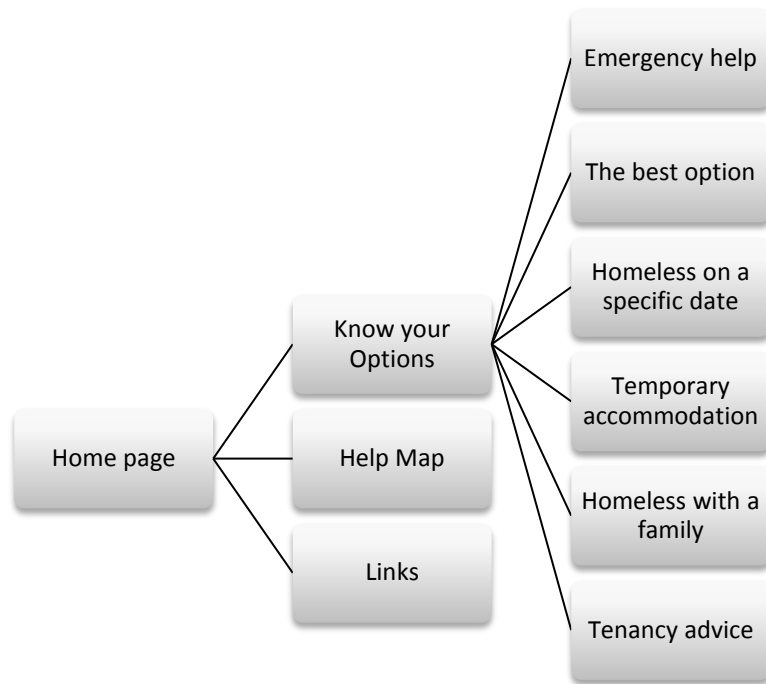


Figure 2: Structure of the app

The home page displays a logo – a hand holding a house, surrounded by a blue circle and the name of the app. Below the user has three choices to click on. First, ‘Know your Options’, under which can be found further links for information about specific situations: ‘Emergency help’; ‘The best option’; ‘Homeless on a specific date’; ‘Temporary accommodation’; ‘Homeless with a family’ and ‘Tenancy advice’. The second link on the home page is ‘Help Map’ - a map of the region with the location of homeless services indicated by red dots, with full names, addresses and contact details listed below the map. The third option is ‘Links’, where links are listed for other potentially useful organisations.

Each page is brief and the narrative is practical, rather than emotional. The pages under ‘Know Your Options’ vary in length, with the shortest page ‘Emergency help’ consisting of just 3 short paragraphs directing users to phone lines or web links. ‘The best option’ is the longest page and has several different sections relating to situations that users might find themselves in (risk of eviction, leaving home, leaving care or hospital, domestic abuse and rent arrears). The advice for each situation (with the exception of rent arrears, which only has a link) starts with the phrase ‘First hand experience’, followed by quote from a person who has experienced that situation and is passing on valuable lessons (e.g. ‘If your landlord has given you notice of eviction, it’s important that you act as quickly as possible’, or ‘try to resolve the family issue before going down the homeless route. If you think it’s not going to be possible, contact your local council as soon as you can’). However, no names or

context are given, and as a result the advice remains impersonal and prompts a rational, rather than affective response.

The style of the app makes it clear that it is not there to provide sympathy, even if it is based on an understanding of what the homeless person is going through. On the contrary, the point is to offer practical strategies for action. On one level, homelessness is taken as a given – users are assumed to understand that it indicates the loss of accommodation. However the structure of the app reveals the ‘truth’ of the experience of homelessness as a continually changing and uncertain state. It is a series of movements between locations (from home, to a variety of temporary accommodation, to independent housing), and there is very little predictability or sequence to the stages or their outcomes. The journey can start at any number of locations and for any number of reasons.

Perhaps because of this, the emphasis in the app is not on explaining the cause or consequences of homelessness, or attributing blame, but on the action needed to change the situation. Links and phone numbers implicitly acknowledge the homeless person’s need for sources of support, but the text is most strongly focused on helping the user make good choices that will resolve the situation more permanently. Unlike media and institutional discourses that marginalize the homeless, the text of the app addresses the user directly – the personal pronoun ‘you’ is always used, rather than the more distant ‘the homeless’ or ‘they’. Advice is offered about the best way to behave in order to ‘work towards’ independent living – managing bills, utilities, opening a bank account, and ensuring a good report from a landlord, for example, are presented as positive options to achieve a goal (‘being responsible will only help your cause’). Thus, the app constructs homeless people as highly agentic, desiring to be integrated back into more stable systems of accommodation, capable of weighing up a situation and making an informed decision, and with a long-term strategy (independent living). Rather than being a victim or outcast, the homeless person using this app is an empowered individual, with the right and the capacity to alter their circumstances.

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