Discussion Paper E Summary

Summary of #btr11 – an experiment in knowledge exchange through social media

Amy Burnage and Roxanne Persaud

The project…

The Third Sector Research Centre's (TSRC) Beyond the Radar project (#btr11) sought to experiment with a range of social media platforms over a 10 month period, to improve the processes by which they engaged with individuals on knowledge exchange programmes. For TSRC, the aim was to ensure that issues around the 'below the radar' (BtR) research, which had been developed by TSRC researchers since 2008, was shared and explored across policy, practice and research communities. The goal of #btr11 was not to decide on solutions or achieve instrumental goals, but to provide a space whereby multiple voices could discuss and debate the issues, with the support of TSRC research. The project was funded by Barrow Cadbury Trust, and launched through an "impact event" event in July 2011, which was hosted by Department for Communities and Local Government. The project ran for 10 months, held 5 online events and 2 'real life' events, built a website space through Civicrowd for resources and discussions, and used twitter for social reporting and discussion through the hashtag #btr11. 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….

The paper associated with this summary[1] offers an evaluation of the #btr11 activities, by first seeking to gain a better understanding of digital knowledge exchange and then applying that understanding to the human dynamics that emerged through the project. It achieved this through using social exchange theory to build a thematic framework, supported with a discussion around social media and "sharing communities". With this clearer picture of digital knowledge exchange, it used numerical and text data (collected through various analytical tools, participant interviews, transcript analysis and observation) to situate the #btr11 activity within the social exchange themes of accepted practices, sharing values and exchange relationships. Within these themes, the evaluation team identified and highlighted key lessons, choices, risks and outcomes, to provide TSRC with a resource for further experimentation, and to serve as a starting point for others interested in developing their own knowledge exchange programme through social media.

The learning…

Through the evaluation process of #btr11, some interesting and valuable learning has been developed. The narrative style of the evaluation has reflected the experimental nature of #btr11, as well as the loose, voluntary nature of social media itself. To summarise the nuanced and complex nature of the project's dynamics and processes; the learning has been loosely themed around outcomes, choices, risks and lessons.

[1] Available on the TSRC website or upon request from *Amy Burnage (axb144@bham.ac.uk) and Roxanne Persaud (roxanne@community.org.uk)*

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.