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Everyday Life and Cultural Communities

Executive Summary 17.1.13

Aims and Objectives of Scoping Studies

The task of the team at the University of Aberdeen was to scope out the uses of digital technologies in everyday life. Our team is running a series of small projects and horizon scanning activities to empirically identify the function and impact of digital technologies in three contrasting areas of everyday life: cultural heritage, migration and sustaining rural communities.

Research Context

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are transforming our social world in ways that enhance existing social relationships but also make possible the creation of new ones. Key to this is how individuals and communities use this technology, which happens in rapid and unpredictable ways, with new forms of inclusion and exclusion, suggesting the need for sociological study. These transformations have led to challenges to traditional social theories in the three fields on which we have focused. Cultural heritage is no longer a “top down activity” carried out by experts but also a “bottom up” activity in which members of the public engage to express and recast their own histories. Migration is no longer just about people moving physically from one place to another but about how they are able to simultaneously inhabit a number of different worlds and to participate in different ways within host, sending and transnational communities. Sustainable community development is no longer about just about developing a physical location but about its representation in virtual space allowing

new forms of engagement and empowerment with people at different levels of community, including ones outside of it altogether (and perhaps even living abroad).

Social Quality theory, based upon a concept of individual and social empowerment and a concept of ‘the social’ that incorporates individual agency within an enabling social context is well placed to interpret these changes (Wallace 2013).

Earlier discussions of digital communications emphasised the differential access of different social groups and how this reflected and reinforced existing inequalities (OECD 2001). It is clear that access to digital communications was not at first evenly spread across the population and in this respect the income has been an important impact upon digital communications – wealthier people are better connected since accessing communications media requires money to purchase communications devices. However, as ICT develops, it is evident that the digital divide goes beyond the “haves” and “have nots” and in fact represents different dimensions of usage, reflecting new as well as old cleavages in modern societies (Din, Yahya et al. 2012). For example, education as well as age helps to distinguish between those who readily live their lives online and those that do not with students as pioneers in this respect. The proliferation of mobile devices enables new kinds of connectivity (Dutton and Blank 2012). Regional inequalities grow rather than decline as faster and more efficient broadband facilities help to multiply the communication power of the cities as against the countryside where superfast broadband is not economical to connect using conventional market models (in countries where it is state sponsored such as South Korea or the Scandinavian countries, these regional divisions are not so evident) (Skerratt, Hall et al. 2010). However, this exclusion has stimulated a range of self-help community broadband initiatives which are being studied in Aberdeen. It has become evident that it is not the presence or absence of digital technology which is important so much as *how it is used*.

Claire Wallace and Kathryn Vincent

The Aberdeen team have addressed these various issues in the following ways:

Our cultural heritage workshops focused upon how community groups are able to express their own history through drawing upon a range of digital resources that could include stories, photographs, and knowledge held by community members that could challenge the “expert” narratives produced by official organisations and official histories (Tait, Wallace et al. 2011). However, the more official narratives were themselves conflicted as to what constituted meaningful “data” and how best to present it. The possibility of connecting between different sources challenged historical narratives tied to a particular monument, place or event.

Our horizon-scanning report on migration looks at the potential areas where digital communications can change the experience and nature of migration. Potential destinations, activities, and

mobility have been expanded as communications evolved. ICT is important not just for migration itself but for integration into host societies and connection to homelands (Kozachenko 2013).

Finally, our case studies of rural communities look at how quality of life and community cohesion are facilitated by ICT infrastructure drawing upon social quality theory (Wallace 2013). We explore how the new digital technologies have contributed to economic and social sustainability. We show that ICT infrastructure does not create economic development merely by existing. Instead, it must be employed in tandem with community building information networks which are dependent upon social capital, civic dialogue and civic engagement (Pigg and Crank 2005) Here, we have focused particularly upon communities that have developed their own broadband connections.

Below we elaborate each of these fields in more detail.

Cultural Heritage

New developments in cultural heritage have challenged conventional paradigms of expertise and history by creating community initiatives that start to write “history from below” based upon material collected from communities themselves: stories, photographs and events. These activities are exemplified in the local history movements in the Western Isles (Commain Eichdriadh associations) and a range of local initiatives aiming to develop community cultural heritage (Tait, Wallace et al. 2011). The importance of these groups for creating regional identities is significant. The role of ICT and Web 2.0 have been critical here in enabling local community groups to develop on-line communications and user-generated content by posting photos and discussing them as well as databases of information connecting family, work, homes and so on. The Aberdeen team have made contact with a range of these local groups, included small enterprises (software and family history companies) as well as government and non-governmental organisations, educational institutions and community voluntary associations: Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, East Lothian councils, Seabridge Consultancies, Historical Detective Agency, Plexus Media, Banchory Town, Historic Scotland, Scottish Government, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Milngave Heritage Trust, National Trust of Scotland, Ancestral Consultants, Second Places Software, Universities of Dundee and Glasgow, Dunblaine House Trust, The Govan Stones Trust, The Burns Monument Centre, HI-Arts, Royal Bank of Scotland Archivists, and Orkney Heritage Trust. Representatives were brought together in two workshops to discuss the issues with cultural heritage as developed in particular sites by local communities. The workshops (held in Ayr on the 2nd and 3rd of October and in Portsoy on the 18th and 19th of October). These projects and dialogue that emerged focused upon how to combine resources to digitize cultural heritage (volunteers, businesses, websites, databases etc.). Ideas were compared in order to provide inspiration and information about funding and organisation. An outcome has been that

some of the ideas created during the workshops were used in applications for the November call for pilot studies.

We found that a number of projects which centred around developing methods of accessing, linking or finding time or funding for digitizing the information held by community associations. Larger organisations seem to dominate the digital narrative, as they have the resources needed to hire staff, collect the correct equipment and access the digital databases of other large institutions. Even within the larger institutions, there is some friction about what is considered ‘important’ culture since only certain artefacts are available digitally and these choices are made by ‘experts’. Small historical societies and independent museums, which are dependent upon volunteers for uploading information are more limited in what they can produce. However, the workshops looked at how local volunteers may be better able to easily and effectively manage digital information in the future through SMEs which provide free and user-friendly website hosting such as Spanglefish (<http://www.spanglefish.com/>) or academic-lead projects which provide open source software-based database like the one currently underway in the CURIOS project (<http://www.dotrural.ac.uk/curios/>).

Outstanding issues and questions that emerged were

- *What is history?* Whilst the official history tends to be stewarded by historians and include an “official” history of a given monument or place, local people post photos and tell stories that are more meaningful ways of understanding their histories, often on websites. These views may contest official histories, may extend them, or may simply suggest a completely different direction. How can these different perspectives be reconciled?
- *Whose history?* Local monuments and places are sustainable only if the local community are able to relate to them. Otherwise they become neglected. How can local communities (schools, socially deprived areas, older and younger people etc.) become engaged in the process of understanding and making their own history? How do the contestations between different views and different groups become manifest and how are they enabled through ICT? How can local volunteers and members of the community be empowered to manage and share their views?
- *Where is history?* The creation and preservation of history is often initiated by local groups, but increasingly a wider community are interested in participating in commenting and contributing to historical discussions at a local level. Diaspora or other communities of interest are of relevance here. Photographs and commentaries can be important here and web 2.0 technologies with virtual presence allows for this non-local engagement.

Migration

Migration is arguably one of the most pressing social and political issues facing contemporary societies. The mobility of workers, students and academics is encouraged through EU programmes but at the same time, migration is seen as a threat to societies, particularly in terms of the integration of migrants (or lack of it). Yet old paradigms of integration and mobility are challenged by the new frontiers of digital and ICT communications as migrants can live simultaneously in the country of destination and that of origin through communications media. Even this distinction can be challenged as some have claimed that migrants inhabit a “transnational virtual space” as geographical communities are supplanted by virtual ones. Earlier studies have identified the importance of networks and social capital in providing advance information for migrants, helping them move, find jobs and accommodation and contacts for them when they reach their destination. This is why migrants previously tended to come from particular regions or districts. However, new digital flows of communication enable migrants to be better informed and have transformed the nature of migration networks that have been identified in earlier research. Websites, online information exchanges and virtual communities have supplanted the old social capital networks so that migrants may not necessarily have any personal connection to the people in the communities in

which they arrive. Furthermore, links to others in the host society are enabled through digital communications as websites, facebook pages and other online media become a medium of communication and contact for diasporic communities. This also has the potential to facilitate integration and foster the civil society activities of migrant communities in the host country. Finally, it enables migrants to keep moving not just between two communities but within a range of countries and continents with a set of social relationships no longer anchored to any one place. The scoping study commissioned for *Communities and Cultures Network+* suggest the following areas of research are called for:

- *ICT and inclusion of migrant populations.* How are migrants integrated through virtual networks and resources? How do they become acculturated? How do they maintain their own cultural identities and communities whilst living in a different society?
- *Migration and democracy.* How can migrants participate meaningfully in their new societies? How can digital communications foster civil society? How do they participate in their previous societies and what impact does this external diaspora have on homeland politics?
- *Digital literacy among migrants.* How far does digital literacy enable the maintenance of cross national families, cross national commerce, education and employment?
- *Social networks* How are migrant social networks transformed by these new communications media? How do people use the information and contacts that they make online and offline? How do they maintain social networks and personal communities with the help of digital media?
- *The methodology of researching migrant communities and culture.* What is the relationship between geographical and cultural communities and virtual ones. How do we research them?

Sustaining Communities

Sustaining community life in the face of fragmented modern societies, frequent mobility and “liquid modernity” (Bauman 1995) is a problem if we are to create communities with high social quality or quality of life (Phillips 2006). This is a particular problem in rural areas where the lack of diverse employment and housing opportunities mean that these regions become de-populated and they are also digitally excluded since they it is not profitable to provide fast and efficient broadband to small populations under the current market model. Traditional paradigms of quality of life have emphasised the role of socio-economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion and social empowerment and have stressed the role of social and public policy for providing this framework of resource. However, digital communications and ICT challenge these paradigms to suggest new ways of enabling community development in the twenty first century (Pigg and Crank 2005; Wallace 2013). The potential for ICT in enabling community networking, civil society and new ways of working have a potentially transformative effect on locational communities. ICT enables locational communities to develop diverse forms of social network and community links in ways that are creative and dynamic, bypassing traditional policies and planning authorities altogether. The Aberdeen team are looking at how communities can use ICT to build social cohesion and quality of life by looking three communities that are well connected using self-help broadband schemes. One of these (Cromarty) was one of the first communities to become connected in the 1990s and is now one of the best connected Highland communities. Another (Kinmuck) has recently introduced fast broadband through a community initiative and a third rural community in Cumbria (Alston Moor) has been an important example of a self-help initiative harnessing local volunteers and enterprise. New questions and issues arising from this research are:

- *The role of social entrepreneurs.* It is evident that community initiatives come about due to the role of particular social entrepreneurs who are both socially and economically active. How can these people be identified and enabled to assist community development?
- *Civil society.* In what ways are civil society expanded through the use of digital communications and what kinds of civil society are emerging as a result?

- *Community networking.* How does the community develop identity and cohesion through a collective online memory as exemplified in posted photographs and videos of community events? Is this under the control of a few people or is it genuinely distributed and open knowledge commons?
- *Digital plurality.* Is the digital divide still an important issue given that mobile phones are ubiquitous and other forms of digital communications through laptops, tablets etc. have become more widespread? What differences are there in class, gender and age in the way these different technologies are used?
- *Digital empowerment.* The use of web 2.0 and social networking technology enables users to become powerful in new ways – to develop political communication, to discuss issues in a deliberative “knowledge commons” and to better control their own health and wellbeing. Is social empowerment enhanced through digital technology?
- *Empathetic civilization.* It has been argued that the distributed nature of digital knowledge and the collective self-help initiatives that this has enabled (for example through crowd sourcing, online information exchange etc.) has enabled a new ethic of co-operation to emerge (Rifkin 2009). To what extent are community building activities enhanced through digital communications?
- *Economic opportunities.* Does enhanced communications technology at a local level enable economic development in terms of work and educational opportunities, the better communication of arts and cultural events, thus bringing visitors to the area? What are the implications for local social and cultural development?

Enabling activities

Finally, we have been actively involved in setting up a structure of resources which can be accessed by members of our smaller network to establish and carry out projects beyond the CCN+ funding scheme. We have set up a blog as an attempt to facilitate these projects, either by connecting people who would not otherwise work together and by providing access to sources of funding available through the University of Aberdeen which SMEs and voluntary organisations would not normally know about. In this way we are able to sustain the communications and exchanges of ideas brought about by the two workshops

Future activities over the next year

In the coming months we will continue **our investigations of the three communities**: Cromarty, Kinmuck and Alston Moor. The aim is to understand how digital networking can impact upon culture, society, economy and quality of life by looking at three very different communities and by speaking to different members of the community.

In addition we will carry out **horizon-scanning** in Finland and New Zealand to understand how other countries have addressed the issue of developing culture and communities in a digital age with a dispersed rural population.

Finally, we will be carrying out one **entrepreneurial workshop** in 2013, and another in 2014 which will be designed to train individuals how to develop their skills and ideas into social enterprises – both those for economic benefit, and academic development.

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