

Third Sector Research Centre

Working Paper 139

Community Action and Social Media:

A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

The literature on the social uses of social technologies is substantial and expanding. Using over 400 sources, the current review outlines the key themes emerging from academic, grey literature and online material in this field. Much of this literature argues for the transformative power of social media, through its capacity to democratise and generate action through horizontal networks.

The literature is dominated by studies of and commentary on the political impact of social media use, in particular in forms of protest. But while these technologies may have helped to change some processes, there seems to have been little lasting impact on broader outcomes in terms of empowerment, equalities or social justice. Nor is there evidence, at the less-publicised level of the community sector, that such outcomes have been or will be affected by uses of social media.

Within the third sector literature, the dominance of material relating to marketing and fundraising for charities obscures a lack of case studies of community organisations' use of social media.

Research suggests that networked individuals may now carry out community action roles more efficiently than organisations. There is evidence that social media is changing the way social actions are organised: not just collective action but also 'connective' action. Community organisations will need to adjust to a changing role in the processes of knowledge generation and sharing.

This literature review has underpinned further primary research exploring the use of social media by community groups. This is published as Third Sector Research Centre Working Paper 140: *Community Action and Social Media: Trouble in Utopia?*

Keywords

Social action, community and voluntary organisations/groups, social media, neighbourhoods, democracy, community development, marketing and fundraising.

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Introduction

During 2013-14, a grant making trust in England invested in the capacity of local community and voluntary groups that it funded, to adopt and use social media. However, the groups made little or no use of it. On reviewing their investment, the trust concluded that social media seemed neither to have facilitated network communications nor encouraged debate, problem solving or the sharing of ideas.

Given the attention paid to social media as a tool for facilitating information flows and discussion, encouraging dialogue and mutual support, this required further exploration. An initial scan of the literature available on community groups' use of social media and the academic literature on community development internationally, revealed that only a small amount of material considers community based practice and activism in relation to new technologies in general and to social media in particular.

This, in turn, prompted a more detailed review of the literature as a foundation for primary research (reported in TSRC Working Paper 140) on the use, and non-use, of social media by community groups and small voluntary organisations in England.

Overview: literature review and approach

The intention was to prepare as comprehensive a literature review as possible within the time and finances available. However, the diversity of the disciplines covered in the literature and the range of topics addressed, together with the relative importance of non-traditional and rapidly expanding non-academic material, meant that a systematic review would not have been possible. Nonetheless, the bibliography which accompanies this review is intended as a resource for future research in its own right.

The review was carried out between late 2014 and summer 2016 and covered the academic, practitioner and grey literature. An in-depth search was conducted in three areas of academic and related research: community development and social policy; social media and informatics; and politics, government and governance. A systematic keyword search was undertaken using the following terms: social media / internet / information technology / informatics, cross referenced with community / community or voluntary action, groups and activities, social action / social movements, voluntary and community sector / organisations / groups. This was augmented with ongoing citation 'snowballing'. Further searches were carried out to identify pertinent material published on 'the blogosphere' and among general online magazine and news sources.

These materials were subject to thematic analysis: the structure of the current literature review, and the key issues addressed, have been informed by that analysis.

Characteristics of the literature

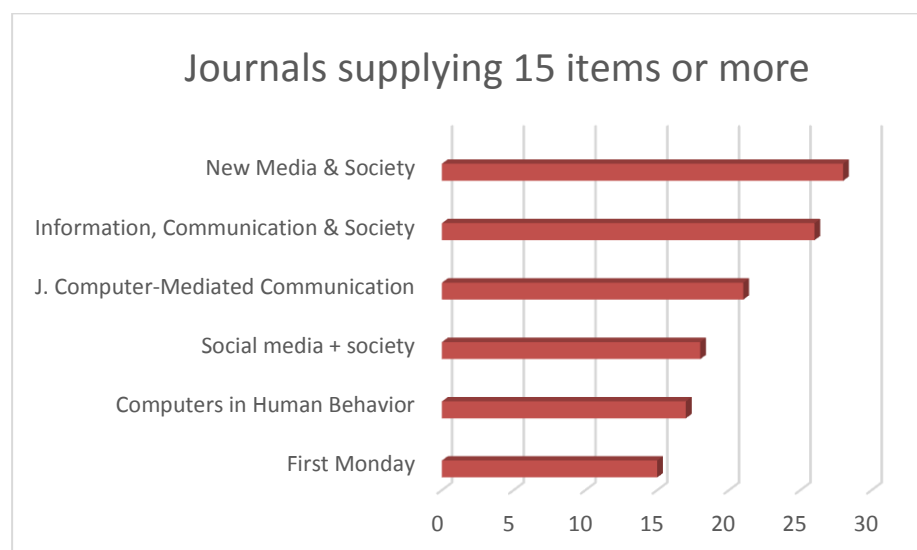
A total of 407 items were retrieved and are listed in the bibliography. Table 1 shows how the items were distributed across the range of categories of material.

Table 1: Categories of material collected for the bibliography

Reports	35
Books	36
Book chapters	4
Conference papers	8
Journal articles (incl. online journals)	249
Blog posts	44
General magazine and website articles	7
Broadcast news sources	22
Press releases	1
Theses	1
	407

Some 249 articles were collected from a range of English-language academic journals (including online journals such as *First Monday*). The six most productive journals provided 125 items (50 per cent): these are shown in Table 2. None of these six sources is among the established journals in the fields of social policy, community development or voluntary action: they all have a focus on aspects of media, technology and society. This literature is largely focused on ‘engagement’ and activism or protest, albeit with considerable theoretical interest in the implications for third sector organisations.

Third sector sources such as *Nonprofit and voluntary sector quarterly*, when they do consider social media, have tended to focus on its uses for marketing and fund-raising and not as a resource for campaigning, local social networks and support, or community action. Just 14 pertinent items were identified from eight established voluntary and community sector journals.¹

Table 2: Community action and social media: main literature sources

As the bibliography expanded, three main content areas became apparent and these have informed the shape of the current review:

¹ The sources were: *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research*, *Community Development*, *Community Development Journal*, *Concept*, *Interface*, *Journal of Community Work and Development* (now defunct), *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, and *Voluntas*. Arguably, *Journal of Community Informatics*, from which one article was collected, could be added to this list.

- issues describing the political and democratic context for social media use
- the main uses of social media by voluntary and community groups; in particular fundraising and marketing
- local applications of social media, in terms of social support, networking and social capital.

Among general commentaries in the literature, three broad positions can be identified:

- Aspirational: here, social media is presented as desirable or as a valuable opportunity (typically, this is implicit in the guides and the documentation for training events). Non-use is presented or implied as an individualised problem rather than an issue to do with the technologies.
- Positivist stances, referring to the benefits of social media as a means of horizontal relationship-building and information-sharing beyond official or controlled media. For some researchers (see for example Bortree and Seltzer, 2009; Cho *et al*, 2014; Waters and Jamal, 2011) voluntary organisations tend not to be seen as reaping these benefits, often limiting their use to broadcasting at the expense of relationship-building.
- Scepticism and ‘doomsaying’, with an emphasis on perceived broad negative social impacts, for instance arguing that digital media atomises social and political relationships (see for example Gani, 2015; Gorman, 2014; Hewitson, 2015; Kotenko, 2013; Mendelson, 2012; Totka, 2015; Turkle, 2012; Urban, 2015).

There are trends in any subject literature. A great deal was published ten or twenty years ago around the topic of e-governance for example, but practise has moved on and interest appears to have waned. Nonetheless, there are no signs that the literature on social applications of social media has peaked: the recent establishment of a new journal, [Social media + society](#), perhaps confirms this. But one potential effect could be to provoke a ‘wait-and-see’ response among community organisations, conscious that many popular phenomena are more ephemeral than their accompanying rhetoric might suggest.

Community development within this literature

As noted in the introduction, the lack of material within the field of community development is striking. Only a small number of journal articles have been published in the specialist academic literature on community development (Deschamps and McNutt, 2014; Eimhjellen, 2014; Hemmi and Crowther, 2013; Matthews, 2015, 2016; Pigg, 2005; Nah *et al*, 2016; Svensson, 2016). Three recent books on community development (Ledwith, 2016; Popple, 2015; Taylor, 2015) make only passing references to social media – there being apparently little research and few case studies for them to draw on. More research and theoretical activity might have been expected, given established arguments about the power of internet communication to transform political dialogue, create new (and less hierarchical) relationships, open up new forms of association and support less geographically bounded networks (Amin, 2000; Castells, 2000).

From this limited literature, it is hard to establish a coherent position regarding social media in the community sector. Popple, in the revised edition of *Analysing Community Work* (2015) frames the

relationship between community development practice and new media as a series of questions, that appear to imply challenges to community development core values:

‘The question that is raised now is whether people are living in a virtual world and whether our lives are devalued or lessened compared to before this technology was introduced. Has this affected the way we interact in our various communities? Has the new technology produced new communities that are more meaningful than the traditional communities that existed before?’ (Popple, 2015, p4).

These three sentences characterise the sense of detachment in many community development approaches to digital media. Questions are raised about changes in relationships, but clouded by reference to ‘meaningful’ communities; and an either/or stance is adopted, which appears to overlook evidence that relationships have changed in ways that are sometimes deemed better, sometimes worse, sometimes just different. Among the most widely-cited, methodologically-robust research is that of Hampton, who concludes that:

‘Internet use does not privatize; it does not isolate people from the parochial realm of the neighborhood. Internet use over extended periods appears to be an antidote to privatism – it affords the formation of local social networks... The evidence here suggests that the Internet is already slowly building local social networks, at least in those neighborhoods where context favors local tie formation’ (Hampton, 2007, p739).

Judy Taylor (2015) argues that online can enhance and re-inforce face-to-face relationships and broaden their geographical spread (Kavanaugh, 2014). Nonetheless it is noteworthy that the examples used to illustrate this are international and national online movements rather than local community-based action. Gilchrist and Taylor (2016, p116) note that new technologies have ‘opened the way to new forms of activism and campaigning’ at the local level, though again the majority of examples used are national or international actions. The same applies to Squirrell’s (2012) book chapter on ‘Virtual engagement’, which makes extended reference to Barrack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign.

Examples of individual and community engagement with larger issues at the national scale (such as the 2014 floods in England (Miller, 2015a)) have been documented, as has the use of social media for mapping local social activities (Marcus and Tidey, 2015) and for environmental activism at the national level in Scotland (Hemmi and Crowther, 2013). Research at the neighbourhood level appears to confirm the applicability of social media for reinforcing face-to-face networks and building bonding capital (Kim and Shin, 2016; Xu *et al*, 2013).

In journal articles examining the local dimension there is less optimism about the transformative power of social media. Research into digital activism in Edinburgh suggests that ‘social networks online often merely recreate social networks offline’ (Matthews, 2016, p432). It could be added that this might not necessarily be a bad thing; but the finding is in contrast to research into online neighbourhood networks in London (Harris and Flouch, 2011a). A study of young people’s use of social media in Söderhamn (Sweden) argues that whilst the use of Facebook as a tool for municipal engagement may develop social capital within youth groups locally, this does not necessarily translate into power or influence:

'The fact that young people are sympathetically patted on the head, but may continue discussions in their own space without being seen as an actual resource (or democratic force) communicates again that the establishment cannot/does not want to open up to new influences and open dialogues, even though they say that this is what they want' (Svensson, 2015, p14).

Social media for public relations, 'engagement' and relationship building

A starting point for much of the literature, whether focused on the corporate, statutory or voluntary sectors, is the role of social media in public engagement and relationship building.

A study of Twitter interactivity associated with three large enterprises (Saffer *et al*, 2013) suggests that its use results in 'a positive public relations outcome' (p214) for the organisations. A similar study of a single US national non-profit (Briones *et al*, 2011) claims that 'practicing public relations through social media is effective and necessary'. The logic is that by facilitating two-way dialogue, social media helps to create faster service, generate media coverage, and encourage feedback. Another US study, exploring the use of Facebook by non-profits, found that 'publics demonstrate high levels of engagement with organizational messages when two-way symmetrical communication is used' (Cho *et al*, 2014, p565). The extent to which these findings apply for community organisations and voluntary groups is uncertain, raising issues about how highly prioritised these benefits are or should be; how demonstrable they are in terms of robust evidence and how challenging they are or might be to achieve *without* using social media.

Community and voluntary groups are frequently accused of failing to use social media to stimulate online dialogue and hence 'quality relationships'. A US study of the Facebook pages of advocacy groups found that most

'seem to adopt the position that the mere creation of an interactive space via a social networking profile is sufficient for facilitating dialogue. However, these organizations are missing a significant opportunity to build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders by failing to effectively utilize the full gambit [*sic*] of dialogic strategies that social networking sites offer. As with Web sites and weblogs, advocacy groups are not taking advantage of the dialogic strategies afforded by social networking' (Bortree and Seltzer, 2009).

The study by Cho *et al* brings similar charges:

'While many nonprofit organizations use Facebook heavily for information dissemination, this limited use does not encourage publics' engagement and build relationships, even though information dissemination can be the first step to stimulate publics to pay attention to an organization. In order to build dialogic communication and quality relationships with publics, nonprofit organizations should utilize two-way symmetrical communication' (Cho *et al*, 2014, p567).

An assessment of Twitter use reaches similar conclusions, but notes that:

'While the provision of information demonstrates a willingness to share information, a follower of these nonprofit organizations' Twitter accounts might sense an unwillingness to answer questions or respond to others' comments' (Waters and Jamal, 2011, p323).

These are US studies and most of the agencies studied are likely to operate at a better-funded and larger scale than most UK community organisations. Certainly for a US national non-profit organisation, quality relationships are not going to depend heavily on face-to-face engagement, as they might do for local (and to some extent regional and national) groups in the UK. This is not to say

that social media does not have a role where priority is given to face-to-face relationships, but this aspect appears not to have been studied.

Accusations such as those quoted often carry an implication that it is invalid to use social media mainly or solely for information-sharing, or 'just broadcasting'. Further, there tends to be an assumption that engagement through social media brings self-evident benefits. The logic is compelling but the issue is nuanced: and, as one study points out, 'evidence is still lacking in terms of the tangible outcomes' (Saxton and Guo, 2014, p297).

Relationship-building does not have to be seen from a public relations perspective. And for Waters and Feneley (2013) at least, it does not have to involve social media. In their study of 'virtual stewardship' among US non-profit organisations they found a strong preference for the use of websites rather than Facebook. Partly this has to do with being able to have 'complete control over message design and content' (p226). Against this, it can be observed that relinquishing full control over communication is precisely one of the requirements usually implied in the adoption of social media, before its benefits can be harvested. Nevertheless, the authors suggest that there is a rationale to the approach:

'If organizations are truly concerned with relationship growth with stakeholders, then it makes logical sense that they would prefer a more stable, more reliable virtual platform for demonstrating cultivating those relationships. As such, it should come as little surprise that despite the hype surrounding social media, attempts at demonstrating stewardship in this domain are still dwarfed by those attempts on websites. Nonprofit organizations want their stakeholders to see the stewardship messages. They do not want them lost in the social media noise' (Waters and Feneley, 2013, p226).

What is meant by 'engagement'?

In an analysis of a social media public relations campaign promoting the cause of child welfare on blog, Facebook, and Twitter platforms, researchers found that

'the more people used each platform, the more they carried out the desired behaviors of clicking "Like" on a Facebook post, communicating offline with others about the campaign, and volunteering for local child welfare organizations' (Paek *et al*, 2013, p532).

The authors note that people's engagement with a social media platform is not so much about the frequency and length of use as about their experiences with the site, for which they offer four categories: 'civic mindedness, utilitarian, social facilitation, and inspiration'. It may also be important to think in terms of 'a continuum of engagement' – this can be seen as 'a progression of the relationship from stranger to becoming a life-long champion and supporter for your organization' (Kanter, cited in Greenberg, 2014, np).

Engagement *with* a site does not necessarily mean engagement with others *on the site*. Analysing comments on YouTube antismoking campaign videos, Chung found that while far more comments were positive than negative,

'engagement was mostly limited to one time, with little interaction with other viewers: the current study's results showed that only a limited number of commenters posted in reaction

to others' comments. The majority of comments (88%) were posted as a single posting' (Chung, 2015, p119).

The academic literature on social media that directly uses the term engagement is fragmented. It refers, variously, to advocacy projects (Obar *et al*, 2012), youth engagement (Wells 2014b), 'political consumerism' (de Zúñiga *et al*, 2014), the development of local online storytelling (Chen *et al*, 2012) or promoting community events (Bussu, 2016). It has been noted that it is easy and cheap to generate 'banal engagement' using these technologies (Matthews, 2016, p433). Others have reflected on the uncertainties generated by the term 'engagement' in the use of social media. Researchers analysing Twitter messages associated with the Taksim protests in Turkey in 2013 noted:

'what we term change engagement... may differ from organizational engagement (employee-based or stakeholder-based organizational involvement), civic engagement (involvement in politics), and brand engagement (involvement with a brand)' (Smith *et al*, 2015, p505).

Such 'definitional ambiguities' are examined by Kang (2014):

'Common approaches by social media consultants or marketers equate engagement with the physical manifestations of an engaged state, such as the number of clicks, bookmarking, blogging, friend requests, tweets, or subscribing without really tapping into psychological aspect [*sic*] of being engaged' (p400).

Kang highlights the importance of trust and satisfaction as 'antecedents' to engagement; and goes on to propose and test a 13-item scale of public engagement that could prove a sound foundation for future attempts to assess social media impact. Since so much of the debate is about 'likes', mentions, and the perceived significance of 'WOM' (word-of-mouth) behaviour, her conclusions are noteworthy:

'the study findings suggest that WOM behavior (offline and online) is not to be equated with engagement but rather an outcome of engagement. This is particularly relevant in the ongoing discussion of engagement as more than a simple click to like or retweet' (Kang, 2014, p412).

In a book-length guide to the theory and practice of engagement, Squirrell (2012) includes a chapter on digital media but does not offer a nuanced reflection on whether new forms of engagement are emerging or on the emphasis given to it in the social media context.

For local groups, the point seems to be that if they want to stimulate word-of-mouth 'buzz' around their activities, cause or initiative, they need to invest in a deeper form of engagement than is implied by 'likes' and retweets. This is not to suggest that social media does not lead to engagement, but that engagement is not manifested through likes and retweets. As others have argued,

'retweeting can be understood both as a form of information diffusion and as a means of participating in a diffuse conversation' (boyd *et al*, 2010, p1).

If someone associates actively with (*i.e.* engages with) the cause of a community organisation, clearly this might *precede* connecting with that organisation online, or it might be the *consequence* of online connection. Investigating this theme, Smith and Gallicano (2015) explored the meaning of social

media engagement in relation to enterprises. They suggest that 'engagement is driven by information consumption, interest immersion, sense of presence, and social interaction'. The participants describe very fluid, personalised and self-initiated relationships with the organisations, and the researchers conclude:

'social media engagement may precede organizational engagement, as was demonstrated in some of the responses in this study, or it may also lead to engagement with civic and political issues' (Smith and Gallicano, 2015, p89).

There have been few studies of the implications for organisations of content posted by users on their sites. Kurian (2016) analysed user-generated content on the Facebook pages of two organisations and found the major categories to be requests, criticism, greetings, status updates, and announcements. For organisations, the benefits amounted to maximising technical assistance, supporting projects, collaboration and building capacity among users, developing the user community, marketing and communication.

While most community organisations will prioritise their direct relationships with clients or beneficiaries, some may have concerns about how the investment of time spent on social media affects their collaborations and partnerships with other organisations. One chief executive put it like this:

'With reduced money in the system, we have prioritised our collaborations considerably, and are missing opportunities to improve our situation through 'thoughtful' collaborations.... What we do know is that technology alone will not crack this. We need to talk to one another; only then we will know which buttons to press for success' (Hewitson, 2015, np).

‘By making it quick and easy for anyone to share information with others, modern social media gives ordinary people a collective agenda-setting power that was previously restricted to large publishers and broadcasters, and that is capable of striking fear into those in authority’ (Standage, 2013, p239).

Introduction

This is a substantial literature and coverage in this study has necessarily been selective. Three distinct themes are highlighted here.

First, an **increasing scepticism**, manifested sometimes as brazen cynicism, **about the longer term socio-political benefits** of widespread use of digital technologies. In some cases this commentary questions the effect of the giant internet corporations on democracy (McChesney, 2013) or points to a perceived strong association of the use of social media with the cultivation and management of the neoliberal consumer-citizen. Social media is also held to play a part in the relation between political consumerism and civic engagement (de Zúñiga *et al*, 2014). This theme is highly pertinent to the community sector in terms of articulated or implied values.

Secondly, explorations of the ways in which **the nature of collective action is being restructured and redefined** as another way of ‘doing politics’. Several researchers and theorists have explored the political implications of personal social media use in relation to collective action, introducing concepts such as the ‘networked democratic spectator’ (Kreiss, 2015) and ‘connective action’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). This debate highlights the tensions between expressions of collective identity on the one hand and networked individualism on the other, noting the concern that personalised communication might ultimately undermine the political effectiveness of collective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). This theme could be profoundly significant for community practice, not least because when it comes to networked collective action and large-scale campaigns, ‘some of these protests seemed to operate with surprisingly light involvement from conventional organizations’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p741). A supplementary, fairly distinct facet of this second theme relates to what has been called ‘clicktivism’ or, disparagingly, ‘slacktivism’ - the claim that the ease of contribution to collective action using social media devalues ‘authentic’ activism. There has also been research into the potential for social media to help expose people to alternative views and to reconcile differences.

Thirdly, a distinct and substantial literature examines the use of social media to provide an alternative voice to the state: as a means of organising rapidly, **for protest and mass action** in ways that are horizontally networked rather than vertically controlled.

These three themes are discussed briefly in the following sections.

Responses to digital optimism

Among the many sceptical voices, Astra Taylor has packaged up a sense of resentment:

‘The internet was supposed to be free and ubiquitous, but a cable cartel would rather rake in profits than provide universal service. It was supposed to enable small producers, but instead it has given rise to some of the most mammoth corporations of all time. It was supposed to create a decentralized media system, but the shift to cloud computing has recentralized communications in unprecedented ways. It was supposed to make our culture more open, but the companies that dominate the technology industry are shockingly opaque. It was supposed to liberate users but instead facilitated all-invasive corporate and government surveillance’ (Taylor, 2014, 231).

Some of this is clearly questionable. For example, whether or not the internet has given rise to monster corporations (Roberts 2014), its availability has also enabled small producers, including local social enterprises and small charities, to emerge and develop where previously this would have been difficult at best (*e.g.* rural micro-co-operatives in Scotland). Nor does the opacity of dominant companies necessarily mean that our culture is not more open than it was. Nonetheless, Taylor’s argument can be seen alongside a number of other recent reactions to what she describes as ‘the standard narrative of techno-triumphalism’ (p223).

Also offering commentary at the macro level, with reference to the role that the internet played in ‘supercharging’ the worldwide economic crisis of 2008, Davidow claims that

‘while we can never measure the Internet’s full effects, we know that it made the current crisis larger, more widespread, and more virulent. It not only carried the information, it also helped spread what is known as “thought contagion”. That is, the rate at which greed and fearmongering took place – via instant access to news and online rumors – was accelerated to unprecedented levels’ (Davidow, 2011, p4).

Davidow is careful not to overlook the pro-social consequences of the rapid spread of ideas that is possible through digital communications. But his work seems to have been influential in reducing the volume of uncritical enthusiasm from those who Turner (2010) disparages as ‘the net boosters’, ‘the digital optimists’ or ‘the digital orthodoxy’.

Morozov (2013) confronts the politics of internet-centrism and ‘solutionism’ – the presentation of ‘the Internet’ as a context in which any significant issue is seen as a problem to be solved by technological means. He challenges the trend to allow Google and Facebook ‘to decide unilaterally what counts both as issues of importance and as the right ways to campaign on them’ (p295). Such questions do not seem to resonate among community organisations as much as might be expected, and yet it is hard to see how a values-based sector can overlook or dismiss them easily.

Others have begun to question the extent to which any increased political participation, attributable to the use of social media, may have given rise to genuine empowerment. Turner (2010) notes that the promise of empowerment is based largely on the expansion of consumer choice, the provision of interactivity and the corresponding rise of the ‘produser’ (p128). For Turner, there is a contradiction between ‘the egalitarian, anti-corporate ethic which drives much of the celebration of the political potential of Web 2.0’ and the fact that these enthusiasms ‘are supporting interests that are

nonetheless, uncontestably, commercial' (p151). It could be that this in itself might not be, and is not widely perceived as, problematic; but again the lack of debate is striking. Turner quotes Hindman's (2009) study of democracy and the internet in the US:

'Again and again, this study finds powerful hierarchies shaping a medium that continues to be celebrated for its openness. This hierarchy is structural, woven into the hyperlinks that make up the Web; it is economic, in the dominance of companies like Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft; and it is social, in the small group of white, highly educated, male professionals who are vastly overrepresented in online opinion' (Hindman, 2009, p18-19. Cited by Turner, 2010, p136).

Social media and neo-liberalism

This leads in turn to the association of pro-social digital optimism with neo-liberalism. The latter is not an easy target to bring into focus:

'One of the characteristic discursive tactics of neo-liberal administrations around the world over the last decade or so has been the strategic conflation of consumer choice with the principles of democracy: in all kinds of contexts, the proliferation of choice and access has been accompanied by assurances that the consequences will be more inclusive, democratic and empowering' (Turner, 2010, p131).

This is by no means an arbitrary criticism. Also taking a global perspective, Roberts (2014) offers an in-depth study exploring the extent to which people have 'become transformed into subjects of online consumption and orderly surveillance, rather than committed social and political campaigners'. He is generally optimistic, however, claiming that 'new media helps to empower those who privately hold oppositional views to a government regime and then translate these into public expressions of opposition' (p159).

Yet it might be asked, is there some subtle way in which social media helps to neutralise action and mollify the angry while smoothing processes for those in power? With reference to what he calls 'the new politics of listening', but without specific reference to neo-liberalism, Stephen Coleman has noted how some of the apparently unmediated experiences of everyday life expose people to 'patterns of mediated interaction in which outcomes are both more predictable for those in authority and more palatable for the governed' (Coleman, 2005, p273).

Again, the charges levelled by Turner emerge in a US study of Facebook abstention:

'Facebook may be the epitomic site for the creation and discipline of the neoliberal consumer-producer-citizen: through participation in Facebook's network, individuals are addressed as consumers of commodities; enlisted as panoptic surveillers of their friends, family, and even distant acquaintances; and incited to generate the very content – in the form of status updates, photo galleries, personal messages, and so on – that makes Facebook a site worth visiting. It collapses the stages of capitalist subjectivity and participation' (Portwood-Stacer, 2012, p1048).

Facebook appears to fulfil perfectly such neo-liberalist characteristics as co-option, self-presentation, de-politicisation, and global extension, without doing so overtly. A more recent paper (Skeggs and

Yuill, 2016) shows how 'Facebook monetizes most effectively those who enterprise themselves' (p391) in accordance with 'the contemporary neo-liberal imperative to perform and authorize one's value in public'. And in a provocatively titled paper - 'Interactivity is evil!' - Jarrett (2008) suggests that:

'The construction of the interactive Web 2.0 user can be conceived as a subtle and politically charged activity. It is an instance of the strategic application of neoliberal power in which control is permissibly enacted through its own negation by the activation of users. Interactivity thus sits within the assemblage of techniques through which regimes of domination are enacted by the prevailing hegemony' (np).

Banning notes that digital 'sharing' is a fundamental feature of the apparatus of the internet, and argues bluntly that it:

'greases the wheels of the neoliberal machine and co-opts some of the best impulses of humanity, the affective and altruistic esprit de corps aspect of digital sharing, to feed its ideology and practices of economic exploitation' (Banning, 2016, p496).

If this is largely theoretical and perhaps contested ground for exploring the political context of social media use in the community sector, it certainly raises questions in relation to the values embedded in the systems from which enhanced levels of participation and engagement are expected to flow. It also raises questions about who benefits most from the affordances of these technologies. These questions seem not to have been expressed clearly, let alone addressed, within the sector.

Does social media afford a new kind of collective political involvement?

The second theme concerns the perceived restructuring of collective action through the use of social media for mobilising, organising, raising awareness of issues and sharing information. Here the concern is with general arguments about the changing nature of collective action and political participation.

That there has been a significant shift in the relationship between the political and the public spheres seems not be in question. Coleman (2005) attributes this to 'the demise of duty-driven political participation' and 'the rise in reflexive and affective, rather than simply obligatory and instrumental, constructions of citizenship' (p273). If social media use is a *reflection* of 'this age of interactive relationships' (*ibid*) as much as it is a driver of the changes, the questions arise: does social media afford a new kind of collective political involvement? And if so, what are the implications for community groups and organisations?

Curiously, this debate features two hierarchies. In the first there are claims of evidence for the existence of a 'fifth estate'. This is populated by bloggers and online commentators who augment the 'fourth estate' of independent media outlets. Dutton (2009) has argued that the use of digital technologies 'is creating a space for networking individuals in ways that enable a new source of accountability in government, politics and other sectors'. Through a case study in Finland, Sormanen and Dutton (2015) explore the use of Facebook in building communicative power and 'the capacity to foster social movements'. This power is demonstrated however in only a handful of cases.

The second hierarchical arrangement has to do with a typology of political involvement. As has been noted, many community organisations occupy the domain of ‘sub-politics’, outside the formal arenas of political activity but seeking to influence what happens there. This understanding absorbs the late 20th century principle that ‘the personal is political’ (Hanisch, 1969) – hence allowing scope for social media. This can be taken further by adding a third level of citizenship, which Bakardjieva (2009) calls ‘sub-activism’: more personal, quotidian, and submerged.

Sub-activism

Sub-activism is not a product of the internet, but;

‘numerous new forms of sub-activism evolve around the Internet with added capacity to traverse effectively the private–public continuum and make civic engagement more deeply embedded in everyday life’ (Bakardjieva, 2009, p102).

Through sub-activism, the public or civic relevance of personal issues is brought to the surface, often ‘through the micro-discourses and practices that the internet supports’. Examples often involve ‘taking a stance with respect to... debates and clashes of a larger scale’ (p101).

‘By affording ease, speed, and scope, the Internet brings the otherwise remote and anonymous political bodies within attainable reach. It makes civic participation, not as a specialized activity in a superior (public) sphere, but as a concrete action amid everyday life, more practically feasible’ (p102).

Bakardjieva’s (2009) delineation of sub-activism is significant in two respects: it helps to explain the widely expressed sense of individual empowerment in relation to political and civic issues; and in doing so it clarifies the sense of detachment and reluctance that characterises the approach of many community groups and organisations to social media. Nonetheless, in describing the phenomenon of internet-aided sub-activism – ‘feeble motions immersed in the everyday many times removed from the hot arena of politics’ – Bakardjieva concludes that ‘their consequences have been neither revolutionary, nor even conspicuous’ (p103).

From collective action to connective action?

The personalisation of political engagement is also a focus in Marichal’s *Facebook democracy* (2012), with the argument that ‘Facebook’s encouragement of constant disclosure makes political engagement on the Web intimately personal’ (p154). The sub-title of Marichal’s work refers provocatively to a ‘threat to public life’, largely on the grounds that Facebook’s ‘hyper-emphasis on “joining-in” and being a “content creator” undervalues the role of discretion, contingency and reflection in public discourse’ (p157). At least one reviewer has criticised Marichal’s approach for technological determinism (see also Costa, 2014).

The meaning of collective action in an individualised, networked, global context is explored by Bennett and Segerberg (2011, 2012; Segerberg and Bennett, 2011). In a study of communication patterns associated with the G20 London protests in 2009, they conclude that the agendas of different organisations can be harmonised around general messages that are broad enough to invite diverse individual participation. Networks of organisations can ‘coordinate this participation through

fine-grained digital media applications that result in coherent collective action' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011, p795).

In a subsequent paper Bennett and Segerberg looked more closely at such large-scale 'connective action', distinguishing it from 'the familiar logic of collective action... both in terms of identity and choice processes'. They go on to distinguish organisationally-enabled networked action from self-organising networked action; and throughout, they are concerned to relate their theoretical exploration to the role of formal organisations. Thus they point out that,

'When these interpersonal networks are enabled by technology platforms of various designs that coordinate and scale the networks, the resulting actions can resemble collective action, yet *without the same role played by formal organizations* or transforming social identifications. In place of content that is distributed and relationships that are brokered by hierarchical organizations, social networking involves co-production and co-distribution, revealing a different economic and psychological logic: co-production and sharing based on personalized expression' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p752, *emphasis added*).

Noting the problem of the free-rider and the challenge of gaining commitment from individuals in the traditional model of collective action, the authors go on to link the importance of *sharing* in social media with a shift in the importance of organisations:

'The linchpin of connective action is the formative element of 'sharing': the personalization that leads actions and content to be distributed widely across social networks. Communication technologies enable the growth and stabilization of network structures across these networks. Together, the technological agents that enable the constitutive role of sharing in these contexts displace... *the logical centrality of the resource-rich organization*' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p760, *emphasis added*).

Caraway (2016) provides a case study examining the connective action model, although notably, the subject is a labour organisation - 'OUR Walmart' - not a loosely-structured network. Bakardjieva (2015) accuses Bennett and Segerberg of advocating 'the dismantling of collective identities and the renaming of collective action', and of implying that 'collective identity can be skipped'. Although this appears to caricature their argument, in contesting their analysis Bakardjieva articulates key questions for further understanding of the issues.

Individualism and the collective 'we'

Contemporary forms of engagement are sometimes equated with an individualised approach to the democratic process, a view associated with forms of engagement that do not explicitly foster collective action. This has been challenged by Halupka (2016), who offers a theoretical link between traditional 'thick' collective forms of political action and the loose, weak ties of connective action that are demonstrated through social media use in social movements and mass protests:

'the information activist's capacity to stimulate commonality through decentralised and loose networks, while allowing for solidarity building, demonstrates an approach to participation which is at odds with the individualisation perspective' (Halupka, 2016, p1498).

Researchers have also explored the extent to which notions of leadership in social action are affected by the use of social media (Lee and Chan, 2015; Margetts *et al*, 2015; Poell *et al*, 2016). Milan (2015) develops an argument associating social media uses with a 'politics of visibility', characterized by 'individuality, performance, visibility, and juxtaposition'. In Milan's analysis, this has partially replaced the politics of identity typical of social movements:

'social media contribute to change the terms of identity building. By providing always on platforms in which interactions are practiced on a recurring basis, they amplify the 'interactive and shared' properties of collective action... They foster an extension of activism, and of the collective experience in particular, into the private sphere of individuals and their quotidian, strengthening the symbolic nexus between activism and personal life' (p893).

For Milan, the visibility afforded by social media serves to represent the 'collective we' and reduces the need to emphasise the traditional attributes of internal solidarity, commitment and responsibility towards fellow activists:

'While the "collective we" remains a fundamental condition of existence of collective action, it is relegated to an intermediary role... The group becomes the means of collective action, rather than an end in itself, because the politics of visibility creates individuals-in-the-group rather than full-fledged groups' (p896).

An alternative interpretation of these changes is offered by Coretti and Pica (2015) who see social media as eroding solidarity in social movements, leading in turn to 'organizational centralization and fragmentation'. Hallam (2016) notes that established political groups have traditionally maintained power by creating barriers for excluded latent groups; but the technology is 'structurally biased to support the mobilisation of latent groups and therefore has the potential to emancipate large dispersed groups oppressed by small coherent groups' (Hallam, 2016, p377).

Images: the emergence of connective witnessing

It is apparent that the visibility afforded by social media might alter the role of the witness - whether it be of injustice, crisis, inadequate services, or indeed of some form of protest (Reilly, 2015; Cowart *et al*, 2016). A study of social media in relation to political activism in Sweden and Greece notes how 'images that adhere to the social media logic have been used against the system' (Galis and Neumayer, 2016, p12). Where the logic of traditional media assumed a role for independent (usually professional) intermediaries in broadcasting and publicising what the witness saw, the new digital media allow and encourage individuals to share such experiences directly and globally, whether as bystanders or as participants. Mortensen (2015) describes this as 'connective witnessing' and argues that it transforms the relationship between the individual and the collective:

'Connectivity as an alternative collectivity does not come with the same moral authority as the classical eyewitness, covering the distance between individual and collective. Rather, connective witnessing leaves more of the contextualization and assessment up to users and/or news agencies and institutions, human rights organizations, and others deploying eyewitness images' (p1403).

Here again, it suggests that organisations may need to review their roles in response to changes that are associated with the ways individuals use social media.

From 'vicarious experience' to action

Much of the literature explores concepts not of empowerment but transformation: in power relationships, global reach and the dismantling of hierarchies and orthodoxies (Castells 2000). A more nuanced, cautious impression emerges from recent research-based (as opposed to polemical or theory-based) publications. One study for example focuses on the concept of 'vicarious experience', whereby individuals are motivated to act by others' experiences. The authors focus on the ways that social media users seek to influence 'through vicarious experience... [rather] than direct personal experience' (Smith *et al*, 2015, p499). They also point to the importance of straightforward 'broadcasting' as well as networking:

'efforts to seek change in social media are realized through information dissemination more than through calls to action and social organising' (*ibid*).

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that, to 'move on' from vicarious experiences to action, there needs to be a connection between online and face-to face relations, and this requires *both*

'the familiar logic of collective action associated with high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities, and the less familiar logic of connective action based on personalized content sharing across media networks' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p739).

An emerging form of organized civil society?

In a sense, this is an old debate of 'the personal as political' and vice versa, re-framed for the network society. Other researchers go further. Mercea for example has noted that the Facebook audience can offer 'a hitherto untapped demographic for the purpose of mobilization' (2013, p1306), elsewhere referring to the 'dissolution of participant ties with traditional interest-based organizations' (2015, p206).

In an experiment to test whether individuals' willingness to express support online publicly is influenced by calls-to-action through different social media sources, Nekmat *et al* conclude that

'invitational acts by people in one's close personal networks (*e.g.* friends, family members) are most influential in motivating individual participation, followed by people belonging to more impersonal groups such as distant social networks (*e.g.* friends of friends) and, lastly, organizational sources... This indicates that alternatives to formal and direct organizational communication might be more critical in rallying support for activism on social media' (Nekmat *et al*, 2015, p1086-1087).

A similar conclusion, pointing to a revised role for traditional forms of formal organisation, is drawn by Milan and Hintz (2013) in a study of 'tech activism'. They document the decentralised organisational forms of these activist networks, characterised by informality, ephemerality, and non-representational participation, emphasising the role of the individual and the user within a loose collective framework. These are values-based networks that inherently imply 'a change in how social and political life is organized in a context of computer-based and mediated interactions' (p16). For these researchers, the realm of online networked action suggests 'an emerging form of organized civil society' (p8).

Clicktivism: 'low cost, low risk, and low impact'?

It is clear that social media lowers the threshold for people to contribute to collective action, for example through online donations; signing petitions; forwarding messages, links or tweets; or just a simple 'Like'. Opinions differ, however, about the implications.

Thus it has been suggested that this low-cost, low-risk form of engagement dilutes 'real' activism (Morozov, 2009; Harlow and Guo, 2014) and constitutes a 'failure to create true activists' (Anonymous, 2016); whereas Halupka (2014) argues that so-called 'clicktivism' is a legitimate political act; and Schumann regards it as 'part of the repertoire of contention' that facilitates civic participation (Schumann, 2015).

The analysis by Harlow and Guo (2014) suggested that the technologies are 'perhaps pacifying would-be activists, convincing them they are contributing more than they actually are'. Experiments by Schumann and Klein (2015) showed that so-called slacktivist actions 'reduce the willingness to join a panel discussion and demonstration as well as the likelihood to sign a petition'. However, the researchers emphasise the need to take account of motivations, noting that 'members considered low-threshold online collective actions as a substantial contribution to the group's success'. Focusing on the 'social observability' of online acts of support, Kristofferson *et al* distinguish two kinds of motivation - a desire to present a positive image to others and a desire to be consistent with one's own values. They argue that

'when consumers who have made an initial display of public support are able to focus on the alignment of values between the self and the cause... they are subsequently more likely to contribute to the cause in more meaningful ways' (Kristofferson *et al*, 2014, p1150).

Other research has challenged the 'slacktivism' thesis. Karpf (2010) offered an early response to the 'clicktivism' theory with regard to the use of mass emails and describing such low-quality, high-volume actions as 'a single tactic in the strategic repertoire of advocacy groups'. Christensen (2011) found no evidence that online activism substitutes traditional forms of off-line participation, claiming that, if anything the internet has a positive impact on off-line mobilization.

A study of two social media campaigns in the USA concluded that 'both events went above and beyond "clicktivism" and "slacktivism" and were true examples of online prosocial media in action' (Fatkin and Lansdown, 2015, p585). Reviewing this theme in a blog post, Schumann (2015) concludes:

'The term "slacktivism" seems to be inapt when referring to convenient online activism. Means of engagement and invested resources should not be equated with the (lack of) motivation that is driving the behaviour. Dedicated citizens viewed low-threshold forms of Internet-based civic participation as a viable tactic to attain collective goals. And the low-cost and low-risk digital activities are possibly a stepping-stone towards enduring involvement.'

Further, there may be other benefits: a study of the use of Facebook by an environmental group - a field where approaches can come across as 'hectoring or directly confrontational' - suggests that the new activism has subtle advantages:

‘Online action can be more conducive to a low-key approach that lends itself to a persuasive strategy of engagement rather than a confrontational one’ (Hemmi and Crowther, 2013, p4).

In conclusion, research and commentary suggests that social media does make a difference to collective action, perhaps most significantly by allowing its extension into the private sphere of individuals (Milan, 2015) – with implications for organisations and groups to adjust their roles accordingly. There is therefore a strong case for research that examines these implications from the point of view of local community groups.

Social media and dealing with differences

Does social media tend to re-inforce political perspectives, or can it expose people to alternative views and help in the reconciliation of groups in conflict (Amichai-Hamburger *et al*, 2015)? Evidence from Ukraine (Duvanova *et al*, 2015) suggests that it does not help in bridging political divides. Twitter users are unlikely to be exposed to cross-ideological content from the clusters of users they followed, as these were usually politically homogeneous (Himmelboim *et al*, 2013). However, a study of social media use associated with a contentious march in Northern Ireland suggests that use of Twitter may have a significant role in enabling people to correct rumours and disinformation (Reilly, 2016). The potential for intercultural liaisons for social justice, through global ‘virtual cosmopolitanism’, is explored by Sobre-Denton (2016).

The structure of offline networks, and the intensity of the political discussion, were seen as significant factors in a study of political disagreement among German and Italian Twitter users (Vaccari *et al*, 2016). The kind of platform used may make a difference. Use of social network sites was linked to exposure to *cross-cutting perspectives* that in turn resulted in higher levels of political engagement online; whereas blog use was associated with exposure to *like-minded perspectives*, which have an indirect, but stronger, effect on online political participation (Kim and Chen, 2016, p327).

Social media and protest

In the West, the literature on social media and protest has focused on two high profile new social movements, Occupy (Garcia-Jimenez *et al*, 2014; Adi, 2015) and Anonymous (Fuchs, 2013); or global movements on specific international issues (see for example Hopke, 2015, on anti-fracking actions). Globally, the majority of writing on these themes relates to national movements and events: the Arab Spring (Alaimo, 2015); the Maidan Square protests in Kiev (Kurkov, 2014); the Libyan crisis (Morris, 2014); the Gezi protests based around Taksim in Istanbul (Smith *et al*, 2015; Hacıyakupoglu and Zhang, 2015) or the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong (Lee *et al*, 2017). At a more local level, a study of content posted on YouTube concerning disturbances in an area of Bristol (Reilly, 2015) shows how the documentation of events on social media struggles to compete, in terms of influence, with traditional news media.

Authors on these forms of mass protest argue that these movements are qualitatively different to earlier revolutions and protests in that:

- they do not rely on ‘traditional’ forms of organising, such as trade unions or revolutionary political parties (Lynch, 2011)

- they are horizontal by nature and not reliant on a charismatic individual leader or figurehead (Theocharis, 2014) (but see Mercea and Bastos (2016) for a review of the characteristics of ‘transnational serial activists’)
- the locations of protest can be spread rapidly and virally
- their communication may have a ‘highly visual character’ (Poell, 2014) often highlighting the spectacle that accompanies protest events
- social media can sustain protest over time by refreshing and relieving protesters, and drawing in a wider network of ‘off street’ actions (Kurkov, 2014).

Much of this literature argues for the transformative power of social media in terms of political, economic and social power relationships. Discussing events in Egypt, Alaimo (2015) argues that ‘social media is a more powerful platform for promoting political change than previously appreciated’ and that the Facebook Page [We are all Khaled Said](#) ‘helped promote the Egyptian revolution’ (p2). These claims, however, lead on to contested ground. Bardici (2012) for example finds the media representation of the role of social media in Egypt ‘overstated and constructed’, ‘rhetorical and exclusionary’. Nonetheless, Roberts (2014) notes that:

‘New media helps to empower those who privately hold oppositional views to a government regime and then translate these into public expressions of opposition. This “information cascade” was particularly noticeable in Tunisia and Egypt, whereby “the courageous early movers sent a signal to a generally sympathetic public of the value of joining in”’ (Roberts, 2014, p159, citing Lynch, 2011, p304).

Roberts places information and web 2.0 technologies in the context of a broader global struggle between corporations that seek to control, incorporate or monopolise social media platforms, and alternative world views:

‘New media is part of the battle for hegemony in and around political and social projects and has certainly altered the terrain through which this battle is fought’ (p20).

Bohdanova (2014) acknowledges the role of social media in the Euromaidan demonstrations in Kiev and in achieving their ultimate goal of ousting President Yanukovich, but strikes a note of caution:

‘This does not mean that all social media-enabled movements are bound for success. After all, technology is only an instrument; it does not necessarily guarantee a specific type of outcome’ (p140).

So while it can be suggested that ‘the revolution will be live-streamed, tweeted and posted on Facebook’ (Bohdanova, 2014, p136), politics ‘as normal’ has since returned to the Ukraine (Kurkov, 2014); authoritarian regimes have returned (for example in Egypt); or the country has descended into extended conflict, as in the case of Libya. Lynch (2011) concludes that social-media-based forms of political organisation ‘have major weaknesses when the time comes for negotiating the terms of democratic transition’ (p302). It may be that we are observing what Wells (2014a) calls ‘the limits to non-hierarchical, non-institutional mobilization’ (p211).

Further, the networks that have emerged may not be immune from the challenges affecting traditional voluntary organisations. For all of the rhetoric on Occupy being entirely open, transparent and horizontal in organisation, Adi (2015) observes that:

‘like corporations, Occupy groups also struggle to find the balance between managing their reputation, controlling their image, sharing their messages and identifying and incentivizing conversations online’ (p508).

Democracy in turmoil?

Following the EU Referendum in the UK and the US presidential election in 2016, social media has been implicated in the charge that democracy is in turmoil. From disillusion with online petitions (Hyde, 2015) to accusations of the role of Google and Facebook in the propagation of ‘fake news’ in a time of ‘post-truth politics’ during the US election, the power and reach of digital media have forced fundamental questions about democracy and communication (Manjoo, 2016a). For example, Rose-Stockwell (2016) argues that Facebook has ‘created a tool that has allowed us to become more insulated in our own ideological bubbles than we ever have been before’. The response of the Facebook company, in establishing an internal task force to address the issue of fake news (Lee, 2016) suggests recognition at the highest corporate level, in one of the largest companies ever operating, that the commercialisation of democratic communication may give rise to complex new issues. It is fair to ask if these issues could cause as much disruption in the context of local community politics as they do in the global arena?

Whilst there is a broad literature on social media and democracy/governance, the focus for voluntary sector literature in this field is largely on fundraising and (as with more corporate materials) marketing (Phethean *et al*, 2012; Quinton and Fennemore, 2013).

Waddingham explains the sense in which fundraising through social media differs from traditional fundraising:

'Given that each Facebook user has an average of 130 friends, just one share could reach many people that the charity does not have access to — and the message may be more effective coming from that friend than from the charity itself' (Waddingham, 2013, p189).

The numbers are impressive. On the JustGiving platform, people are encouraged to share their actions with their Facebook friends:

'the impact of a share on Facebook changes depending on the context of who is sharing and what they are sharing. For example, if a donor shares a message on Facebook about them donating directly to a charity, it is worth £1 per share, but if someone shares a message about donating to a friend's fundraising page, it is worth around £5. But if a fundraiser (i.e. someone taking part in a fundraising event for a charity) themselves shares a text update about their event, it is worth around £12 per share. And then if the fundraiser records a video about their event and shares, the average value per share increases to £18' (Waddingham, 2013, p188).²

This transformation was anticipated for example by Miller (2009) who suggested that charities will need to 'flip the funnel' so that 'supporters become a key channel through which we communicate' and that 'the professional fundraiser's role will increasingly become that of community manager rather campaign manager, as each community fundraises in the way that works best for them'.

Mano (2014) found that both online and offline donations are significantly increased through participation in social media and networking. Farrow and Chuan (2011) looked at how Facebook influences alumni attitudes toward volunteering for and making charitable gifts to their *alma mater*. They found 'a small, but significant, direct impact' of social network site usage on charitable giving and volunteering. In a study using data from *Facebook Causes*, Saxton and Wang (2014) explore what characterises charitable giving in social networking environments, and conclude:

'Facebook donors do not seem to care about efficiency ratios, their donations are typically small, and fundraising success is related not to the organization's financial capacity but to its "Web capacity". Moreover, online donors are prone to contribute to certain categories of causes more than others, especially those related to health' (p850).

² There is an alternative view, that the 'the dollars per donor analysis' is not the right metric for success. Facebook's 'Causes' tool for example was described as 'a friending tool, not a fundraising tool' (see [Red Rooster Group, 2010](#), p23-24). In summer 2016 Facebook began a service whereby donations could be made without leaving the Facebook page: see <https://www.engadget.com/2016/07/01/facebook-personal-fundraising-tool/>.

This small sample of research suggests strongly that fundraising through social media is a valuable extra dimension for most charities, if not all. It would seem to favour campaign-oriented organisations and special issue organisations. The New York-based consultancy Red Rooster Group (2010) offers an impressive range of short case studies. However, the extent to which these findings and examples can be extended to community groups and organisations, working on knotty local issues in the UK, seems not to have been demonstrated.

Civic crowdsourcing and crowdfunding

The principle of crowdsourcing reflects the power of the internet to involve large numbers of people in sharing resources such as time, ideas, effort or money. Among the areas of interest where the process can be applied by community groups are fundraising and policy.

Civic crowdfunding is a relatively new area of research, although a variety of advice on good practice is available (see e.g. Yeh, 2015). The work of Stiver *et al* (2015) focuses on crowdfunding platforms established specifically for the funding of civic projects (Citizinvestor, ioby, Neighbor.ly, Spacehive). On the whole they disregard other social media platforms while noting that ‘social media integration with platform features remain underdeveloped’. They hint at potential advantages for local community organisations, since geography appears to have an impact on stakeholder contributions, with both contributions-in-kind, and coordination of volunteers, benefitting from proximity.

Davies (2014) presents the rationale for this form of finance in a direct way:

‘The average civic crowdfunding campaign organizer who wants to create a new community resource may be an expert in her field... but may not have the time or resources to maintain an organization. That doesn't mean that she should shelve the work she wants to do. If a tactical, small-scale, short-term intervention brings opportunities for education and growth, social impact practitioners should encourage it... With crowdfunding, a single powerful campaign can show a community what's possible and spark a range of other activity’ (np).

Elsewhere Davies puts forward three areas of concern:

‘the extent to which civic crowdfunding is participatory, the extent to which it addresses or contributes to social inequality, and the extent to which it augments or weakens the role of public institutions’ (Davies, 2015, p342).

These are all themes that are likely to matter to community organisations – particularly the suggestion from early indications that civic crowdfunding ‘may be structurally biased toward outcomes that either reproduce or widen existing inequalities’ (Davies, 2015, p352). Nonetheless, taken within the broader context of socio-economic change,

‘Civic crowdfunding isn't about supporting core public services or establishing formal organizations; it creates immediate impact, and offers a valuable model and set of practices for future projects... If civic crowdfunding's ultimate social impact is to empty thousands of small coffers but teach millions of people how to refill them, it will be a game changer for philanthropy and community development’ (Davies, 2014).

With regard to the use of crowdsourcing processes in relation to social policy, Bright (2015) provides a useful summary of early research in this emerging field and offers the following definition:

‘new digitally enabled ways of involving people in any aspect of democratic politics and government, not replacing but rather augmenting more traditional participation routes such as elections and referendums’.

Pioneering work and research on crowdsourced policy has been carried out in Finland. Aitamurto and Landemore (2015) for example have looked at the design principles that should govern crowdsourced policymaking processes, and the kind of principles that need to be embedded in the digital medium. They argue that

‘Crowdsourcing makes it indeed possible to bring the dispersed and often unheard knowledge and voice of the people into the public sphere.’ (p3)

Social media at the neighbourhood level

Most groups and organisations in the community sector are concerned with people in a defined locality. Since Hampton's seminal studies of 'Netville' in the 1990's (Wellman and Hampton, 1999) it has been apparent that online networks can strengthen local links within neighbourhoods, intertwining online and offline relationships (Hampton, 2007). This was reinforced in a London-based study which demonstrated clear social benefits from three established online neighbourhood networks (Harris and Flouch, 2011a). Fuchs (2016) has explored the sustainability challenges facing 'community networks' (which tend to have a larger base), noting that their political challenge is 'how to be open, participatory and privacy-friendly and at the same time challenge the surveillance ideology and respond to actual criminal abuse' (p638).

While these and similar studies showed how online interactions could be pro-social at the most local level, subsequent work has looked at more specific questions. For example, concerning the extent to which social media empowers local groups and residents (Hothi, 2012); how it can be used to develop local social capital (Matthews, 2016); the ways in which it can help residents deal with disturbances in their areas (Harris and Flouch, 2011b); how it might be used to strengthen the local news network that shapes community engagement (Chen *et al*, 2012); the significance of individuals' community ties (Kim and Shin, 2016; Xu *et al*, 2013); what it takes to establish independent online networks in low income areas (Harris and Flouch, 2012); and how social media might be used to counter the stigma or labelling of low income areas (Matthews, 2015).

A study of UK 'hyperlocal' news sites suggests that their potential reach on Facebook is 'significantly under-exploited': in 81 per cent of cases, the sites reached ten per cent or less of their target audience size (Williams *et al*, 2014, p23). Locally-based Twitter chat groups are beginning to emerge, although the idea that co-residents use the technology synchronously without meeting for their conversation, will surprise some:

'Here, a hashtag functions to make shared social interaction visual, to facilitate the exchange of information in real time about shared goals and interests, and to develop colloquial group patterns that illustrate shared meaning in community' (McArthur and White, 2016, p7).³

In most cases, neighbourhood online networks have arisen organically from the initiative of one or a few residents. However, given the chance to consider the options, residents might be hesitant or show resistance. Factors uncovered in one US study included:

'inequality of access and fears that some neighborhood residents might be left out (not democratic enough), concerns that social media would become the only communication outlet, expectations of residents that neighborhood communication should be face to face, and perceptions of social media as being too intimate and, simultaneously, too impersonal for the neighborhood context' (Johnson and Haleboua, 2014, p71).

In low income neighbourhoods, developing social media-based networks is likely to be problematic without some form of community development (Harris and Flouch, 2012). Matthews confirms that

³ McArthur and White studied three interest groups (#SmallBizChat, #Foodiechats, and #BrandChat), not local groups.

local social interaction can be stimulated, but 'achieving greater activist engagement is more difficult'. He concludes that 'social media do not offer immediate opportunities for community development in deprived communities' (Matthews, 2016, p433).

In winter 2015-2016, community informatics researchers debated online the benefits and disbenefits of Facebook's *Free Basics* as a resource for community development.⁴ The views were summarised as follows:

'opponents of Free Basics largely expressed their concerns around Facebook's exertion of power affecting the internet environment with regards to net neutrality and potential risks to the users as the company might be able to access and manipulate information. In contrast, the proponents mostly focused on what could be gained at the individual and collective levels as a result of using the service and argued that decisions surrounding the use should ultimately be made by the people in the developing world' (Yim *et al*, 2016, p219).

⁴ <http://vancouvercommunity.net/lists/info/ciresearchers>

Social networks, social capital, and social support

Many community and voluntary organisations are involved in providing, organising or managing various forms of social support, typically around health and care for specific groups of beneficiaries. To the extent that social media can be used as a channel for such support, it is likely to be of interest to these organisations, and some benefits have been documented. Lee and Kvasny (2013) examined health-related social network sites and found a high level of ‘information richness’ through greater information variety (e.g. photos, videos, interactivity, and shared documents), multimodal interaction, and language translators. They also note a higher level of ‘social presence’ through support for intimacy and immediacy. In addition to injury-prevention campaigns (McMillan-Cottom, 2014), social media is seen to have a role in helping people to address local emergencies and crises (Doerfel and Haseki, 2015; First Responder Communities of Practice, 2012; Lachlan *et al*, 2016).

A study of a digital health outreach service for gay, bisexual men and men who have sex with men contrasts the potential that commercial platforms offer to peer educators with the commercial constraints embedded in the platforms (Mowlabocus *et al*, 2016). Another study found that social media use can increase users' awareness of stressful events in others' lives, and it is this awareness that can lead to higher levels of stress – not the use of social media *per se* (Hampton *et al*, 2014).

But it is unlikely that mutual support on social media will eradicate the need for face-to-face groups and organisations: the issue is how such organisations relate to their ‘virtual communities’ – the extent to which their members, volunteers or staff lurk or participate in online discussions, the ways in which their resources are made available and so on.

One study of social support through Facebook seems to suggest that online ‘friends’ may be of little value when it comes to instrumental support:

‘49 participants sent 588 requests for instrumental help to their Facebook friends to determine the accessibility of networked resources and online social capital. Almost 80% of these modest requests went unanswered’ (Stefanone *et al*, 2012).

Other research has looked at how Facebook interaction is related to various types of social support. In this case the conclusion was that Facebook interaction is positively related to receiving and giving social support *on Facebook*, but not to perceived social support in general (Li *et al*, 2015). However, the large-scale 2011 Pew Research Center study found that a Facebook user who uses the site multiple times per day scores higher in terms of total support, emotional support, and companionship, than internet users of similar demographic characteristics (Hampton *et al*, 2011a). A methodology for analysis of social capital in civic activism on Facebook has been proposed by Tsatsou and Zhao (2016). Jessen and Jørgensen (2012) theorise the notion of ‘aggregated trustworthiness’ to explain the dynamics of online credibility.

If evidence were to be found of a general decline in face-to-face contact, intimate ties or personal social support in western societies (Pinker, 2014), that would have implications for the work of many community groups. However, research suggests a ‘complementarity effect’ between personal meetings and electronic interactions (see for example Tillema *et al*, 2010). The Pew study found little justification for concerns that people who use social networking sites experience smaller social networks, less closeness, or are exposed to less diversity. Notably, the study found that ‘the frequent

use of Facebook is associated with having more overall close ties' (Hampton *et al*, 2011a, p42). Assuming this applies comparably in the UK, it suggests that Facebook offers a significant basic networking resource for community organisations.

As far as individuals' social networks are concerned, there are numerous research insights. For instance, a study of social interactions on Twitter suggests that usage is driven by 'a sparse and hidden network of connections underlying the "declared" set of friends and followers' (Huberman *et al*, 2008). Positive, slight (but significant) associations have been found between intensity of Facebook use and social capital (Valenzuela *et al*, 2009). De Zúñiga *et al* (2012) explore the use of social network sites as a predictor of people's social capital and civic and political participatory behaviours, online and offline. Lin and Lu (2011) found that *enjoyment* is the most influential factor in people's continued use of social networking sites, followed by number of peers, and usefulness. And recently a Danish randomised control trial has found negative impact of Facebook on people's sense of personal well-being (Happiness Research Institute, 2015). This contrasts with but is not necessarily in conflict with the findings of the 2011 Pew study which found that 'Facebook users are more likely to have a larger number of close social ties. Facebook use seems to support intimacy, rather than undermine it' (Hampton *et al*, 2011a, p25). The well-being effects of social media may depend on the kinds of use made of the sites: Burke and Kraut (2016) found that 'receiving personalized, effortful communication from close friends was linked to improvements in well-being' (p279).

Extrapolating from most of the findings in this literature to the context of community and voluntary groups, risks compounding the uncertainties, particularly because of the tensions between personal and organisational use of social media accounts, which is discussed below and in Working Paper 140.

Nonetheless, there are two studies that may prove helpful for community sector organisations. First, a paper by Hampton *et al* (2011b) demonstrates that several kinds of new media indirectly contribute to diversity, by supporting participation in traditional settings such as neighbourhoods, voluntary groups, religious institutions, and public spaces. Notably however, they found that use of social networking sites was related to lower levels of participation in neighbourhoods. This is echoed in a recent experiment with young Greek participants (Theocharis and Lowe, 2016) which found that maintaining a Facebook account had clearly negative consequences on political and civic participation.

Secondly, a very different study examined the experience of community organisations trying to rebuild their networks in New Orleans after the hurricane 'Katrina' disaster in 2005. The researchers explored the use of a range of communication media both traditional and new, and discuss use in terms of 'rich interpersonal interaction' and 'information-getting capacities'. They conclude that:

'organizations that relied on established and mixed media to reconnect were more efficient at rebuilding a network that was similarly dense prior to Katrina. These media users also (re)built diverse networks at a faster rate and expanded diversity in the long run relative to pre-disaster levels' (Doerfel and Haseki, 2015, p444).

The research emphasises the importance of a mix of communication media, and paying attention to both information seeking and relationship building.

Personal vs organisational use of social media

These are essentially personal technologies and their use in community organisations is typically driven by individuals – often a volunteer or an intern. Much of the literature on social media relates either to individual use, or to corporate use within the private sector. Where the literature is pertinent to the third sector, it tends to relate to marketing or fundraising, and there is typically a strong corporate emphasis implicit in the use of social media by charities. Against this, there is little to help understanding of how community groups might deal with the tensions between personal and organisational use – for example in terms of who has the skills (and time), who manages the channels, and should there be a written policy?

Managerialist approaches will tend to favour processes aimed at controlling content and publicity. Thus the Direct Marketing Association recommends that organisations should ‘Define boundaries between personal and professional use of social media’.⁵ But in the community sector this could be very difficult to achieve and impractical for many individuals who embody the values and principles of their organisations.

European Commission research has drawn attention to the significance of open, non-hierarchical approaches to sharing information using social media. Where organisations are structured hierarchically, they can be operating in tension with anti-hierarchical networking processes, even before social media comes into the equation (Martin and van Bavel, 2013, p11). One view is that these technologies can help to erode the hierarchies by facilitating 'horizontal' relationships:

‘One interviewee noted that networking is a natural activity for humans but over time organisations have become bureaucratically structured. Social networking technologies thus help to "re-humanize" the enterprise’ (Martin and van Bavel, 2013, p20).

⁵ See <http://www.dma.org.uk/article/how-is-your-organisation-managing-employees-social-media-use>.

Non-users and lapsed users: barriers and constraints on the use of social media

Non-use and lapsed use of social media can sometimes be explained by factors generally associated with digital exclusion, such as cost or access. As far as cost is concerned, this could be a significant factor:

'Even if social media applications do not need to be purchased, they are not cost free to use. To truly adopt social media, it may be necessary to dedicate a part-time staff member. For small non-profits operated by volunteers, this may be entirely unimaginable' (Brown, 2014, p690).

With regard to access, for the purposes of this study it was assumed that groups and organisations *do* have internet access, and that there are other explanations for non-use that merit examination.⁶

Evidence exploring the reasons why some people and organisations choose not to use social media, or become lapsed users, is understandably sparse in the research literature. People are less inclined to talk about why they reject something than why they choose it; and this may be the case particularly if they feel that the subject of discussion is being pushed at them with an insistent rhetoric and there is implicit failure or inadequacy on their part. Nonetheless there is a body of work that seeks to understand non-use, some of which challenges the simple binary between users and non-users that may gloss over subtle nuances in different forms of engagement with technology (Baumer *et al*, 2015).

Non-use by organisations

An interview-based study of the use of social media in the American Red Cross (Briones *et al*, 2011) suggests that the main barriers to use are 'staff, time, managing content and publics' abilities'. Two surveys, in addition to that reported in Working Paper 140, offer respondents detailed lists of possible barriers to use: these are presented for comparison in Table 3.

⁶ Consideration of non-use and lapsed use may be gaining momentum: the Office for National Statistics introduced a new breakdown of internet users in 2015, distinguishing those who have used the internet within the last 3 months (recent users), those who last used the internet more than 3 months ago (lapsed users) and those who have never used the internet. See <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-users/2015/stb-ia-2015.html>.

Table 3: Survey questions suggesting possible reasons for non-use of social media in community and voluntary organisations

Third Sector Insight, May 2012 ⁷	Zorn <i>et al</i> , 2013	Harris and McCabe, 2017 ⁸
<i>Which of the following best describe the reason(s) that your charity is not present on social media?</i> (Question wording)	This list is gleaned from a table in the published article	<i>The following are some of the reasons why organisations do not use social media...</i> (Question wording)
Tried it and stopped	Lack of understanding of how it works	No-one here knows how to use it
Lack of expertise	Too intimidating	Our board / trustees did not approve
No staff / budget	Too busy to learn	Few of the people we work with are using these media
Concerns about privacy	No staff to manage it	We / our users have limited access to the internet
Don't think it's valuable	Can't afford it financially	It's too difficult to find out how to use it
No strategy	Not useful to the groups we serve	It's too expensive to use
Don't know how to communicate messages	Unsure of usefulness to organisation	Not the best use of our time
		We have concerns about safeguarding and security
		People tend to behave very negatively online
		We don't need / want to promote what we do in that way
		We tried it and did not see the benefit

At best, this comparison suggests three common themes:

- Perceptions of cost
- Staff time / expertise
- Perceived benefit to the organisation.

⁷ <http://is.gd/IYNvg4>. Last accessed 21 December 2016.

⁸ *Community action and social media: trouble in Utopia?* TSRC Working Paper 140.

A study of social media use by UK charities found that ‘the resisters consistently cited were the lack of skills and resources’ (Quinton and Fennemore, 2013, p36). Among public and non-profit human services in New York state, barriers to use were found to include ‘institutional policies, concerns about the inappropriateness of social media for target audiences, and client confidentiality’ (Campbell *et al*, 2014). Against this, from their survey Zorn *et al* identified two sets of obstacles that constrain organisations’ ability to exploit social media:

- lack of resources, and
- lack of perceived usefulness.

Organisations that were making little current use of the internet were more likely to give a higher rating to lack of perceived usefulness (Zorn *et al*, 2013, p675). The study also examined in more detail the situation of two voluntary organisations that were struggling to exploit social media. The researchers record how one ‘weak link’ in the chain of adoption leads to further weaknesses:

‘Lack of confidence, lack of time to learn new skills, lack of hardware for people to access the Internet, and lack of general IT support were concerns raised to varying degrees at both organizations. In turn, this lack of resources prevented CVOs’ attempts to mobilize social media as a means to mobilize further tangible resources—such as human resource capacity—and intangible resources—such as social and political capital in the form of service-user engagement. Thus, the resource mobilization chain had a number of weak links that prevented these organizations from mobilizing social media to achieve their ultimate aims...’ (p684).

This is an example of the ways in which technology can amplify benefits and disbenefits; in this case suggesting that those who do not adopt can be disadvantaged by comparison with those who are able to exploit it.

An alternative research approach, taken by Eimhjellen *et al* (2014), is to explore correlations between types of organisation and their use or non-use of the web in general and social network sites (SNSs) in particular. Their study used data from approximately 2,500 voluntary associations in Norway, a country with high levels of social media use, especially of Facebook. They found that the size and complexity of the organisations, and the age of the membership, were important factors explaining the adoption or non-adoption of social media:

‘First, it seems that a certain numerical point must be reached in terms of organizational and community size, for SNSs to be useful. Small associations in small communities with few active volunteers might therefore not gain much from adopting SNSs, contrary to larger and more complex organizations. Second, an age-based digital divide in the member base of associations is central for explaining SNS adoption. Most associations using SNSs are dominated by members between 16 and 30 years. If the member base of an association mostly consists of older age segments—non digital natives—it reduces the likelihood of using SNSs. Also, a small financial economy (resources) and a low degree of formalization (structure) in associations might hamper the implementation of SNSs’ (Eimhjellen *et al*, 2014, p749).

Two different kinds of explanation have been brought together here. The first is about relative benefit from investment in the technologies, implying that small organisations ‘might not gain much’. The second is a detached observation about the ‘likelihood of using’ the technologies, based on the demographics of their member base. Nonetheless, what the research suggests is that it should not be surprising if small, loosely-structured organisations with few resources and few younger members do not make much use of social media.

For some organisations, the technology may well be less satisfactory than is widely assumed. For example, with regard to the perceived loss of control over the message delivery system (forced placement of messages on Facebook) and message construction (restrictions on message size with Twitter):

‘The rules and requirements placed on organizations that choose to use social media sites restrict the extent to which an organization can truly create its own unique identity and community in this space’ (Waters and Feneley, 2013, p 225).

Non-use by individuals

As would be expected, most research into non-use is focused on individuals, not organisations or groups. One questionnaire-based study points to ‘numerous complex and interrelated motivations and justifications’ for lapsed use of Facebook: among categories of non-user the authors identify ‘the lagging resister’ (Baumer *et al*, 2013). Justifications can include socio-political reasons: in an analysis of instances of defiant withdrawal from Facebook, Portwood-Stacer (2012) identifies a category of abstention as ‘media refusal’, locating this firmly within the construction of ‘the neoliberal consumer-producer-citizen’ (p1048). The unfortunate vernacular use of the term ‘suicide’ (see *e.g.* White, 2008) to refer to this form of non-use has even reached the academy: one study describes closing a Facebook account as ‘virtual identity suicide’ (Stieger *et al*, 2013).

There is evidence to suggest that non-use of Facebook is associated with higher perceived levels of bonding social capital (Lampe *et al*, 2013). This might imply less concern for bridging capital, or even low levels of social capital anxiety. If people who are less concerned about their network connections are less interested in using social media, the same principle presumably extends to groups and organisations.

A few studies report on non-use among young people. Using data from a paper-based survey of more than 1,000 first-year students at the University of Illinois, Chicago, Hargittai (2008) noted that over 12 per cent of her sample did not use any of the six social networking sites referred to. Since only one respondent claimed not to have heard of any of them, it seems that it was choice, not lack of awareness, that guided their non-use. One reflection provoked by this study is that although social media often appears to be ubiquitous, its use is not as widespread as it seems.

Using anonymised written responses from young people in Australia, Baker and White (2011) explored non-use and report the main reasons as:

‘lack of motivation, poor use of time, preference for other forms of communication, preference for engaging in other activities, cyber-safety concerns, and a dislike of self-presentation online’ (p387).

A qualitative study of 20 students at two universities in Turkey offers similar explanations: non-use of Facebook was mainly a reaction to 'excessive time spent online' or 'lack of interest' (Turan *et al*, 2012). Tufekci (2008) also used data from a sample of college students, and compared the characteristics of users and non-users of social network sites (SNSs). She concludes that

'The students who do not use SNSs are neither hermits, nor socially isolated, nor fearful of the Internet. However, the non-users are less interested in activities that can be conceptualized as social grooming' (Tufekci, 2008, p560).

It may be that much the same could be said of some community organisations.

These studies offer partial explanations for elective non-use by individuals, but two pre-date the identification of 'social media fatigue'⁹ which helps the understanding of some specific forms of lapsed use. In a Gartner industry study (2011), almost a quarter of respondents said that 'they use their favorite social media site less than when they first signed up': boredom and privacy appear to have been the main explanatory factors. Stieger *et al* also identified privacy as the key concern among their sample of Facebook 'quitters' (Stieger *et al*, 2013).

In a recent study of Facebook use, Bright *et al* (2015) clarify that this phenomenon is not explained simply in terms of information overload. They found that privacy concerns and confidence are the strongest predictors: respondents with greater privacy concerns experienced more social media fatigue, while those with greater confidence experienced *less* social media fatigue. There is also a correlation between 'social media helpfulness' and fatigue. The researchers suggest:

'it may be the case that respondents who find social media to be helpful use it to a greater degree and thus experience greater levels of social media fatigue' (Bright *et al*, 2015, p153).

The decline in use of Twitter has been widely discussed in popular media, with a BBC article for example describing it as 'struggling on several fronts' and social media users becoming 'increasingly uninterested'.¹⁰ A post on the *Civic Science* blog puts forward some survey-based characteristics of Twitter's estimated 10 per cent lapsed users: they are likely

- to be younger - they're more likely to be under age 35 and more likely to not have graduated from high school yet
- to be female (43 per cent were male and 57 per cent female)
- to have also abandoned other sites like Snapchat or Instagram (Sikora, 2015).

Individual concerns and withdrawal are not un-related to organisational take-up of social media: in general, within community groups and organisations it is *individual* interest, experience, aptitude and commitment that tends to drive social media use. Therefore these findings may resonate across the community sector. Further, there is a need for greater differentiation in research findings, especially

⁹ [Techopedia](#) offers a definition: 'Social media fatigue refers to social media users' tendency to pull back from social media when they become overwhelmed with too many social media sites, too many friends and followers and too much time spent online maintaining these connections.'

¹⁰ BBC News, 2015. 'What Twitter must do to save itself'. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-34654894> (accessed 28 October 2015).

with regard to ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status. One comment made in a seminar for young people in poverty has particular resonance:

‘Social networking promotes happy perfect lives, designer labels, going out, new clothes. You can’t do this if you’re poor. I avoid Facebook’ (Breslin Public Policy, 2013, p10).

Finally, there are some social concerns, both narrower and broader, that may yet have an impact in terms of non-use but which are beyond the scope of this study: for instance, that increased media multitasking is associated with higher depression and social anxiety symptoms (Becker *et al*, 2013); the reputed negative impacts of Facebook on individual happiness (Happiness Research Institute, 2015); and that there are macro-social consequences of many people being ‘over-connected’ (Davidow, 2011). But as one commentator has put it, ‘The power of social media is only going to grow with the only barriers being the challenge of keeping up with the next latest trend’ (Hale, 2015, np).

Evaluation, monitoring and measurement

A 2014 blog post on *Nonprofit Quarterly* asks: 'Why is everyone talking... about measuring engagement?' (Greenberg, 2014, np). If there is a level of urgent interest among charities it may well stimulate the production of systematic models or frameworks that will be the subject of experimentation and development. One UK public policy assessment notes that

'The methodology, tools and processes required to generate evidence from social media that is robust enough for policymaking are not currently available, but are realisable in the near-term' (Leavey, 2013, p5).

Some commentators (e.g. Pearman, 2014) point to the flexibility that social media offers to small charities to optimise their marketing efforts. Greenberg claims that a 'Like', Comment or 'Share' on a post indicates what an audience cares about, and when they want to receive the content:

'These metrics are the pulse of our audience and we can feel it with every post, every day of the year' (Greenberg, 2014, np).

De Vera and Murray (2013) offer four 'principles' for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of a non-profit organisation's use of social media:

1. Identify objectives and goals
2. Define key performance indicators (KPIs) and metrics
3. Collect metrics on a consistent basis
4. Create a master spreadsheet.

The Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) could include for example 'total amount of followers and fans, your growth rate over a period of time, the reach you have on Facebook and Twitter'. In their example, a goal might be 'Engage our audience to talk about our issues' and the metric goal might be '50 Facebook comments, 150 Twitter mentions' (De Vera and Murray, 2013, p24-25). However, for most community organisations and certainly for campaigning groups, the issue is probably that 'effectiveness' needs defining in terms of social change, not the metrics of retweets, likes and comments.

Whether or not any of these approaches amount to much more than monitoring may be contested, but many organisations would be likely to welcome more robust ways of demonstrating impact. Facebook's analytic tool, *Insights*, certainly helps organisations make a start on their monitoring:

'For example, in the Posts section of your Page Insights, you can go to Posts Types to see the kinds of posts (ex: photo, link) that have the highest average reach and engagement.'¹¹

The system helps users to calculate the number of 'people engaged' – defined as 'the number of unique people who've clicked, liked, commented on or shared your Page posts.'¹² However, as Taylor (2012) notes in her case study of a social media campaign,

¹¹ Facebook Help Centre, 2015, <https://en-gb.facebook.com/help/355635011174004>.

¹² Facebook Help Centre, 2015, <https://en-gb.facebook.com/help/336143376466063/>.

'While all online activity can be monitored, measured and recorded for its reach, engagement and online impact, it is difficult to measure offline impact and to know what online activity might have inspired more widely in terms of longer-term social change' (Taylor, 2012, p35).

Greenberg (2014) notes how *Insights* can help organisations to 'pinpoint the days, times, and types of content that resonate best with their audience'. Clarke (2013) uses an example from a social media surgery to demonstrate its use and how the 'reach' of a single post was far more extensive than the surgery participant assumed. Nonetheless, she notes that

'ultimately it is the quality of the engagement that matters more than the number of people you think you're engaging with' (np).

Other approaches include the Klout system, which calculates a score for influence across a range of social network sites.¹³ Klout have indicated that they are already looking at ways of scoring 'sentiment', which is the sort of qualitative factor in engagement that could be significant for community and voluntary organisations:

'Sentiment is something we have considered adding to the score and might do so in the future. A point to note is that sentiment inference is itself not always accurate, and a negative perception from someone may be deemed as positive by another. So we're working to see if adding sentiment would improve the accuracy of the Klout Score' (Fanucchi, 2015, np).

With regard to campaigning, Chung's (2015) review of social media assessment proposed three key metrics:

- exposure (reach or the number of times contents were viewed);
- engagement (number of people who respond to a message); and
- insights (whether audience engagement is positive, neutral, or negative) (p115).

Using the Twitter accounts of major US non-profit organisations, Ihm (2015) has developed and tested two network measures:

'the first network measure captures two-way communication between organizations and the stakeholders. The second network measure captures communication among stakeholders, which can develop into autonomous communities to support the organization' (p501).

Ihm's study may well usher-in a new period of work on systematic frameworks for evaluating the impact of social media activity in community and voluntary organisations. An important question will be the extent to which it proves to be applicable to smaller groups.

¹³ For an example see Taylor (2012) p30.

Case studies and guidance

Several studies of the use of social media by community sector organisations (or clusters of organisations) shed light on the practical experience of trying to make the most of these technologies. These suggest areas (such as marketing) where needs and experience differ to those of larger charities and non-profits (see Briones *et al*, 2011, for an example of the latter). At the end of this section we refer to samples of guidance aimed at community and voluntary organisations.

Three notable UK case study examples illustrate the potential and the challenges involved. The TSRC ran a social media trial with ‘below the radar’ community groups across England, over a ten month period, with a focus on knowledge exchange. The conclusion was that knowledge exchange is facilitated because social media ‘can support informal interaction, the discovery of mutual interests and the subsequent development and management of relationships’ (Burnage and Persaud, 2012, p24). Nonetheless, the authors note that:

‘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’ (p10).

The potential is not necessarily easy to fulfil. A more local study, focused on the work of Telford and Wrekin Council for Voluntary Service (CVS), evaluated the ‘BASIS’ initiative. This was a 5-year project working with local groups and organisations, designed to demonstrate how use of social media could strengthen marketing techniques, increase service user knowledge and in turn drive traffic to websites to create demand. The evaluation found that: (i) CVS staff gained skills in IT and social media; (ii) 50 groups developed income generation techniques; (iii) 10 small groups diversified their income or fundraising strategies (Rawlings and Heffernan, 2014).

Taylor (2012) offers a thorough, considered description and evaluation of a pilot social media campaign against homophobia run by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. The campaign was preceded by a ‘listening exercise’ on homophobia and faith, designed to help determine the focus of the social media campaign. Taylor’s report includes detailed analysis of mentions, likes, tweets and retweets, reproduced in Table 4 which distinguishes ‘positive’ and negative’ mentions:

Table 4

Mentions over time for all online content relating to the NHAH (‘Nothing Holy About Hatred’) campaign



Source: Taylor, 2012, p22.

Taylor's report is distinguished for the unusual level of analysis – for example with an analysis of Facebook page total engagement and reach over time (p25). She concludes:

'Within a three-month period, the campaign was able to achieve much more than would have been possible with offline activity alone... It was possible to quantify the online achievements of the campaign via social media analysis tools, and the whole initiative was achieved with almost no monetary budget: the only investment was time...'

'The research above suggests that the short-term social media campaign increased awareness and created a community around an issue, but it was only possible to inspire relatively low levels of engagement; 'likes' rather than meaningful dialogue, online pledges rather than offline action' (p34).

This suggests that even for a campaign (as against ongoing daily use by a group or organisation) expectations of impact need to be kept in check. Other researchers argue that one effect of social media is that an awareness campaign must have high production values and be tailored to a sophisticated and 'picky' audience (Klang and Madison, 2016).

One further UK study should be mentioned, an evaluation of the use of social media by community reporters under a programme run by People's Voice Media. The report claims that the programme is contributing to empowerment through the development of 'psychological and social power' at the individual level (Wattam, 2009). The significance of this study may lie with how it is located conceptually between organisational use of social media, and individual use.

A study of social media competencies among community and voluntary organisations in New Zealand includes two case studies of large, high profile organisations. These highlight the difficulties of integrating practice into busy, resource-constrained agencies from scratch, raising questions about barriers such as lack of staff time, confidence, and skills; inadequate basic equipment; concerns about professional quality content; and declining enthusiasm. Thus in one instance,

'Participants commented that it was hard to maintain the motivation needed in the face of demanding work schedules and limited resources' (Zorn *et al*, 2013, p681).

A range of nearly 50 concise case studies and short articles has been brought together by New York marketing consultancy Red Rooster Group (2010). Most cover some aspect of fundraising. Similarly, *About that first tweet* is a short guide, apparently aimed at UK charities and social enterprises, that includes a number of 'inspiring practice' short case studies, Q&A with industry representatives, and a checklist and resource list (Miranda and Steiner, 2013).

More specific guidance on how to get started and make use of social media is widely available. NCVO's Knowhow resource base includes some (undated) mini-case studies, including for example:

- 'Setting up social media'
- 'How to manage social media'
- 'Social networking: best practice' and
- 'Building social media engagement' (all Knowhow NonProfit, no date).

Other examples include *Using social media to engage tenants* (Arena Partnership, 2015) which offers ideas and examples, and highlights innovative practice for social housing landlords; a US toolkit for non-profits called *The art of listening* (De Vera and Murray, 2013); and BT's *Using social networks* (BT, 2015).

Some of the negative publicity surrounding social media behaviour can generate a more light-hearted form of guidance (e.g. '7 ways to be insufferable on Facebook' (Urban, 2013)). Ello has responded to this negative culture by publishing a 'bill of rights for social network users' -

'To encourage an atmosphere of responsibility and transparency, while creating the most positive social network experience' (Ello, 2015, np).

Concluding remarks: implications for community groups and organisations

The literature reviewed here is dominated by studies of and commentary on the political impact of social media use, in particular in forms of protest. For community organisations and groups in the UK, it is striking that, while these media may have helped to change some processes, there seems to have been little impact on the overall outcomes in terms of empowerment, equalities or social justice. Utopian anticipations, where such outcomes were seen as a consequence of inexpensive, ubiquitous, horizontal communication, are looking problematic: there is, as yet, little evidence of benefit from social media use for small agencies working at the local level.

Within the third sector literature, the dominance of material relating to marketing and fundraising for charities obscures the lack of case studies among community organisations. This is an area where clear and robust studies would be helpful for the sector. In addition, it will be important to continue monitoring and exploring the extent to which collective action is individualised through social media use.

The literature implies a reduced role for community organisations in *organising*. The technologies take on some of the organising functions, of course: researchers note for example the function of Twitter streams as networking mechanisms, ‘embedded in various kinds of gatekeeping processes’ (Segerberg and Bennett, 2011, p202). Subsequent commentators observe this change in slightly different ways:

‘Increasingly, organizations choose to stay in the background, providing social technology outlays and generating action frames that can be taken up by the public’ (Theocharis *et al*, 2015, p204-205).

‘Civic action is becoming increasingly flexible, temporary and elusive. This type of non-traditionally organised collective action often stays below the radar of public discourse’ (Milan and Hinz, 2013, p8).

It could be added that there is nothing new about discovering small scale community based actions ‘below the radar’. But it may be the case, as McCosker’s (2015) analysis suggests, that networked individuals now carry out community action roles - such as awareness-raising, stimulating and coordinating reactions, feeding traditional media, and provoking policy - more efficiently than organisations. Community organisations will need to adjust to a changing role in the processes of knowledge generation and sharing.

These core messages highlight the relative lack of literature on social media relating to local communities or small-scale communities of interest, with some significant questions for future research:

- What are the motivations for community groups to use social media, and what are the explanations for non-use?
- Social media is seen in much of the literature as a means of promoting dialogue beyond the mainstream media. Voluntary and community groups have been criticised, however, for using social media as little more than a means of broadcasting. Why might this be the case – and does it matter?

- How compelling is the logic of social media to organisations at the local level – where, for example, marketing may be a low priority and face-to-face networking is often an acknowledged strength?
- Should a clear relationship be expected between the (apparently empowering) use of social media in mobilising large national and global movements, and its use at the micro-political neighbourhood level (Emejulu, 2015)?
- What might be the ‘tipping points’ at the community level for social media transitioning from primarily social uses, to effective political mobilisation and activism?
- How do community organisations respond to the ideological challenges arising from the association of digital media with neo-liberalism?
- Can the use of social media for campaigning help to bring about genuine and lasting empowerment; or does it serve largely to re-inforce pre-existing relationships?
- Is social media a means of building dialogue and consensus in diverse communities or does its use encourage increased fragmentation or, alternatively, a homogeneity of interests?
- Can meaningful impact measures be developed that can be used by small, under-resourced organisations at local level (or indeed within larger voluntary organisations)?

These issues have informed the partner Working Paper (140), which used a range of primary research methods to explore them in greater depth.

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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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