

Briefing Paper 140

Community action and social media: trouble in Utopia?

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Introduction

Social media provides a set of digital tools and channels that can help community groups and organisations to communicate, multi-directionally, more efficiently and inexpensively, and connect with wider networks - globally if appropriate - for publicity and support or to raise awareness.

Despite this compelling logic, and widespread use by individuals, social media has not been adopted as widely by community organisations as might have been expected. This study set out to explain that discrepancy, through a consideration of the use and non-use of social media by community groups and small, more formal, voluntary organisations in England. It followed a detailed literature review ([Working Paper 139](#)), exploring the gap between the claims for the transformative power of social media, and its use by grassroots community groups and organisations. It also discusses more generally how organisations relate to these technologies and their evolving culture.

The research considered:

- evidence that social media use 'makes a difference' for small voluntary and community sector organisations
- the benefits and costs of investing in a social media presence, and
- explanations for non-use and lapsed use of social media.

The study found that there are fully-understandable reasons for non-use and lapsed-use, and these are clarified by examining use by smaller community organisations alongside that of larger agencies and international movements. Beyond the rhetoric around the transformative power of online exchanges and communications, Utopian visions may need to be reviewed.

Methodology and sources of material

In addition to the literature review, the study included the following components:

- a scoping exercise, comprising telephone interviews with experienced commentators and an exploratory seminar
- a questionnaire survey
- three focus groups on social technologies and social networks
- case studies from follow-up telephone interviews with survey respondents.

Insights were also absorbed from small-scale studies of local use of Twitter, of social media in Big Local areas, and of the use of smartphones by people on low incomes.

The literature review

The review identified three main categories of material in the academic, grey and online literature:

- a broad body of sociological work which argues for the transformative power of digital media, in challenging hierarchies and helping to organise protest and social action at a national and international level;
- a narrower literature on the adoption of social media by formal voluntary organisations: this material is dominated by uses for marketing and fundraising;
- a smaller literature on the use of social media for community development and at neighbourhood level.

Two points about the community and voluntary sector literature are noteworthy. First, among academic sources, just eight journals that could be said to be representative of the sector provided a mere 14 items - around three per cent of the total material captured for the bibliography. Secondly, when reference is made to the potential for digital media to contribute to campaigning and activism, authors turn to examples of international or national online movements rather than local community-based action. This accentuates the striking lack of local-level studies, for example of Facebook use among community groups.

The close association of social media with large-scale protest movements and campaigns is evident. Questions remain around the extent to which genuine empowerment and social change has resulted.

The association of social media with neo-liberalism is also well-documented, raising questions with regard to the values embedded in the systems from which enhanced levels of participation and engagement are expected to flow. While it

seems that this issue influences individual choice (sometimes through the outright rejection of social media) there is little to suggest that it is widely-discussed among groups and organisations.

Social media is recognised as part of a blending of collective action with 'connective action' – for which the formative element is personalised sharing, resulting in actions and content being distributed widely across social networks. Networked individuals may now carry out community action roles - such as awareness-raising, stimulating and coordinating reactions, feeding traditional media, and provoking policy – more, and more efficiently, than organisations. This raises questions about the future role of organisations and groups, especially where campaigns and protests are concerned. Individualism does not necessarily imply the loss of collective identity. However, the expression of collective identity does not necessarily require a significant role for organisations, or even groups.

Understanding non-use and lapsed use

The rhetoric surrounding social media carries two implied assumptions. First, that the benefits are universal - that social media is of value to all kinds of organisation and group, as well as to individuals. Secondly, that non-use is irrational and that people may just need sympathetic introduction to the technologies to overcome apprehension or ignorance.

This research suggests that these assumptions can be challenged. Lapsed-use and non-use appear mainly to be a story of willingness undermined by insufficient capacity, inappropriate organisational 'fit', and lack of expertise in the face of 'difficult' technology; compounded by the absence of impact

measures. Non-use can be an informed choice and/or a realistic reflection of juggled priorities in pressured circumstances.

Both the literature review and the primary research indicate that non-use is complex. Various explanations or justifications are put forward:

- *'No-one here knows how to use it'*
- *'Few of the people we work with are using these media'*
- *'Not the best use of our time'*
- lack of understanding and basic skills
- lack of resources
- lack of perceived usefulness
- inability to measure and demonstrate the return on investment.

The particular pressures on community and voluntary organisations have to be taken into account. Several respondents reported 'burned finger' experiences, typically after social media channels had been established by a volunteer or intern who then left. While this can be seen as an endemic problem within the community and voluntary sector, reflecting resource shortages, it also illustrates the awkwardness of the technology, which is far from transparent to the novice.

The size and age profile of an organisation can be an explanatory factor. Small associations with few active volunteers might not gain much from adopting social media. In some cases - a community gardening group, for example - social media may add little to the organisation's purpose and activities. It is apparent that there are rational cost-benefit decisions being taken, often under pressure, that effectively consign social media to the 'nice-to-have' category.

The specific circumstances of individual organisations will dictate the priorities of energy and time, but many would likely make progress with social media if (a) the technologies were less awkward to use, and (b) uncomplicated processes were available for demonstrating impact. Whilst this may change with the increasing ubiquity of smartphones, non-use and lapsed use cannot simply be regarded as irrational or outdated.

How social media is seen in the community sector

Generally, respondents seemed to be persuaded by the logic of social technologies: it is appreciated that they accelerate communication and offer the potential to reach new, possibly wider and more influential, audiences. *Social media is far from being a universal benefit, but is something that requires a degree of faith as well as cautious investment of effort and time; with technological and associated challenges, and benefits that may be hard to identify or claim.*

How community organisations use social media

The research has shown the need to look more closely at organisations' *capacity* to adopt and exploit social media. There is no consensus on the use of organisational or personal accounts; nor concerning the need for an organisational policy or strategy. *Groups and organisations seemed not to be concerned if they are using social media more in 'broadcast mode' than for engagement and relationship-building, whereas expert commentators felt that there were grounds for criticising this.* Lack of expertise, and social media not being an appropriate 'fit' for the organisation's role or clients, emerged as the main reasons for non-use in this study.

Impact, monitoring and evaluation

Some commentators recognise the need to go beyond the metrics of clicks, retweets and likes in the pursuit of impact evidence, but few respondents felt able to make claims:

'We're not doing any analysis of what happens. But we do get engagement, enquiries, comments... There are people who pick up and re-tweet what we say'.

'If we felt we were getting huge attention we would be using it... We'd put more effort in if there was a compelling case'.

'We'd want to schedule tweets weekly according to a monthly plan. I don't know if that would be better, because we don't have evidence'.

There is a potential market for a practical tool to help groups and organisations measure the impact of social media use.

What is meant by 'engagement'?

Research into the uses of social media may be held back by lack of clarity over what is meant by 'engagement'. It is not clear if engagement is thought to be demonstrated through 'likes' and retweets, or some further correspondence with an organisation or campaign. Can it be positively identified as a precursor to radical activism; or a valid component in accounts of 'clicktivism'? Does it refer simply to a connection that can in theory be exploited – and energy or resources mobilised - by either party at short notice in the future?

Research may help to clarify what is meant by 'engagement', which in turn may contribute to a sound foundation for measuring impact.

Concluding remarks

Notwithstanding the ethics and politics of its commercial basis, social media does *not contradict* the processes of community action: in theory it fits comfortably and even promises to enhance it. This study has found little evidence, however, to confirm that promise. This may reflect the lack of research in this field which has not yet brought the necessary focus and methodologies to local activities.

Respondents described social media platforms as often awkward to use, creating a need for expertise that generates additional pressures on time and energies. It is very hard to demonstrate impact that can be attributed to social media use. Concerns such as inappropriate behaviour online, security, '24/7' pressures on privacy, and misinformation, also partially explain non-use.

Representatives of community organisations are not, typically, rejecting social media out of hand. It is fairer to say that social media makes too many demands – in terms of skills, time, and the demonstration of impact – to make its adoption sufficiently straightforward for community organisations.

The full report is available as [Working Paper 140](#).



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