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Making sense of the Big Society: perspectives from the third sector

Rob Macmillan

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Abstract

The Big Society agenda has generated a great deal of critical comment in the media, in the third sector and amongst think tanks, and has stimulated some early analysis from the academic community. Despite strong backing from the Prime Minister, it has an unsettled presence and an uncertain future in political debate and the policy process. The third sector is seen as a key agent of change in the Big Society vision, yet there is precious little evidence of how members of third sector organisations understand and assess the idea, nor of the extent to which they embrace it. This paper assesses the changing fortunes of the Big Society as a narrative, and explores how it has been received in third sector circles. Drawing on data from a qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations, two contrasting responses emerge: overwhelming scepticism, combined with an awareness of potential opportunities ahead, and a need for participants to 'position' their organisations and activities in relation to the Big Society.

Keywords

Third sector, Big Society, narrative, field, positioning.

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Introduction

In just fifty words in a research interview, a manager from a third sector organisation comments on the UK coalition government's 'Big Society' agenda:

'their Big Society rhetoric....it's very vague, and because it's vague, there are, you know, this whole localism and all this kind of twaddle, it's nothing new, it's been around for ages, it's just been, the language is different. But there are opportunities within it. If we package ourselves properly'

Senior Manager, 9.7.10

The manager's comment speaks volumes about the reception of the 'Big Society' as a concept. The agenda, in this view, is 'theirs', 'rhetoric', 'vague', 'nothing new' and 'twaddle'. However, in an illuminating twist, the manager notes that within this new, vague language, there are *opportunities*. It requires the organisation to think seriously about how it presents itself and *packages* its work. There appear to be two parallel narratives in play: a critical stance in articulating, in this case, what the Big Society is, but alongside this, recognition of possibility.

The Big Society has generated a great deal of critical comment in the media, in the third sector and amongst think tanks, and has drawn a very mixed reception. Responses have included a combination of doubt, confusion, occasional enthusiasm, but also widespread indifference amongst the general public. It had to be sidelined as a campaigning issue for the Conservatives in the 2010 General Election (Parry et al. 2010), and despite several subsequent re-launches and apparently strong backing from the Prime Minister, it has 'an unsettled presence and an uncertain future' (Macmillan 2011b) in political debate and the policy process. Over time its use in ministerial speeches and official documents appears to have declined markedly.

The third sector, understood as the whole range of informal community groups, voluntary organisations and social enterprises, has always been a central focus of Big Society discussions and initiatives. As such it is seen as a key agent of change in the Big Society's vision of a recast relationship between citizen and state and reformed public services (Conservative Party 2010). For example, a 2010 strategy for building a stronger civil society stresses that: 'Together with citizens and communities, the voluntary and community sector sits at the heart of the Government's ambitions to create a Big Society' (Office for Civil Society 2010: 3). For Alcock (2010: 380), the Big Society was 'intended as an endorsement of the positive and proactive role that voluntary action and social enterprise could play in promoting improved social inclusion and 'fixing Britain's broken society'.

If third sector organisations are a key mechanism for the Big Society, how are they seeking to understand the concept? This paper explores two contexts in which everyday sense is being made of the Big Society concept. Firstly we chart the emergence of the idea and assess the wider public and political debate on the agenda. Here we seek to explain the concept's difficulties as a political narrative. This is followed by a detailed examination of how Big Society is being received in third sector circles. Drawing on data from a qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations, we ask how research participants view the government's Big Society agenda, what sense they make of it,

and how they might respond. In particular we find a double-sided response: overwhelming scepticism about the Big Society agenda, combined with an awareness of potential opportunities ahead, and thus the need for participants to 'position' their organisations and activities in relation to the Big Society. In seeking to understand this ambivalence, the paper concludes by building on the idea of third sector organisations stating and seeking positions in a discursively constructed 'field' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Fligstein and McAdam 2012); one in which the Big Society itself can be seen as a field-shaping narrative intervention.

The troubled history of the Big Society

David Cameron set out his vision for the 'Big Society' in his 2009 conference speech to the Conservative Party, and then more fully in the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture a month later. However, the broader agenda, linked to discussions around the modernisation of the Conservative Party, and informed by a more socially inclusive compassionate conservatism, had been in development for some time before this (Dorey 2007, Evans 2008, Page 2010). In the 2009 lecture Cameron counter-posed the Big Society with 'Big Government':

'Because we believe that a strong society will solve our problems more effectively than big government has or ever will, we want the state to act as an instrument for helping to create a strong society...Our alternative to big government is the Big Society.' (Cameron 2009)

The general election on 6 May 2010 was followed by the establishment of the Coalition and its Programme for Government. The Big Society initiative was launched in government two weeks later, accompanied by the appointment of newly ennobled Nat Wei as the government's Big Society advisor. The policy agenda itself involves three key aims: an emphasis on decentralisation ('*community empowerment*') with more power devolved to local councils and neighbourhoods; public services reform ('*opening up public services*') enabling charities, social enterprises, co-operatives, but also private companies, to compete to deliver public services, for example in employment services and criminal justice; and thirdly programmes to encourage people to play more of an active role in communities ('*social action*'), such as the National Citizen Service for 16 year olds (Mycock and Tonge 2011) and the Community Organisers Programme (Taylor 2011).

Academics, think tanks and other commentators have begun to turn their critical attention to the idea in order to ask what it means in practice and particularly how it links with existing Conservative traditions (Alcock 2010, Smith 2010, Scott 2011, Taylor 2012, Levitas 2012, Sage 2012). Does it represent a ground-breaking shift in the relationship between citizens and the state, or offer political cover for an ideological assault on the public sector and welfare state? Historians have drawn attention to longer term continuities in the debate (Hilton and McKay 2011, Harris 2012, Hilton 2012), while others consider the extent to which the Big Society might be a break from, or ultimately a longer term return to Thatcherism and the idea of a minimal state (Evans 2008, Kisby 2010, Tam 2011, Corbett and Walker 2012). Some commentators have suggested more recent comparisons. Smith (2010: 829) and Pattie and Johnston (2011: 407) draw closer connections than perhaps advocates of the Big Society would like between this agenda and the previous Labour government's approach to

welfare reform, encouraging greater involvement of citizens in decision making, plural delivery of services and increased choice for users.

It is perhaps appropriate to view the Big Society not as a single concept or programme, but as a loose and encompassing alliance of ideas and signals with a range of purposes. Albrow (2012) argues that 'Big Society' should be seen first and foremost as a 'rhetorical intervention' designed to communicate with a range of audiences. In broad political terms, it is part of an attempt to continue the process of decontaminating the Conservative Party 'brand'. It does this by facilitating access to the language of 'social' and 'community' purposes, rather than relying purely on familiar conservative ideological tropes around defence, law and order and free markets. It acts as a strategy of distinction, but here the signals are at least partly oriented internally and against the idea of the Conservatives as an electorally unappealing 'nasty party'. This is encapsulated from an earlier speech by David Cameron to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), deliberately creating distance from the Thatcherite neo-liberal wing of the party: "there is such a thing as society, it's just not the same as the state" (Cameron 2006). The Big Society may also serve as the positive story to counter the negative association with fiscal contraction and public spending cuts; an element of what Lee (2011: 4) refers to as the 'politics of deflection'.

It is also important to see the Big Society in relation to its rhetorical 'other': namely the notion of 'Big Government'. Big Society then becomes the rather abstract but positive imagined future of individual and community responsibility set against a traditional ideological critique of (big) 'state failure'. In this view the state tends to be ineffective in tackling society's major issues, or worse, part of the problem itself in creating a 'broken society'. This argument seems also to extend to the state's relationship with the third sector. There is more than a hint in some ministerial speeches that the state and the sector have become too close, based on a 'zero-sum' perspective in which the state 'crowds out' civil society and compromises its independence (Tam 2011, see also Thane 2012 for a historical perspective on this argument). On the one hand there is a push to remove the burdens on the sector and independent social action from the state's red tape (Cabinet Office 2011), and on the other, with an interesting echo of the language of 'welfare dependency', that government should break 'the culture of charities and social bodies being dependent on the state for hand-outs' (Cameron 2009). Rhetorically at least, there is an attempt to reset boundaries between the state and the third sector; a partial 'decoupling' of the state and the third sector.

The Big Society has had a very troubled history. It required repeated re-launches and constant reiteration to maintain momentum in the midst of doubt, indifference or hostility. Over a twelve month period in 2011-12 it was the focus of a third sector commission, a parliamentary inquiry and an audit. Respectively these argued that the Big Society lacks: a clear, coherent and compelling definition (ACEVO 2011: 5); ministerial leadership, clear communication and a coherent plan for implementation, particularly around public sector reform (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee 2011: 55), and 'a common vision and strategy for delivery forged with key partners, particularly the voluntary sector' (Civil Exchange 2012: 8).

A key issue appears to be the extent to which the Big Society is understood in political and media circles, and in the wider public. Many have struggled to comprehend what it is and in what sense it

might speak to the lives and concerns of ordinary people (Defty 2011). Faced with a largely sceptical media, the Big Society as a narrative struggles to gain traction. This is primarily because there have been at least five readily available counter-narratives that tell more immediately resonant and convincing stories. These are: *confusion*: people don't know what the Big Society is or means; *the challenge of everyday life*: given work and family commitments, many people are time stretched and too busy to get involved or take responsibility for local activities; *not so new*: the Big Society is what the third sector and communities do anyway up and down the country; *contradiction and a cover for cuts*: contrasting the seemingly positive vision of Big Society with a reality of deficit reduction and cuts to public spending, including valuable community and voluntary services – for Pattie and Johnston (2011: 420) 'Fiscal retrenchment may yet prove the Big Society's Achilles' heel' (see also Blond 2010: 291); and finally *irrelevance in deprived areas*: the Big Society appears to speak more to the concerns and capabilities of relatively affluent areas, where people have more resources, security and opportunities, but is likely to be less relevant to the deep-seated problems of deprived inner-city areas. If the Big Society emphasises citizen and community action and participation in civil society, it may be challenged inasmuch as participation is narrow in scope, unevenly distributed, limited in magnitude, or in decline. Pattie and Johnston (2011: 409) liken the Big Society to the anxious wait of a dinner party host before the guests arrive: 'What if, despite all the invitations, no-one comes?' The Big Society as an idea and broader social narrative may thus be undermined unless it can overcome various forms of 'participation failure' (Macmillan 2011b).

In the face of these seemingly more compelling counter-narratives, the Big Society's story itself struggles to secure or gain 'room' in a dynamic discursive field of contesting narratives (Macmillan 2011a). Pattie and Johnston (2011: 421) ask whether the Big Society might 'join the long tradition of grandiose phrasemaking, much trumpeted in pursuit of office, but ultimately quietly shelved once in power?' This question has proved to be eerily prescient: over time the term has fallen into disuse, and many now see the label, if not the underlying reform agenda, as moribund. Many of the approaches and initiatives hitherto trumpeted as part of the Big Society, such as localism, have been advanced in various contested ways (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). However, the language describing these makes far less reference to the Big Society. Nevertheless, it may still be useful to think of it as one element of a wider 'hearts and minds' hegemonic project to change the framing and assumptions about the role, scale, scope and responsibilities of the state vis-à-vis society (Tam 2011). The fact that for a while it has appeared to be the focus of discussion in policy circles, seminars and interactive forums might be seen as its major achievement. This gives some credence to the idea articulated by Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude that in some sense the basic point of the Big Society is that it is not for government to specify what it is; citizens should make of it what they will, and in effect make it up themselves through independent discussion and social action (Chorley and Merrick 2011).

Thus, into the narrative space claimed by the concept of Big Society, commentators and leaders in the third sector and beyond were making interventions which tried to populate it with their own articulations of what it could mean, what it could imply, and where the agenda might go next. For example, the aforementioned Commission on Big Society proposed a clearer definition, namely:

A society in which power and responsibility have shifted: one in which, at every level in our national life, individuals and communities have more aspiration, power and capacity to take decisions and solve problems themselves, and where all of us take greater responsibility for ourselves, our communities and one another (ACEVO 2011: 12).

In contrast, the National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA), a campaigning alliance seeking to defend and promote independent voluntary and community action, castigated voluntary organisations for their failure to challenge the Big Society agenda as ultimately promoting the interests of business:

By declining to highlight the ideologically noxious thinking behind the 'Big Society', voluntary organisations are colluding in their own demise, allowing the government to turn all activity that used to be called 'charity', 'voluntary' or 'civil society' into business (NCIA 2011: 2).

Finally, social media and social action activist, Julian Dobson offers a pragmatic, progressive response in the context of doubt that a 'Big Society cavalry' can rescue society from austerity:

In a world where we have to be more self-reliant, it's more important than ever that we are not only self-reliant but find ways to help each other. You could call it the Big Society. You could call it cooperation. I prefer the concept of solidarity, because it is about people coming together from shared experiences and hopes rather than out of a sense of duty or philanthropy (Dobson 2011).

Rather than outright rejection, there is an attempt here to use and channel the Big Society as a discursive resource in other directions, hinting towards a non-statist agenda for economic and social action (Glasman 2010, Diamond 2011, Sage 2012).

Thus far we have examined the nature, fortunes and some public responses shaping the narrative of the Big Society in general terms. How, though, are third sector practitioners on the ground thinking about and responding to the Big Society agenda? In the next section we ask how the Big Society is received and regarded in a core constituency for the agenda: groups and organisations in the third sector. We ask whether the sector appears able and willing to embrace the Big Society.

The Big Society through third sector eyes

Other than reflections about the Big Society amongst smaller grassroots community groups (McCabe and Phillimore 2012), and a rather limited survey of around 100 Chief Executives of voluntary organisations (ACEVO 2011: 62-4), there is precious little research evidence on third sector perspectives on the Big Society. The latter survey suggested that respondents had a clear understanding of what the Big Society means (58% agree or strongly agree), believe the agenda is fundamentally a good thing (63% agree or strongly agree), but see local authority spending cuts to the voluntary sector as undermining the Big Society vision (88% agree or strongly agree).

In the remainder of this paper we discuss qualitative evidence drawn from the 'Real Times' longitudinal study of third sector organisations and activities. The research follows a diverse set of fifteen core case studies of voluntary organisations, community groups and social enterprises over a four year period. The overall purpose of the study is to gain a more in-depth and realistic understanding of how third sector organisations work in practice over time (Macmillan 2011a, Macmillan et al. 2011).

The first three waves of fieldwork with research participants took place over an 18 month period, from just after the General Election in May 2010, through to November 2011. Although it is not the direct focus of the study, the research coincided with a crucial period in public discussion of the Big Society concept, which featured in conversation in 51 separate interviews. This represents just over a quarter of interviews undertaken for the study in that period. Most of the references to Big Society come from Chief Executives or equivalents: participants who might be expected to form a view of the emerging political and policy landscape.

Two main themes arise from these discussions. On the one hand participants attempt to describe, understand and explain the Big Society agenda, and in doing so share their critical assessments of the concept and provide commentary on its changing fortunes. The key finding here is that overwhelmingly participants are sceptical of the phrase and what it signifies. On the other hand, however, participants seek to 'position' their organisations and activities alongside and in relation to the 'Big Society'. Alongside scepticism, therefore, is a keen awareness of potential opportunities. This raises the possibility that working with such narratives resembles a subtle 'game' in which players reflexively seek to use and adopt certain discourses and languages. We discuss these two themes – understanding and positioning – in turn.

Understanding the Big Society

Respondents in the study have some awareness of the Big Society concept, but their use of language around it suggests that it is seen as a rather 'top-down' politically contested narrative, percolating conversation from elsewhere. It is recognised as something politicians, policy officials and media commentators talk about, rather than being an embedded talking point of everyday life in the third sector. Respondents seem almost to place it in quotation marks, displaying their distance from it by surrounding it with phrases such as 'you know' and 'etc.'. For example, some referred to 'the push for the Big Society *and so on and so forth*'; '*you know*, the Big Society' and '*this* Big Society'. It seems to be used as a signpost or as shorthand to explain some aspect of a policy thread, a set of activities, or even to describe their job to others:

'It's what I use to describe what I do to friends and family who say, "What is social enterprise?" And I say, "Well have you heard of Big Society?" "Yeah, heard of that" So I think it's a quick and easy way to describe it.'

Marketing Placement, 14.7.11

Respondents have an overwhelmingly sceptical orientation to the agenda and language of the Big Society. Here it can also be the subject of mockery:

'Well obviously there's the Big Society and... what's it called?... it's not Home Guard, is it?... Civil Society....that's what it sounds like to me. 'Civil Society', it sounds like that, doesn't it, a war phrase.....I've not heard anybody [here], apart from jokingly, using the new terminology, because people have only just got used to Labour's new terminology of calling it third sector instead of voluntary sector. Now it's Civil Society or Big Society...I noticed [our local umbrella organisation], on all their newsletters now, it's now Civil Society newsletter instead of Third Sector...You know, it's a bit 1984 to me: "Scribble that off and stick that on.'

Chief Executive, 18.2.11

The sector thus faces a dual challenge of both understanding what the Big Society is, but also how to respond, as exemplified by a rather doubtful aside from one respondent, that: “There’s a kernel of an idea that’s worth exploiting here I’m sure, and I’m sure we’ll all learn to be very, very enthusiastic about it” (Chief Executive, 30.7.10). A sense of weary resignation pervades this comment, as if politicians and their handy phrases come and go, and yet while they are around third sector organisations have to play a game of pretend support. We return to this idea below. A year later, the same respondent appears to be none the wiser as to how the concept will play out, but notes its political centrality in the Conservative Party:

‘God knows what the hell it is but anyway, we’re gonna have to find something because [David Cameron’s] personal credibility rests on the Big Society! So they’re not gonna drop it as an idea, and hopefully there will be some money attached to it, but it’s not clear to me what it’s going to be’

Chief Executive, 8.6.11

The ‘Big Society’ thus involves a significant challenge of interpretation and communication for many in the sector. One local umbrella body saw its role as one of ‘translation’: identifying what happens in government policies and decisions and how it translates on the ground. Translation has proved to be a rather challenging task, however, in the case of the Big Society. Respondents expressed an extraordinarily wide variety of interpretations of Big Society and the kinds of activities to which it supposedly refers. One noted its origins in Conservative political philosophy, in that:

‘they want to get people to participate rather than take, you know, in tory language, people are taking too much and not contributing and so they want to change the model, the Big Society model so that people play in to it rather than take out.’

Chief Executive, 24.5.10

Most frequently Big Society is mentioned in interviews in a context of volunteering, people doing things themselves, and local decision making and delivery. But in addition, the Big Society was said to invoke, inter alia: co-operatives and mutuality, tackling worklessness, social enterprise, giving up time for nothing, making big government into small government, a bigger independent sector, decentralising responsibility, marrying up voluntary and community sector interests with corporate interests, and taking over a local council office as a community centre. For one participant, it amounts to “a puffed up term to disguise the fact that there’s cuts all over the place” and “a deconstruction of the state as we’ve known it” (Community Development Worker, 29.7.10).

Thus in an echo of prevailing counter-narratives to the Big Society discussed earlier, respondents appear to be confronted by and articulate a range of contradictions and mixed messages about the agenda. Firstly, that in initially presenting the ‘Big Society’ as something new, its advocates seemed to overlook much that has been going on in the third sector already. In this view the Big Society becomes a political project attempting to encompass, describe and promote a range of non-state activities. For one respondent this amounted to an illegitimate co-option of a range of positive community and voluntary activities for political purposes:

‘I don’t think it really matters what you call what’s going on. The bit that annoys me...is that David Cameron is trying to steal what’s going on and make it appear to be something new and different.’

Chief Executive, 7.3.11

Secondly, respondents express doubt, disbelief and anger at the contradiction between the apparently open Big Society agenda on the one hand, which seems to promote the third sector, and the Coalition's deficit reduction programme on the other, through which cuts to benefits, services and programmes affect third sector organisations and their service users. There is a divide here between a view that the Big Society agenda was sincere but dwarfed by the priority for deficit reduction, and one which described the Big Society in the face of cuts as a fallacy:

'Well the government seems to be giving mixed messages. It's saying it wants Big Society and voluntary organisations to do everything, it's cutting them off at the knees. It doesn't make sense at all when...it's just rhetoric I think really'

Chief Executive, 18.1.11

A final contradiction expressed in the interviews is that the Big Society's emphasis on volunteering and community involvement risks overlooking the varied and complex nature of citizen action and volunteering. This includes on the one hand the awkward reality, for Big Society advocates, of campaigning and activism, and on the other the true costs and demands on volunteers and volunteer involving organisations. Two case study organisations, both delivering services to vulnerable people, argued that the Big Society agenda appeared to assume that working with volunteers was relatively cost-free. Many service users of voluntary organisations have highly complex and challenging needs, and thus it was problematic to assume that these services could be run either by volunteers alone or without considerable training and support:

'the Big Society, I understand, is about getting more done by volunteers and getting more people to take their social responsibilities. Fine. I'm a trustee as a volunteer. I'm a scout leader as a volunteer, that's Big Society. For me the issue here is that the nature of the people we're working with as the cuts bite ...we are seeing an increasing number of referrals of people with complex needs. A volunteer off the street cannot cope with that.'

Chief Executive, 19.1.11

In their efforts to understand the developing agenda around the Big Society, respondents also passed comment on the fortunes of the concept. Here the general tone was one of a political agenda struggling to gain credibility.¹ One respondent had actually met senior ministers in a roundtable discussion on the Big Society, and expressed surprise at the combination of sincerity and naivety:

'I came out thinking how they were all genuinely nice people actually and you couldn't dislike them, how they didn't have the faintest idea, not the faintest idea of where they were going or how they were going to get there and how they were genuinely terrified that the Big Society is going to blow in their...faces and they were genuinely saying to us 'what can we do?'....I was overwhelmed by it's the blind, leading the ... blind here....they've been brought up in a wealthy environment and actually really they want to do good, you know, but they're not quite sure how to do it.'

Chief Executive, 17.2.11

¹ It is worth noting that several interviews were undertaken in February-March 2011 when the concept was being heavily criticised in the media.

Thus far we have seen how respondents in the study reacted with deep scepticism to the promotion of the Big Society. They are sometimes perplexed, often critical and aware of both its political purposes and contradictions. It is variously dismissed or held at a distance. A framework conceived as part of a campaign to rethink, reposition and decontaminate the Conservative Party in opposition, and then brought into government, appears not to have made much of positive impression on those who might be considered key agents for the Big Society. As a hearts and minds strategy, the evidence from these respondents indicates that it is falling on deaf ears. However, it is important to stress that this is only part of the picture.

Positioning third sector organisations in the Big Society

In various ways respondents in the research also present another side in their references to the Big Society. Here we find organisations considering the strategic opportunities presented by the changing direction and power dynamics signalled by the new Coalition government. The second dimension of making sense of the Big Society, then, is one of positioning. The importance of this aspect can be illustrated by this quotation from a respondent in a national support organisation:

‘I think it’s a fantastic time, at the moment, there’s so much opportunity, it’s a really thriving sector at the moment, it really is. You know, there is quite explicit political support, that’s in terms of the Big Society, whatever anyone thinks about that...and interest, explicit interest, in this area. [It] is a bit of a double-edged sword in that there’s been a huge amount of negative reaction to it, but I actually view it more positively, in terms of its potential. [It may] help trigger more opportunity’

Grants Officer, 19.5.11

This opens up a new angle on the debate about how the Big Society is being received. According to this respondent, there are opportunities for third sector organisations to be found in a political landscape of explicit, on-going, and possibly even increasing, support for the sector:

‘I accept that people are worried, that they say, “Well, hang on a minute, (a) we’ve been doing this for ages and, (b) well you want us to deliver all this and then you’re cutting all our budget,” etc. etc., but I’m more of the view of, well, let’s find the opportunity and get on with it. Keep going...and be flexible, and look for opportunities’

Grants Officer, 19.5.11

Remarkably, these are the only unequivocally positive comments about the Big Society found in the 51 interviews in the study where the Big Society agenda arises in discussion. It is an outlier in an otherwise overwhelmingly negative response.²

Some of the respondents in the study appear to be adopting a pragmatic stance towards the emerging Big Society agenda. Whilst traditionally third sector organisations are praised for their flexibility, adaptability and innovation in discovering new ways of addressing complex problems, what is notable here is also how flexibility and adjustment are illustrated in *the language* being adopted by third sector organisations. In a variety of ways respondents discuss how their organisations and

² It is worth noting that the next most positive comments about the Big Society tend to be more qualified: “I think the general principles of the Big Society are fine, if you can understand what they are” (Chief Executive, 7.3.11); “we’ll see how it pans out but the rhetoric, I mean, you’ve got to give them credit for it... The bits that I’ve seen personally so far... I mean, it’s a sincere effort” (Chief Executive, 14.4.11).

activities 'tap into', 'chime with' and 'hit the buttons of' the Big Society agenda. This is evident in this quotation from the manager of a co-operative:

'I think also, you know, the Big Society, Cameron, the cross-party political support for co-operatives....means that we're well placed, and we're the flavour of the month at the moment....'

'it just seems to chime in very nicely with that Big Society agenda. And so we think there's a big sort of way for us to make a play to that agenda.'

Senior Manager, 11/19.10.10

A couple of larger organisations in the study, both employing specialist public relations and communications staff, were more explicit in thinking through how their organisations should be marketed in the light of the Big Society agenda. For one, less than six months into the life of the new government, it was work in progress:

'I'm looking at [this] now in terms of message formulation...I've looked at it in terms of day to day press messages... I think the...way we're set up, to enable smaller local delivery of services really fits in with the 'Big Society' concept – localised delivery, it's perfect really. Again it's a new concept, I think we need to think about how we incorporate it in any formal, you know, permanent messaging.'

Communications Manager, 3.9.10

Asked what would be their two minute 'elevator pitch' with a government minister, another case study organisation made a direct link to the new agenda:

'Simple – we are the Big Society... that's exactly what I would say, because everything... the work that we do, we are so community-focused...You read the papers: we do that, there's nothing I can turn round and say, we don't do that. Everything they're harping on for the Localism Bill, we are it, and we've been doing it for years; it's nothing new to us. We're thinking innovatively; we're thinking out of the box. Everything they're wanting us to do... we could be a great case study for them. For me, that's what we are. So that's what I would say in the two minutes in the lift; we are the Big Society.'

Director of Communications, 13.9.11

Whilst these organisations align the presentation of their activities directly with the themes thought to embody the Big Society, another respondent warned against over-playing the link between their work and the Big Society. The approach here was to discuss the organisation's work and value in its own terms, without mentioning the Big Society phrase, and this would allow politicians and policy-makers to make their own connection. Regardless of the tactics involved, however, several respondents were clearly thinking of how their organisations could be seen to coincide with the Big Society agenda.

However, closer alignment of initiatives and messages may bring some dilemmas. One case study, waiting for the outcome of a bid for a key government programme, was concerned about being seen to be delivering part of the Big Society, and therefore being associated with a government involved in implementing significant public spending and welfare cuts. In contrast, another was somewhat more relaxed at the mutual exchange involved in closer alignment, and pragmatism appears to prevail on

both sides of this relationship. Here a government minister visits a new initiative in development, and praised the third sector organisation for taking it forward:

‘he wanted to thank us for our leadership, but also wanted to – his department and his team, to be engaged in this, I think so they can claim some traction, you know... So I suppose I’m a bit cynical. But, you know, you go with the grain actually. If he can claim it and we get some money for it and things happen, I’m quite happy.’

Chief Executive, 24.10.11

The changing political landscape, and particularly the language associated with this shift, becomes a signal that new things are held to be important, and others less so. The Big Society, however ill-defined, and perhaps because it was so, was seen to involve new possibilities. In as far as they can, third sector organisations in the study seem to be reading this agenda, then, with both considerable doubt on the one hand, and yet strategic purpose on the other.

Making sense of the Big Society

In a little over three turbulent years the Big Society agenda has sparked extraordinary amounts of commentary, although this appears to be diminishing, suggesting that it may be reaching the end of its shelf life. The Big Society agenda has always been broader than just the third sector, but clearly the promotion of non-state approaches to address significant social issues will have some focus on third sector organisations, and as we have seen official policy pronouncements have emphasised the potential contribution of the third sector to the Big Society. However, a recent audit of the Big Society argued that:

Lack of ‘buy in’ is likely to become a major obstacle to progress for an initiative which relies on delivery by others. Many individuals and civil society organisations which are essential to delivery of the Big Society regard the policy with hostility or suspicion (Civil Exchange 2012: 68).

The research reported here provides some evidence which broadly supports this conclusion. Respondents are highly critical of the agenda, suggesting that it is essential to explore not just how discourses, impressions and frames are made and managed, but crucially how they are received, interpreted, translated and judged. Members of case study third sector organisations have been overwhelmingly doubtful about the new narrative. However, the research also reveals a more nuanced situation. From the analysis here, we have two simultaneous narratives in play, often articulated by the very same people. On the one hand respondents are sceptical of the purpose, content and promotion of the Big Society, yet on the other they seek an advantageous position in a space of new opportunities. They hold it at some distance, yet at the same time consider more instrumentally how they might adopt and deploy the language. The conclusion is that third sector organisations may not like or have faith in the ‘Big Society’ agenda, but they could see ways of working with it. This is neatly summarised in this quotation from one research participant.

‘I don’t have an issue with using the term or even agreeing with the general thrust, but I’m also quite happy...sneering with the rest of my colleagues about the cynicism with which it’s being promoted....I don’t really have a problem with the principles, it’s been around for

a long time, I'm a bit of a cynic about, you know, the hobbyhorses, but I don't think anybody's fooling anybody, to be honest.'

Chief Executive, 7.3.11

This contrast may reveal something about the nature of the third sector 'field' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Macmillan 2011a). A field is typically understood as an arena, milieu or social domain. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) define a 'strategic action field' as arising where:

actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purpose of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 9).

Actors try to make sense of the field and develop their strategies for action accordingly. However, they cannot directly know the field; their knowledge is mediated by understandings and through discourse. Hence strategic action in a field is always discursively framed (Hay 2002). In this perspective the Big Society agenda can then be seen as a broader field-shaping narrative, which aims to construct a particular set of understandings about the role of the third sector in a broader narrative of society and the state. In promoting activities beyond the realm of 'big government', it attempts to recast the terms of the debate on the roles and responsibilities of the state and citizens, and of the appropriate organisation of social provision. This is intended to affect and influence participants in the third sector and civil society, as in many other fields. Actors attempt to interpret, translate and occasionally shape the narrative, or rely on others' attempts to do the same, including the media, expert commentators, researchers and umbrella bodies in the third sector. However, third sector organisations are also concerned about their 'position' in the field and accordingly seek to secure or advance their position. This might explain how organisations came to view the Big Society as a space of possibility. However, doubts arise when it is simultaneously associated with position-threatening processes and interventions such as deficit reduction. Governments appear to be in a powerful position to shape the field, although the fortunes of the Big Society narrative suggest that this provides no guarantees. Framing is thus always a rather circumscribed power.

A complementary line of explanation comes from the possibility that there is a more deep-seated third sector reaction to politicians and their overarching, often vaguely expressed narratives, involving an almost natural hostility over and above any ideological differences. Third sector practitioners are often used to confronting complex, hard end issues faced by some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people, and at the same time with the day to day struggle to keep their activities and organisations going. These would seem to be rather fertile conditions for reinforcing an 'us and them' mentality; where politicians and policy makers are typically positioned as remote, relatively fleeting, superficial and even venal, in contrast to the apparently grounded and enduring presence of third sector practitioners claiming local and real knowledge of life at the sharp end. Painter (1997: 138) suggests that a voluntary or third sector 'habitus' might become embodied in gut orientations towards particular issues. 'Habitus' describes a pre-conscious orientation to a social world, manifested in the way actors behave and 'carry themselves'. An example might be an almost automatic suspicion

amongst voluntary and community organisations of the agendas of statutory authorities, and of course vice versa. It would not be surprising then, in this context, that the Big Society, despite its overtures to the third sector, is likely to sound grand, other-worldly, and almost incomprehensible in the day to day reality of third sector life.

Overarching narratives such as the Big Society are always likely to struggle to convince people, particularly when confronted with a highly sceptical media culture. The Big Society appears to face an even more uphill battle against evident contradictions and compelling counter-narratives. Given the analysis presented in this paper, members of third sector organisations, as potentially key partners in the promotion of the agenda, are clearly not impressed by it. Politicians and policy makers are often encouraged and exhorted to set out clear visions for the direction of society. Perhaps the lesson from this research and the experience of the Big Society is that they should tread carefully in this endeavour. They might be wise to spend time developing ideas and narratives in ways which make sense in everyday life and at the frontline. If stories fail to offer compelling, resonant and realistic scenarios, they are in danger of being derided, dismissed or ignored. Narratives are important field-shaping interventions, but evidence from the third sector making sense of the Big Society suggests that this is a precarious undertaking.

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Third Sector Research Centre, Park House, 40 Edgbaston Park Road
University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2RT

Tel: 0121 414 3086

Email: info@tsrc.ac.uk

www.tsrc.ac.uk

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Contact the author

Rob Macmillan

r.macmillan@tsrc.ac.uk

0121 414 8975



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