Third Sector Research Centre

Discussion Paper E

Exploring social media as a tool for knowledge exchange: the #btr11 experiment

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Overview

This paper presents an evaluation of the experiments for knowledge exchange using social media during TSRC's Beyond the Radar knowledge exchange work. Launched in July 2011, the "#btr11" experiment sought to trial, and learn from, new ways of engaging with people around 'below the radar' issues using a range of online platforms. The paper introduces the project and the evaluation approach, before describing the project in greater detail. The approach is then contextualised within digital knowledge exchange literatures, and justification is provided for using social exchange theory as the evaluation's underlying framework. Next, the paper uses this framework to generate some learning from #btr11, through a thematic discussion around accepted practices, shared values and exchange relationships. It concludes with a summary and a set of lessons and insights that could be helpful for future experimentation with social media platforms.

Hyperlinks have been provided where possible to provide readers with direct links to all the resources used for the evaluation – other resources are given in the bibliography. A short glossary of abbreviations and terms is also provided in Appendix 1 for those who may want clarification on social media concepts, a list of figures is available in Appendix 2, and for those interested in learning more about social exchange theory, a brief outline can be found in Appendix 3.

Introduction

Since 2008, Below the Radar (BtR) researchers at the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) have explored the role, function, impact and experiences of community groups, organisations and activities working both formally and informally at a local level and within communities of interest (McCabe and Phillimore, 2009). This paper presents an evaluation of the online dimensions of TSRC's *Beyond the Radar* knowledge exchange project, which was launched in July 2011 as an experiment that sought to trial, and learn from, new ways of engaging with people around 'below the radar' issues using social media. Funded by Barrow Cadbury Trust, and led by TSRC's Knowledge Exchange Team (KET) it used a range of social media platforms with the ambition of;

> *…offer(ing) the chance for more voices to engage in the debates surrounding below the radar and the big society…[and] offer a platform for more in-depth exploration and analysis of the implication of the current socio-economic and political environment for community groups and activities.*

The work started with an "impact event", hosted by Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) which was attended by over 50 academics, policy makers, practitioners and community activists. The event consisted of participatory workshops to encourage 'a cross fertilisation of ideas between different stakeholders from diverse backgrounds'. It also launched the project's online activities, using the twitter hashtag (searchable keyword) *#btr11* as its title. The aim of #btr11 was to offer a 'virtual continuation of the debate' for wider public engagement and participation using social media over a ten month period. Acknowledging that potential audiences have evolving expectations of how they can receive and interact with information; digital methods were trialled for knowledge exchange within the participative culture driving online social networks for addressing civic and societal challenges.

Recognising the experimental nature of such activity in the academic context; the evaluation team built a loose theoretical framework from literature around digital knowledge exchange, and then assessed the #btr11 project against that framework through a discursive approach, which situated statistical data, narrative from organisers and stakeholders, and observation data within key literature themes. The paper presents this evaluation process by providing a brief description of the #btr11 activities and responding to the following evaluation objectives;

> **Objective One**: to build a framework for assessing #btr11 activities through a discussion around digital knowledge exchange between research, policy and practice communities

Objective Two: to use the framework to answer the research questions and generate key lessons from #btr11 around the use of social media as a knowledge exchange tool. The research questions were;

- Did the social media platforms offer suitable opportunities for knowledge exchange?
- Was the value of knowledge/resource exchange shared by the individuals involved?
- Did the research reach new audiences?
- Did individuals build new relationships through the project?

The paper concludes by summarising this theoretically informed evaluation process, and presenting key learning that TSRC, and others interested in developing their own understanding of social media, can build upon to improve knowledge exchange practices.

Project description – #btr11

A key ambition of the Below the Radar (BtR) research stream is to share its findings across policy, practice and research communities, in order to further explore some of the challenges that the research exposed. Through #btr11, a programme of social media events were developed over a ten month period (see fig.1), to trial how effective digital knowledge exchange could be in delivering on this aim. In addition to using TSRC's existing website and email list to collate and disseminate information, KET worked with stakeholders and decision makers from well-established online or local community networks. *Beyond the Radar* discussions were held online with partners including the Guardian Voluntary Sector Network, NatCAN (National Community Activists Network), Big Lottery Fund, Community Matters and Globalnet21. Additionally, a new platform (btr11.civicrowd.com) was created to provide a discussion and decision-making space for online interactions. Several different platforms were used for #btr11 events; each with an established etiquette intended to be easy to pick up without prior use. The first and last #btr11 events were based on two face-to-face meetings and five others took place exclusively online.

8th July 2011	"Maximising the impact of community activities"
	Beyond the Radar conference held at Department for Communities and Local Government in London
19th July 2011	"How can community groups achieve their aims despite the cuts?"
	Q&A hosted by Guardian Voluntary Sector Network
19th October 2011	"What motivates people to act"
	Q&A in partnership with NatCAN using Civicrowd site
30th January 2012	"Civil Society Beyond the Radar"
	Globalnet21 webinar

1st February 2012	"Below the Radar and the unintended consequences of voluntary sector configuration" Q&A in partnership with Big Lottery Fund using Civicrowd site
28th February 2012	"Strengthening civil cociety through social media" Globalnet21 webinar
4th April 2012	"Social Networking Below the Radar" Workshop and discussion hosted by Big Lottery Fund and Globalnet21

[Figure. 1 - #btr11 event dates and descriptions]

Three events took a 'Q&A' format whereby expert panellists responded to comments on a dedicated web page. These were public, did not ask for pre-registration to view but did require registration on the site in order to post comments. Two events used private webinar formats which required pre-event registration. Twitter conversations were entirely public and monitored via a dedicated hashtag #btr11.

The impact event that launched the *Beyond the Radar* project linked new online activity with traditional face-to-face knowledge exchange. It introduced a 'social reporting' approach to engage people in developing and championing ideas which were stimulated by information and discussions from the BtR research stream. For this event, the social reporting had three aspects; event design, live micro-blogging, and creation of a new platform to host on-going virtual participation;

- A social reporter designed and facilitated some of the workshop exercises to support on-going online community activism based on knowledge, connections and ideas generated at the event.
- A micro-blogger was engaged to relay event proceedings to a live audience using Twitter and be a conduit for questions from the virtual audience. More than 20 people joined the live debate on Twitter and around 45,000 individual Twitter users saw tweets with the #btr11 hashtag, each seeing 2 tweets on average and 2,122 seeing 7 or more tweets in their feed.
- A new platform (btr11.civicrowd.com) was set up shortly after the impact event offering video interviews, photos, articles, highlights from the 'stream' of tweets and the ability to comment and vote on practical ideas on how to maximise the impact of small community groups in the current context

Other social media tools were used to create 'word clouds' (visualisation of keywords associated with the Twitter stream) [fig. 2] and a themed selection of Tweets was viewed on the 'curation' site Storify by over 200 people. These visualisation and curation tools were used to illustrate and promote the relationship between #btr11 online conversations, face-to-face activity at the event and on-going activity around BtR issues (see Love, Passion and Fun Below the Radar for full details).

[Figure 2: July 2011 word cloud produced using wordle.net]

The concluding event in April 2012 offered a short workshop and discussion on "social networking below the radar", plus live tweeting. The volume of tweets reflected the small face-to-face attendance with 11 tweeters generating more than 90 tweets. The twitter audience of around 5,700 were more focussed than for the impact event, with 3,694 seeing more than 8 tweets from #btr11 on the day. Digital material (tweets, blog posts, video, etc.) available for reference include collected highlights which have been viewed over 170 times on Storify, a collection of links on the social bookmarking service Delicious and 4 popular audio snippets published by discussion partners Globalnet21.

For further details and a full content analysis of all the online events and discussions see Shariff, 2012 (please contact TSRC for a copy).

Objective one – Digital knowledge exchange: sharing research through social media

The purpose of this objective is to situate the #btr11 project within an academic context and provide a justification for the evaluation team's theoretical choices, which started with the question: How can knowledge exchange be promoted between disparate individuals, groups and organisations using social media? The following discussion offers a response to this question in three stages; firstly though exploring the notion of "sharing communities", secondly through a brief outline of the current social media context, and finally through developing a social exchange framework for assessing knowledge exchange programmes such as #btr11.

Sharing Communities

The motivation for this section is to explore how social media is (or could be) used to complete the research "loop" between academic, policy and practice communities.
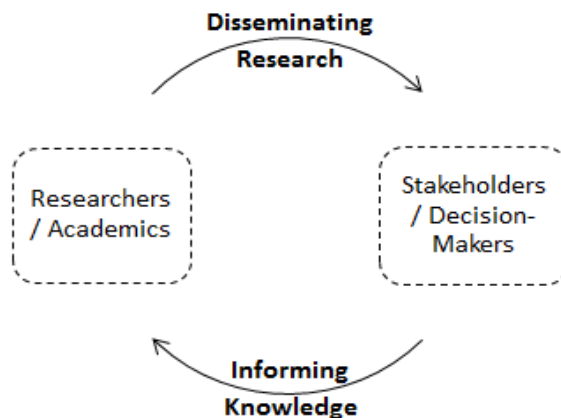
[Figure 3: Illustration of research "loop" between academic, policy and practice communities]

Knowledge exchange programmes like TSRC's KET have been funded to achieve this objective, based on capacity building and community engagement literatures across academic, public and voluntary sectors (see Boyer, 1996; Bennet and Bennet, 2008; Hart et al., 2008; 2009). However, managing the process of research-community knowledge exchange through social media remains problematic, due to what Jacobson et al. refer to as the "two communities" problem, which 'point to cultural differences between researchers and users as barriers to such engagement' (2004: 274). In the case of #btr11, this is manifested in a steep learning curve for experimenting with different ways of encouraging engagement in academic research, in order to demonstrate "process impact" through new approaches to knowledge exchange.

Within academia itself, there is an assumption that knowledge exchange is an innate motivator for individuals who spend their careers collaborating within learning environments – at both an informal level, when sharing is not perceived as "transactional" or contractual (Antal and Richebé, 2009: 91), and through the formal 'reward and incentive system of the academy' (Jacobson et al. 2004: 249). In other words, knowledge exchange is already understood as a valued *and valuable* practice in this organisational context. This offers the potential within academia to replicate and virtualise such exchange through social media, shown through the platform academia.edu for example. However, this is a relatively alien practice for many academics, with a general lack of incentive and/or enthusiasm for publically engaging in such a way (see blog by Casilli, 2012). For those that do, extending the spaces of exchange beyond academia into policy and practice communities brings a secondary problem – that new individuals engaging with research will bring distinct (and maybe contradictory) motivations, expectations, understandings and practices with them.

For community groups, huge pressures on time and resources mean that reading an academic journal article, attending (or even accessing) a conference or participating in a research project is often not feasible. The learning from academic research may be interesting and potentially useful, but unless it

is accessible, easily available and relevant to current priorities, it is unlikely to be used. Co-production of knowledge is suggested as a valuable solution to this problem, as it empowers the communities in question to deliver their "experiential expertise" to the research process, diminishes the role of the "privileged expert" and breaks down barriers for marginalised groups (Durose et al., 2012). However, although this approach is gaining interest, it is still generally restricted to those groups or individuals who are engaged in the fieldwork process, either through commissioning or contributing to action or participatory research. The complex and difficult spaces that many communities groups exist within can also be unfamiliar, inaccessible and unreceptive to formal academic research. Martin argues that due to the often contested and inconclusive nature of academic study 'many policy-makers and practitioners are doubtful of the value to them of social science research' (2010: 212). Thus, even if underlying motivations are shared between academic and policy-practice communities; spaces and opportunities for engagement are not always available, language is not always shared, and personal or political agendas may interfere with the research process.

Social Media Context

Social media is part of Web2.0 technology, which is a progression from 'static' websites towards more collaborative, interactive and responsive website design. Social media comprises new online tools for publishing multimedia content, often in a variety of formats including text, video, audio, and pictures. It enables interactions to cross one or more platforms or services through sharing links, and involves different levels of engagement by participants who can read, respond to and republish vast quantities of information freely and easily (Gibson et al., 2009; Shirky, 2009). Social media participants are consumers of information who behave in new ways, repurposing and sharing data as hybrid producers and users, individually and increasingly in groups. The range of tools and services is changing rapidly as "produsers" (Bruns, 2007) find new ways to combine them and increasingly engage in collaborative content creation. Knowledge exchange practitioners should take note that these new digital behaviours and tools often emerge together. A good example is 'Creative Commons' licensing through which individuals bypass established copyright laws by making their work available for free non-commercial use. The illustrations below, made available in the Commons, show snapshots of the range of social media in 2008 and 2012.

[Figure 4: Snapshots of "social media landscapes" from 2008 and 2012 by fredcavazza.net]

Negotiating these social media landscapes offers a promising approach to knowledge exchange, through cheap, easy, efficient and productive information sharing. Debating in an open forum, running a web-based discussion, or using Twitter for advice and resources, offers the potential for a wealth of information and rich, informative dialogue (Griffith, 2007). Relationships with new networks can be built, key stakeholders and decision-makers can be accessed, and decades of good practice can be shared and learned from (Gibson et al., 2009).

Yet, in this time of cuts and public sector withdrawal, voluntary and community sector organisations are experiencing increased organisational instability and rising competition for diminishing resources. Thus, when turning to digital cooperation using social media, these organisations are exposed to new risks through the opening up of conversations and exchanges in the public domain. The voluntary and informal nature of such exchange has no guarantees of reciprocity, there is little control over content, and no formal sanctions for providing "bad" information. The question that therefore remains in encouraging knowledge exchange and developing a sharing community is "why should I share?" (Wasko and Faraj, 2005).

Social Exchange Framework

While social media programmes are often assessed with social network theory (Kanter and Fine, 2010), this paper has taken its conceptual grounding around the themes of knowledge sharing and transfer, in order to respond to the "why should I share" question and to more accurately reflect the goals of the #btr11 project. The evaluation team therefore chose to situate the evaluation within social exchange theory, to illustrate how the practical benefits of knowledge exchange can be obscured through a complex process shaped by the understandings of its users. The motivations, goals and significance that "sharers" place on "sharing" change the dynamics of the practice, and bring a whole host of (sometimes unpredictable) risks and benefits.

In order to recognise the natural human behaviours in knowledge exchange through social media; a nuanced, multi-layered model of social exchange is necessary to accurately capture its complex dynamics. As such, some fundamental themes and attributes have been distilled from social exchange theory (see Appendix 3 for a short overview of the literature), supported by social media and knowledge transfer literatures, for the purpose of evaluating #btr11 activity.

1. **Accepted practices of exchange** – individuals within a "sharing community" should have access to suitable platforms and agreed ways of working:
   o Space – both physical and virtual
   o Opportunity – time and access
   o Knowledge and skill – technologies/innovations
   o Dialogue – ways of behaving/talking, level of (in)formality

2. **Shared values through exchange** – individuals engaging in exchange should share some common values or attributes:
    o Motivation – willingness and intent
    o Goals - impact, outcomes, or learning?
    o Reciprocity - explicit, implicit, delayed, gifted
    o Perceptions - gain versus risk

3. **Exchange relationships** – relationships that develop through collaboration should be beneficial to the network:
    o Personal – trust, honesty, wisdom
    o Network - reach and strength
    o Benefits - capability, capacity, influence, power
    o Status - transparency, accountability, access

Many of these interesting and challenging 'sharing community' dynamics were reflected in the #btr11 experiment to engage voices from a range of sectors in BtR debates online. The evaluation team used these themes, and the literature outlined throughout objective 1, to expose and learn from these dynamics. The lessons that emerged from this process are explored under objective 2.

Objective two – Learning from #btr11

In order to explore the "process impact" of #btr11 and learn from new ways of engaging in knowledge exchange; the project's research questions were mapped against the key attributes of social exchange identified from the literature (figure 5). This provided the evaluation team with room to develop a themed narrative that highlighted important choices, risks, outcomes and lessons under each theme. With such a small scale project, this theoretically informed story provides a potentially valuable resource for further TSRC experimentation, and a starting point for others interested in developing their own project. The discussion below comes through retrospective evaluation, and analysis of quantitative and text data, which was collected through interview and observation. Empirical examples and illustrations are provided at particular points of interest, and the literature is referred to throughout.
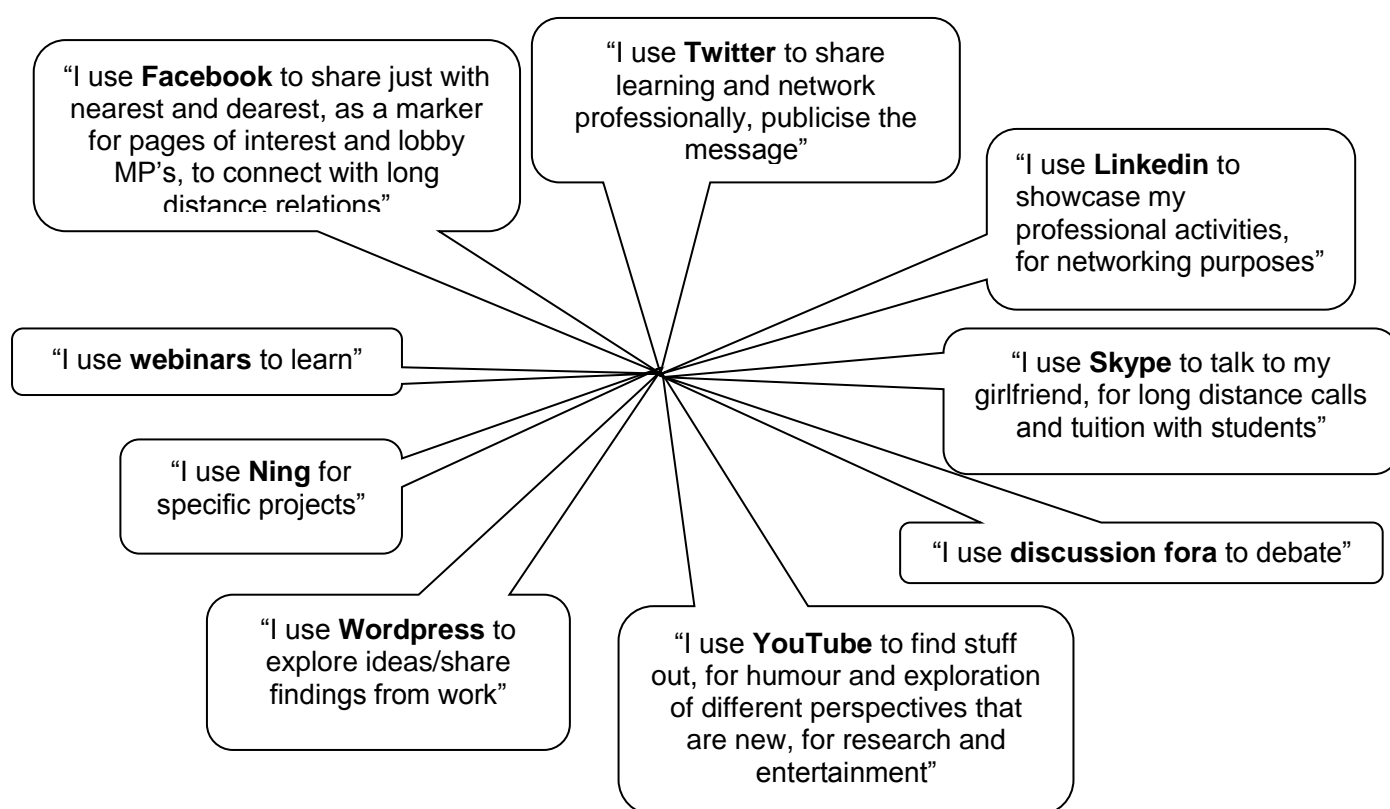
Research Questions	Social Exchange Attributes
Did the social media platforms offer suitable opportunities for knowledge exchange?	Accepted Practices
Was the value of knowledge/resource exchange shared by the individuals involved?	Shared Values
Did the research reach new audiences **and** did individuals build new relationships through the project?	Exchange Relationships

[Figure 5: Matching the #btr11 research questions to the social exchange framework]

Theme 1) Accepted Practices

Social exchange theory suggests that when using social media to share between different communities, the platforms used should offer suitable spaces for agreed ways of working. While there is no single accepted practice for knowledge exchange, there are certain platforms that are more suitable than others for achieving certain goals. Therefore, projects like #btr11 are worthwhile and sensible experiments for improving understanding, in this case, knowledge exchange between academia and communities. The key to understanding which platform to use is to test a range of social media tools and learn how your target communities interact with them.

For #btr11, the evaluation team wanted to know whether the project offered suitable spaces and opportunities for knowledge exchange. The answer is not a straightforward "yes, it did" or "no, it didn't". We can, however, highlight the primary narrative that emerged throughout this process, which reinforced the notion of social media being a 'toolkit'. This introduced a range of issues around how the tools were used and how suitable they were for the task. To demonstrate this, we asked final event participants to complete in the sentence "I use [a particular social media platform] to…" and we received responses (in figure 6) which are indicative of the range and scope of platforms that could be used for knowledge exchange projects.

"I use **Facebook** to share just with nearest and dearest, as a marker for pages of interest and lobby MP's, to connect with long distance relations"

"I use **Twitter** to share learning and network professionally, publicise the message"

"I use **Linkedin** to showcase my professional activities, for networking purposes"

"I use **webinars** to learn"

"I use **Skype** to talk to my girlfriend, for long distance calls and tuition with students"

"I use **Ning** for specific projects"

"I use **discussion fora** to debate"

"I use **Wordpress** to explore ideas/share findings from work"

"I use **YouTube** to find stuff out, for humour and exploration of different perspectives that are new, for research and entertainment"

[Figure 6: Illustration of responses from workshop question "I use [a particular social media tool] to…", April 2012]

In order to highlight the practical scope of the tools that #btr11 used, the evaluation team adapted the TSRC's Knowledge Exchange Impact Matrix (see Shariff, 2010). Through this, the different events and platforms were mapped (see figure 7) against audience size (the numbers of people participating or reading) and level of active audience engagement. Note however, that this illustration should be treated as indicative of how the #btr11 platforms were perceived by the evaluation team with access to limited data around single events – it should not be treated as a rigorous analysis of comparable social media platforms.
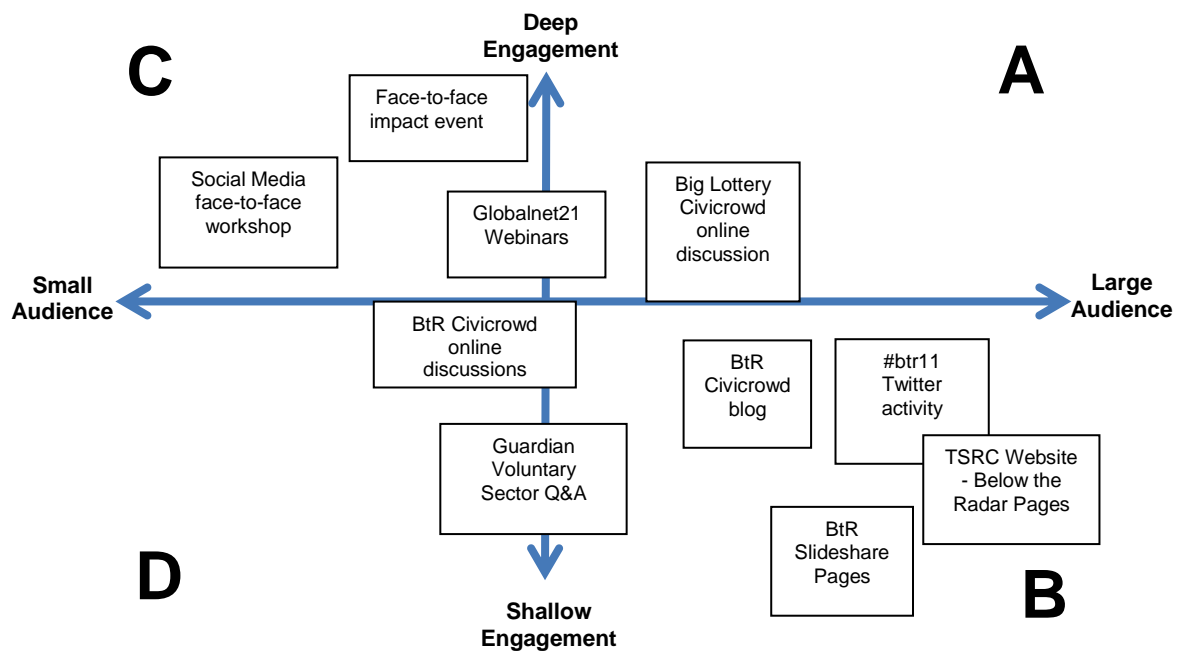
[Figure 7. Adapted Knowledge Exchange Matrix from Shariff, 2010, with mapped #btr11 events]

This illustration represents that the first decision that should be made when choosing a particular tool is whether to take a dissemination or a discursive approach to the knowledge exchange activity. If you are seeking to get your research out to big numbers, then shallow engagement from your audience is likely – as shown in section B. If you are looking for insight and debate around a particular topic or research theme, then small numbers are more likely – as in section C. It can be argued that the least desirable result in social media terms (unless targeting your research findings to very specific stakeholders for example) appears in section D with small audience and shallow engagement, while the best result for a single event is found in section A (although it is also least likely to produce sustained and meaningful knowledge exchange unless a strong digital brand is built).

For those who haven't experienced a wide range of social media platforms, the different ways of participating in each virtual discussion space can be hard to follow or measure, particularly for organisers, one of whom stated 'we had no idea if the numbers were good or bad!'. Understanding the accepted ways of working and dealing with irregularity in online conversation formats also introduces

another aspect of awkwardness – as shown in some comments taken directly from the #btr11 transcripts:

"Interesting debate. Thanks for hosting. Worth doing although a little frustrating not to be able to follow threads very easily – especially early on when it was moving very fast."

"Julie I agree. It's like being at a party and trying to have 10 conversations simultaneously"

"Thanks everyone – plenty to reflect on. Agree debate was more difficult to follow than if we'd all been sat in a room! Best wishes. Peter"

"Very constructive but slow pace at times. More interlinking with participants would have added something and make for a more integrated event"

"Sorry – went off to find some links, lost the post I was typing and am now behind"

These final comments represent the interesting divergences around time and space requirements that were raised by a number of contributors. For example, social media events offer the convenience of not having to pay for travel costs or event fees, and allow people to stay in their homes. In an academic context, online meetings like the #btr11 webinars also don't require long time commitments as in a conference setting, and they enable communities of interest to, in the opinion of one contributor, 'opt in and opt out much more easily'. This is reinforced by another, who comments that 'these type of events also help to bridge a gap for new people usually isolated from these types of conversations, they can observe quietly and see how interesting it is'. As shown through #btr11's Big Lottery online discussion on Civicrowd, these platforms can offer spaces where people can access and engage with "big names", that they would otherwise be distanced from.

This is contested however, by the repeated feeling that there are still "hugely significant practical barriers in skills, hardware and cost – going door to door to everyday people in local communities, most people won't have a smart phone and some not even email". Inadequate access to the Web makes it hard to develop digital literacy, which even if achieved, still requires organisers and potential participants to navigate through the mass of information to find events and platforms that are useful, significant and timely. This means learning to "filter", or even "ignore waffle", which another contributor contested as another term for "censoring". This also reflects divergence around the issues of immediacy – with some arguing that 'yes there is a lot of online activity in the voluntary sector but the disadvantage is responding instantly rather than reflecting on implications' – while another claims that 'social media allows dialogues that are going on in the field to be made immediate and widely accessible'. This "catalyst and accelerant" effect is hugely subjective, and one which will bring continuous debate through its unpredictable and uncontrollable outcomes.

The primary lesson, therefore, through exploring the question of whether #btr11 offered suitable spaces and opportunities for knowledge exchange, is that attempts must be made to understand and adapt to the preferences of your audience. Establishing benchmarks and setting targets for audience size and contribution for different platforms is only feasible if you have the resources to conduct heavy consultation with your community of interest, and analyse it against comparable programmes. If this approach isn't feasible, then experiments like #btr11 provide cost effective opportunities to explore what works. The necessity is to, in one contributor's words, be 'professionally promiscuous' and learn something from each occasion. Through this, the aim is to be able to say, as one organiser reflects, 'I know now which networks and groups I can access through different tools for different purposes, and have a much better idea of how they are likely to contribute'.

Theme 2) Shared values

Alongside practical considerations, the literature informed the 'common-sense' idea that, for digital exchange to be successful, the individuals involved need to have shared sense of purpose or at least some common attributes. The evaluation question around whether the value of knowledge exchange itself was shared by the individuals involved in #btr11 clearly resonated with those we spoke to. The event participants and the stakeholders accepted and supported the notion of academic-community knowledge exchange, and demonstrated this through the mutual use of words like 'trust', 'willingness', 'passion', 'collective will', 'purpose', and 'personal connections'. They also displayed a shared concern around community activity and were motivated by the importance they placed on social change. The initial engagement in each event was sparked by this thread of interest that brought people together.

However, this was countered by the feeling that most successful social media programmes achieve their success by packaging ideas in an accessible way and "selling" their brand to the right digital audiences. There is a potentially interesting question emerging from this, which cannot be answered here, around whether trust between people or trust in a knowledge "product" has the highest value in exchange projects. As the #btr11 project didn't commit time and resources to brand building, there was some divergence around its perceived goals and the objectives of each event. This was in part due to the intentionally free structure of most of the events (with loose topics and light-touch moderation) and in part through the risks associated with a social media experiment that tapped into pre-existing networks with pre-formed relationships. The result was that the conversations that played out between those who attended the events did not always match the publicised themes, and that participants did not use the Civicrowd space in the way the organisers anticipated. There were two key messages that emerged around this problem, which are explored below.

'Build a shared purpose'

While a wide range of opinions and backgrounds should be promoted and included through a knowledge exchange project, an important learning point is that a shared purpose needs to be developed from the outset and followed through. As described in the introduction, the aim of the #btr11 project was to engage more voices in below the radar debates and explore the implications of

the current socio-economic climate. The impact event also launched a set of ideas generated by participants, that could be followed up both through the online spaces that the project offered and independently of #btr11. From one organisers' perspective therefore, the purpose was to 'facilitate space to increase communications with new groups and communities' who had an interest in the issues raised through BtR research. This meant accepting the risks around not being "in control" of each event and allowing a range of often messy conversations to emerge and play out.

The funding proposal for #btr11 set out aims for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to learn from each event, and for community groups to benefit from exploring a range of challenges and solutions generated by responding to the research. Therefore, while the individual discussions occasionally deviated from the event purpose (for example by acting as a space to promote other work); comments from every event expressed appreciation and relevance to the interests and work of those that participated. A concern was raised, however, by both contributors and organisers that the online events did not build momentum around the actions championed in the initial event, which resulted in a missed opportunity for shared ownership of the #btr11 project. One contributor noted that 'a few people had intentions to do something with [the impact event] but after two weeks the energies went elsewhere'. Thus, while the #btr11 programme did deliver on its strategic purpose of providing spaces to explore community-centred debates; it was less successful in building a unifying purpose to create momentum for on-going activity within their communities of interest. This "shared purpose" could have been more successful if the ideas championed from the impact event had been *explicitly* related to each online event, with relevant "snap-shots" from the research (or other resources) provided on the Civicrowd space as a focal or discussion point. In practical terms, maintaining a strong twitter presence from the outset, and referring participants directly back to the Civicrowd space after the events for more "ideas championing" could have also been fruitful, without requiring participants to feedback or update on their progress.

'Communicate, don't broadcast'

The language that was used by the project contributors had a strong focus on "conversation", "dialogue", "engagement" and "communication". Reflecting on the events themselves, the transcripts and recordings show that #btr11 events where certainly dialogical. They acted, in the most part, as discussion forums that allowed those involved to contribute as little or much as they wanted, and gave an insight into the experiences and values of the communities that were interested in the topics. In this sense, #btr11 did very little "broadcasting" of their research, findings or on-going questions. Conversely, the message that came very clearly from the stakeholders was that academics were often guilty, as one contributor describes, of not 'expressing themselves in ways communities can hear'.

While #btr11 was successful in connecting people around BtR issues, the BtR research itself was primarily published on the TSRC website and on the resources page of Civiccrowd. This manifests itself in a break in the knowledge exchange loop illustrated under objective one.
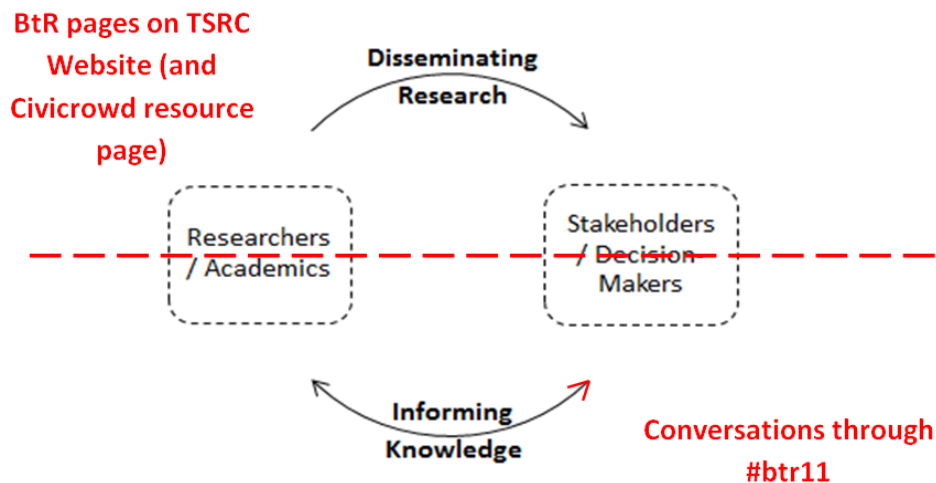
[Figure 8: Illustration of "broken research loop" between academic, policy and practice communities]

The dividing line here is perforated, to illustrate that the BtR research was open, published, accessible and shared through the #btr11 events. The project also engaged a BtR researcher in key discussions and, at times, raised some ideas directly from the research. However, the research documents remained peripheral, primarily as links to the TSRC pages, with only marginal experimentation with alternative methods of dissemination using social media. Formal organisational participation online was strong in signposting and structured events, particularly in a Q&A structure, and community groups responded well to multimedia formats such as webinars and the conversational style of Twitter. This offers a strong indication that a complimentary approach to research dissemination is important, by introducing new formats alongside more traditional ones. #btr11 created a valuable space for community feedback and discussion during events, and began to experiment with new ways of packaging and sharing knowledge (using Slideshare for example), but that this didn't translate to a completed cycle of dialogue around the BtR research.

The high value that both organisers and participants placed on the idea of conversation and communication demonstrates the shared willingness to engage with each other and speak the same language, which resonates strongly with the literature. One contributor noted 'we're not too bothered about where people come from; we care about what they say and how they say it'. Another contributor builds on this with the comment that 'if academics feel undermined and communities feel ill-equipped, then learning will fail. Egos are at risk from both sides!'. Both of these viewpoints reflect that academics need to accept the vulnerability of allowing their research to be challenged, and adapt their normal institutional ways of communicating, though using succinct, jargon-free language, and by talking as normal people with interesting and insightful contributions. #btr11 successfully achieved this during the online events themselves, but the signposted BtR research generally remained in a distinct academic format. By building on the well-received video and Slideshare elements of the impact event, further use could be made of spaces like Civicrowd to offer video, podcasts, slides and on-going discussion forums, in order to engage people in exploring and questioning specific research themes, issues and findings.

Theme 3) Exchange relationships

Some of the key notions around relationships that came out of the #btr11 discussion resonated strongly within the social exchange literature. The issues the evaluation team were initially interested in were whether the research reached new audiences, and whether beneficial new relationships were formed out of engagement with the project. Outside of the social exchange framework, this also relates directly to the key ideas in social media theory around networks, which is explored below. The literature also raised an interesting question around status, which was not an original research question, but which was also reinforced in the narratives that emerged from the stakeholder dialogue.

Social network mapping

To explore the issue of digital audience reach; TSRC's place in 'real life' organisation networks was mapped by the impact event participants in July 2011, and at the end of the project the evaluation team used twiangulate.com to analyse Twitter networks. The social network analysis conducted in the July network mapping exercise asked 28 contributors to identify up to six organisations and individuals they worked with most (see figure 9). Typically for a conference map, the most central organisations were those which sponsored the event. A further series of smaller, unconnected clusters were also identified, largely representing local, 'below the radar' special-interest groups. Note however, that this map does not necessarily represent the most important parts of the network, but the network relationships that participants were willing to divulge.

Taken in April 2012, the twitter network snapshots shown in figures 10 and 11 illustrate a 'digital echo' of real-life relationships, with TSRC's twitter followers overlapping with key organisation partners. Network mapping in different forms helps visualise different positions in the network, how resources flow, and stimulates conversations amongst participants (Grant and Scearce, 2009). Each type of network diagram produced for #btr11 supports the idea that 'real world' links with individuals and smaller organisations could help TSRC and others increase the online network effects, and engage directly and digitally with 'below the radar' audiences.

[Figure 9: Social network map of #btr11 impact event ([Mackie and Wilcox](), 2011)]


@3sectorrc

Close 'real life' working relationships between TSRC and key partners were reflected on Twitter. Using [twiangulate.com]() to illustrate organisation networks for #btr11 clearly illustrates some overlap among followers and potenital to reach new audiences through online networks.[1]

[Figure 10: Twitter network 'reach' – organisations[2]]

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[1] To see how this is calculated, see [http://www.twiangulate.com/blog/biggest-twitter-followers]()

[2] The Twitter followers of TSRC were compared with an organisation representing local activists and one organisation seeking to improve support to local voluntary and community groups.
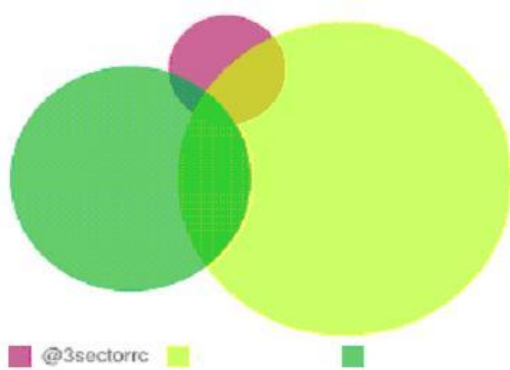
The network position of TSRC is shown with 2 third sector professionals who engage with traditional organisations, are known to be active at community level and who also use Twitter to work with 'below the radar' groups. The overlaps represent an opportunity for TSRC to use personal connections, developed at the impact event, to access 'grass-roots' networks developing on social media.

[Figure 11: Twitter network reach – individuals]

In terms of whether the research reached new audiences through #btr11, the evaluation team is confident, as are the organisers, of the success of this aim. Just three participants from the impact event attended the final event, and few were identifiable throughout the online events, which meant that the remainder had, at some point, been newly introduced to, and were interested in, the project. The success of the increased visibility of the network is demonstrated in TSRC's twitter following moving from a following of 105 before the launch of #btr11, to 567 after. With 1,652 unique users accessing the BtR civicrowd website, active commenting and participation from over 120 people, and almost 3,000 individuals viewing and downloading material across all events. Taking into account the potential reach of twitter networks (#btr11 tweets were estimated to reach more than 45,000 users) and the potential for 'double counting' of participants in more than one event, we can assert that #btr11 introduced people, beyond the original event participants, to the TSRC and the Below the Radar research.

Uncovering network benefits

However, the main difficulty in assessing our second question - whether individuals built new relationships through the project - is that #btr11 didn't seek to map and track the individuals that engaged with the project. While the evaluation team was therefore unable to directly map network relationships, feedback from contributors reflects the positive role of #btr11 in enabling new relationships, which has resulted in partnership work outside of the project (between, for example, TSRC and Globalnet 21, Oxfam Manchester and women's refugee groups in the North West, and a South London community activist with a Midlands-based environmental group). There are also examples (some below) of participants who sought to use the #btr11 conversations as a starting point for work elsewhere, and to share and promote their own work:

> *"Following on from Debbie's point, Women's Resource Centre and Voice4Change are going work on the Big Society and equalities. If anyone is interested you please see below for more info* http://voice4change-englang.co.uk/content/how-can-all-communities-benefit-big-society*"*

"We will be launching a Community Voice panel in the near future – as an opinion poll – and I would love it if we could get some really focused discussion on some of the points here. Open to discussions with others if it would be of use as commissioned research."

"Looks interesting and I hope to be able to join you.
Those taking part might be interested in taking a look at research we did at Networked Neighbourhoods into the impact of neighbourhood based online communities.
Sponsored by London Councils, Cisco, Experian and Cap Gemini, the research identified significant impacts derived from these sites. The multi-part research, together with the 2011 update is freely available at http://networkedneighbourhoods.com/?page-id-409*"*

"The idea of ?social glue? in society is useful, but risks reinforcing a static mechanical approach to the dynamic complex living system that society is. We need to expend our metaphors to think deeply about why our ways of organising ourselves for many things are not working well. See more on this at these links:
http://www.socialreporters.net/?p-455
http://tinyurl.com/social-eco-system-dance-paper
Hope some webinar participants can take a look and say if this helps on community issues."

This indicates a positive outcome in the #btr11 experiment, by providing gateways for new engagement between disparate and previously unconnected networks, groups and individuals. However, aside from anecdotally, it hasn't been possible to explore if anything was "achieved" outside of the project, or if long-term and sustainable exchange relationships were formed out of it. While this wasn't an explicit objective of the project, there was certainly a normative intention to promote such relationships. TSRC publishes research online hoping that many other people will look at it, think about it, and react to it. When using social media for knowledge exchange there is an intention to build digital influence to trigger an effect. Further exploration is therefore needed in order to move beyond providing gateways for "new voices", towards building long-term exchange relationships between these voices.

The final issue raised from the literature and from project contributors, which could inform future experimentation, but which was not a direct research question, was around the notion of status and ego in exchange relationships. Disparities between the perceptions of our own and others' status can cause issues from both sides of the 'two communities problem'. Those with perceived higher authority (funders, politicians, even academics) can feel defensive in such meetings, and need to be met under non-adversarial conditions for exchange to be beneficial – saying 'you don't understand ordinary people' is unproductive. Conversely, individuals who perceive themselves as having lower status may feel they don't have the language or capabilities to fully engage with a discussion and are 'fearful of looking foolish', so are left as exchange observers. Social media has the potential to "empower the

wisest" in this case, if feelings of fear and insecurity can be overcome. One contributor added, 'what people forget is that often everyone is just as clueless as everyone else and are just trying to find the best ways of achieving their goals!'.

In #btr11, the Big Lottery online discussion serves as positive example of people being able to engage with funders without status-related anxiety, although there is no way of knowing how many "fearful" exchange observers there were in this case, or how the conversation may have differed if it had been conducted in another environment. Text-based discussions such as this Q&A format can break down status divides by avoiding traditionally laid-out rooms (or webcams) directing you towards the "big names", and by using first names with no labels, for instance. Further experimentation across formats would allow TSRC to build on this positive knowledge exchange approach, to facilitate constructive relationships and dialogue between stakeholders and decision-makers; reducing the risk of misunderstandings, confrontation and dispute, and enabling practitioners and activists to productively challenge policy processes.

Conclusion

The discussion above offers an evaluation of the TSRC's #btr11 social media project. The project sought to experiment with social media, to engage more voices in *Below the Radar* issues, and provide spaces for debates around the implications, challenges, and solutions of the current socio-economic climate at the community level. The project (funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust and led by the TSRC's Knowledge Exchange Team) ran for 10 months, held five exclusively Web-based events and two 'real life' events with an online dimension, built a collaboration platform to host resources and discussions, and used micro-blogging for social reporting and real-time discussion. Through Twitter, news and information about the project reached approximately 45,000 people, the Civicrowd space was accessed by 1,652 people, and over 120 people directly contributed to the online events.

The evaluation process aimed to explore the dynamics that emerged through the project and build some key learning for future experimentation with social media. Through objective 1 it justified the evaluation team's decision to use social exchange theory as the underlying thematic framework, and contextualised the project within both social media and knowledge exchange literatures. Objective 2 then responded to the key research questions around learning through a social media experiment. The evaluation team situated the research questions within the themes of accepted practices, shared values and exchange relationships to outline the "process impact" of innovative knowledge exchange shown in #btr11. The concluding learning that can be taken from these themes as a resource to support future experimentation can be categorised into outcomes, choices, risks, and lessons as follows;

Outcomes

Potentially, the most practically valuable outcome of the project was the improved knowledge and understanding around how different audiences responded to different platforms through digital knowledge exchange. A key message from one organiser was that; 'I know now which networks and groups I can access through different tools for different purposes, and have a much better idea of how they are likely to contribute'. Through this increased understanding, #btr11 succeeded in its primary goal of engaging with "more voices" and was able to introduce people beyond the original event participants to TSRC and the Below the Radar research. Moreover, it was able to provide spaces where individuals could discuss and debate important issues across professional and geographical boundaries. The Civicrowd online discussion with the Big Lottery CEO and other large sector funders serves as a particularly successful example of this, through a model that could easily be replicated in future events.

A weakness of #btr11 however, was that it was less successful in building a unifying purpose to create momentum for on-going activity within TSRC's communities of interest. Feedback suggests that while the project created a valuable space for community feedback and discussion, it didn't translate to a completed cycle of dialogue around the BtR research. This limited the project to individually valuable "below the radar" debates, rather than shared ownership around the research implications.

That said; the primary response to the project demonstrated significant levels of support from participants and stakeholders, who saw value in the notion of academic-community knowledge exchange, and repeatedly used the spaces and events to share their stories. Therefore, while the discussions were not always what the organisers expected; comments from every online event expressed appreciation and relevance to the participants' interests and work. By providing gateways for engagement between disparate and previously unconnected networks, groups and individuals; #btr11 enabled it participants to benefit from new relationships, which has resulted in partnership work outside of #btr11.

Choices

In terms of future experimentation, the evaluation process has uncovered a few key choices that knowledge exchange practitioners must consider during the design of any social media project. The first decision that should be made is whether the primary strategy of the project is one of dissemination and response (a two-phase approach) or of discussion (a single phase approach). This will affect the tools that should be used and the numbers of individuals you will likely connect with. The key to understanding which platforms to use is to test a range of social media tools and learn how your target communities interact with them.

Secondly, as organisers, there is a need to understand how trust in your project can be developed with your communities of interest. For some audiences this will mean building a strong digital brand by packaging and delivering information in an accessible way, for others this will mean spending time

building relationships and facilitating personal contact. For the latter, which was preferred by the communities that engaged with #btr11; text-based discussions can break down status divides by avoiding traditionally laid-out rooms (or webcams) directing participants towards "big names". This encourages value to be seen in what is said, not who says it or how they say it. Negotiating the social media landscape to find events, platforms and individuals that support this approach requires significant time and "filtering", but is vital to build a project that audiences trust.

Risks

As with most knowledge exchange projects, #btr11 faced a number of risks that were negotiated through their social media strategy. On the whole, these risks were managed well and were not problematic, but are worth anticipating at the start of future digital knowledge exchange projects. The major practical risk for #btr11 was that motivations of the project participants did not always match the expectations of the organisers, which occasionally skewed the conversation away from the original aim. This difficulty, experienced on all social media platforms, is one which organisers must accept as a natural feature of voluntary, informal participation.

A secondary risk that was emphatically raised by contributors in the context of academic knowledge exchange, and other projects that involve "experts" or decision-makers, is that those with perceived higher authority can feel challenged or defensive in online meetings with their stakeholders. Academics in particular need to accept the risk of making their research vulnerable and allowing it to be challenged. #btr11 accepted this risk and dialogue around the issues was generally healthy. However, in future work where relationships are potentially more fraught, it is important to encourage participants to see academics, policy makers and funders (for example) as community members with interesting and insightful contributions, rather than expert sources of authority.

Lessons

The most useful conceptual lesson emerged that from this evaluative process was that, when asking the question "why should I share", social exchange theory emerged as a new and interesting framework for designing and assessing knowledge exchange projects. For knowledge exchange practitioners, a number of other important lessons can be drawn out of the #btr11 experiment.

The clear lesson from project was that social media offer a promising set of tools for knowledge exchange, as they can support informal interaction, the discovery of mutual interests and the subsequent development and management of relationships. This is supported in the key narrative from #btr11 participants, who reinforced the notion of social media being a 'toolkit'. In order to discover which tools work for a particular project, attempts must be made to understand and adapt to the preferences of your audience. Without the time and resources to conduct heavy consultation with a target community, experiments like #btr11 provide effective opportunities to explore the responses to different tools.

Alongside this practical exploration, digital knowledge exchange projects must also discover what sparks interests and brings people together. #btr11 had a very clear theme around a range of community issues, and attracted a relevant audience for the BtR debates through identifying key partners. However, in order to move from providing gateways for bringing "new voices" together towards building beneficial, longer-term exchange between these voices, additional resources and strategies would be needed.

In terms of building on the #btr11 project, the audiences that were identified through the project could be improved further through using social media analysis tools to map and monitor TSRC's position within the broader network to engage (both directly and digitally) with other 'grass-roots' or 'below the radar' audiences. To maintain interest and engagement in the project; a strong conversational twitter presence would be useful throughout the project (not just around events), referring participants directly back to the Civicrowd space for more "ideas championing" and regularly including links on email newsletters. Finally, based on the well-received video and Slideshare elements of the impact event, further use could be made of spaces like Civicrowd or others in the 'social media landscape' to offer video, podcasts, slides and on-going discussion forums, in order to engage people in exploring and questioning specific research issues/findings. Importantly, this would support the breaking down of normal institutionalised ways of communicating for academics, diminish the traditional "top down" dissemination approach, and promote a cycle of dialogue around research and its implications.

#btr11 demonstrated a highly successful project that generated real "process impact" in beginning to change accepted practices of academic-community knowledge exchange. Further experimentation across formats would give organisations such as TSRC a better idea of how these positive relationships and dialogues could be developed to increase the take-up of ideas and build momentum for action.

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Appendix 1) Glossary of abbreviations and terms

#btr11
This hashtag was created to track digital participation in BtR11 and was also used to distinguish online knowledge exchange events from face-to-face activities.

Hashtag
Online keyword prefixed with the symbol # to identify information around a topic. Use of the # symbol causes the word to appear in search results, and is a feature of Twitter.

KET
TSRC's Knowledge Exchange Team

(Social Media) Platforms
Open access services which allow users to freely upload digital content in various forms and interact with each other. These are Web2.0 services which evolve and change quickly, as illustrated by the Social Media Landscape (figure 4). The platforms used in #btr11 included blogs, Twitter, YouTube, Slideshare and Storify.

Social reporting
A practice which helps create meaning in social spaces – online and offline – by bringing stories to the surface, and helping others do the same. http://www.socialbysocial.com/book/emerging-roles

TSRC
Third Sector Research Centre

Web2.0
A large set of web applications driven by the rapid growth of users with access to broadband and devices to create digital content (text, pictures, audio, etc.), Web2.0 is easy to use, provides free publishing platforms and facilitates 'social' sharing and interaction through making comments, rating mechanisms, sharing links and data.

Webinar
A seminar presented online with real-time interaction where individual participants can see materials the presenter is showing on screen, hear and contribute to a group discussion.

For a detailed Jargon buster and explanation of core concepts see
http://www.socialbysocial.com/book/jargonbuster

Appendix 2) List of Figures

Appendix 3) Social Exchange Theory Overview

Sociologically, the social exchange paradigm is framed as a bridge between economics and social psychology, situated by Peter Blau (one of its founding theorists) as 'the intermediary case between pure calculation of advantage and pure expression of love' (1964:112). In other words, social exchange theory offers a way of understanding social action (applicable in both physical and virtual spaces) that is neither purely selfish nor purely altruistic. It asserts that the issue that makes the value of sharing so highly complex is that, unlike market exchange, 'the benefits involved in social exchange do not have an exact price' (Blau 1964:94). There are a number of key factors that influence the practice in different contexts, which are built around sets of negotiated norms and rules, contingent on the nature of the resources in exchange, and influenced by the relationships that exist or develop through the exchange (see Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

Taking this further, gift exchange theory (a component of social exchange, now common within organisational and management literatures) aims to reduce the reciprocal and obligatory connotations of social exchange, to protect what Antal and Richebé call the theory's 'subtlety and analytical power' (2009:81). They put forward the conditions for gift exchange within the context of knowledge sharing in academia, through 'exploring power, status and emotions in exchange processes'. Through this exploration, the emphasis of exchange is moved from negotiated rules to the tacit nature of exchange, the status of and relationships between actors, associations with other contractual or explicit exchanges, and the symbolic and personal dimensions of exchange.

This emphasis on the "disinterested" nature of gift exchange (that individuals don't contribute because of an explicit expectation of something in return) echoes Park's (2006) model of knowledge creation in virtual organisations, structured around a key theme of trust.
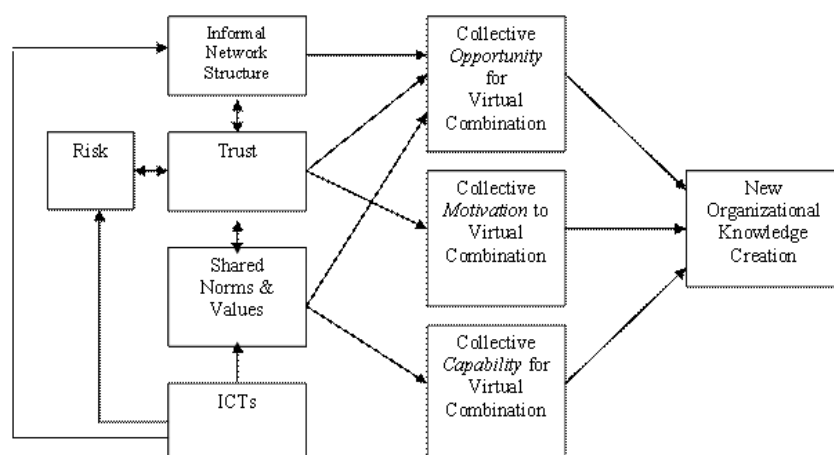
[Figure 12: Model of knowledge creation in virtual organisations, by Park, 2006]

For Park, the conditions under which social exchange is most effective is when the structures and opportunities for sharing are present, individuals are motivated to collaborate, and the network benefits from the combined capabilities of its members.

Trust, network reach and strength are also strong themes in social media studies, where digital behaviour can mirror the physical world. Trans-disciplinary research and application of network theory has been welcomed as a new "Golden Age" (Shirky, 2009) releasing the problem solving power inherent in networks of all kinds. Christakis and Fowler (2010) present an influential set of examples of multi-disciplinary network analyses which have been widely applied in settings from biology to business studies.

In order to recognise these natural human behaviours in knowledge exchange through social media; a nuanced, multi-layered model of social exchange is necessary to accurately capture its complex dynamics. As such, some fundamental themes and attributes have been distilled from social exchange theory, supported by social media and knowledge transfer literatures, for the purpose of evaluating #btr11 activity.

Accepted practices of exchange – individuals within a "sharing community" should have access to suitable platforms and agreed ways of working:
- o Space – both physical and virtual
- o Opportunity – time and access
- o Knowledge and skill – technologies/innovations
- o Dialogue – ways of behaving/talking, level of (in)formality

Shared values through exchange – individuals engaging in exchange should share some common values or attributes:
- o Motivation – willingness and intent
- o Goals - impact, outcomes, or learning?
- o Reciprocity - explicit, implicit, delayed, gifted
- o Perceptions - gain versus risk

Exchange relationships – relationships that develop through collaboration should be beneficial to the network:
- o Personal – trust, honesty, wisdom
- o Network - reach and strength
- o Benefits - capability, capacity, influence, power
- o Status - transparency, accountability, access

About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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