Trajectories to community engagement: Understanding older people's experiences of engagement with online and local communities

Communities and Culture Network+ Final Report

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community portals chosen included a local community organisation[3], a computer club[4] and an elder-specific online community called DropBy[5]. An initial survey with 43 respondents led on to fifteen individual interviews and a focus group. The participants all lived independently in their own homes, their ages ranged from 65 to 87 years with a mean age of 73.4 years and there were nine women and six men. Analysis of interviews was conducted using an inductive process of thematic analysis and this resulted in the identification of four 'catalysts' which were used to explain underlying motivations for community engagement both locally and online. These catalysts frame our responses to the research questions.

4.   Key findings

Our study was designed to investigate four key questions around motivations, experiences and expectations, socioemotional selectivity and routes to engagement with online and local community. Here we address these questions directly using our four catalysts to inform our responses and use direct quotes from our participants to illustrate particular points. In order to protect participant confidentiality no real names are used.

4.1 What motivations exist at a local community level for older people to engage with SNS and other forms of online community?

Through our analysis we identified four 'catalysts' which influenced individual trajectories of community engagement, motivating initial moves to connect with community resources, establishing points of contact with the community at large and dictating preferences for local versus online forms of engagement. The catalysts were family, roles, loss and 'spaces and places'. Older people's trajectories towards and between local and online forms of community were idiosyncratic and there was no suggestion of one linear transition from local to online forms of community.

4.1.1   Family

Family acted as an important conduit to community engagement both locally and online. For most of those interviewed, the sense of belonging that we commonly associate with community had its roots in the family, with a suggestion from some that "real community" could only occur through extended family connections in a particular locale. This came through in memories of community as it had been during childhood.

> "I was born, or raised in a small village where everybody knew everybody and I could name everybody that lived in our road from up one side and down the other. These days, I live in a small apartment block and I don't know everybody, whereas as I say, in my young days we lived in a long road and I knew everybody in the whole street. Every house. I knew everybody and they knew me" Daniel

For many of those interviewed this ideal scenario did not exist in their current circumstances, with family members often living some distance from them in other areas of the country or

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[3] The Meridian Mature Citizen's Forum (http://meridian-sf.org.uk/)
[4] The Computer Club run at the Hillcrest Community Centre, Newhaven
[5] www.dropby.co.uk

abroad. In spite of this fact family ties remained the focus of everyday life for most of our interviewees.

Those who were particularly active in their local communities were often physically and emotionally close to their immediate family, seeing them regularly and being involved in their day to day lives. This on-going contact provided opportunities for informal meetings with other local people who were friends and acquaintances of younger family members. Here Janet explains what happened when she moved to Newhaven to help support her grandchildren,

> "I didn't like Newhaven, I didn't feel I belonged to it at all, it was only the children, and as a result of that all my acquaintances, friends like those two there, are my daughter's friends, not mine" Janet

Regular contact with younger family also provided more formal opportunities for community involvement through school and sports club activities.

Family relationships were also at the core of engagement with SNS. The preferences of family members with regards to particular communication technologies (e.g. mobile phones, texting, email, Skype, Facebook, etc.) were a strong motivating influence, determining the ongoing social practices of the family.

> " I do email people. I thought, when I first got my laptop, this will be good to keep in touch with my family, but they don't really email. The younger ones do Facebook, even the older ones, one of my sons don't do Facebook, they don't do email, he doesn't phone either. I do think about Skype, maybe I could do that, but then again, if they're not doing it. If they're not going to be doing it, what's the point in me doing it?" Betty

Five of our participants had started to use Facebook in a more 'active' way, by posting their own content to the site. Three of these individuals had close relationships with family living nearby and used Facebook to augment their family and local community involvement. Facebook allowed them to maintain their family connections with a degree of independence, providing ways of expressing their family involvement without having to always be physically present. It also offered ways of extending their social network by getting to know the friends of their family before meeting them in person.

4.1.1.1 Family as a constraint

The strength of family ties and the prevailing use of SNS (particularly Facebook) by family were significant in determining our interviewees' engagement with community through Facebook's 'friends of family'. However family ties were not always central to these older people's daily lives and the motivations that exist beyond family are important to acknowledge as they highlight other important aspects of everyday social life for this group of older people. Some of our interviewees had quite weak connections to their family and did not rely on them for a sense of ongoing involvement in life. Even those with strong family ties still maintained activities and friendships beyond the purview of family. Whilst these relationships were sometimes perceived as peripheral they clearly had a part to play in maintaining the shape of everyday life, often taking place with peers and focussing on shared regular activities and light-hearted companionship. This same emphasis was expressed in relation to local and online forms of community.

In addition family dynamics did not always steer an older relative towards using the Internet at all, curtailing their engagement with all forms of community online. The willingness of younger family members to help older family with such technologies was variable. Janet for instance who did not use the Internet at all decided that genealogy websites might be interesting to her.

> "All I wanted to do really was to do my ancestry[6]. But I haven't done that yet. I'd quite like to do that but they are always so busy when I see them, my daughters, trying to cook meals and get children off to bed and so forth. My son-in-law says he'll do it but I don't know when" Janet

Bakardjieva (2005) highlights the importance of 'warm experts' when teaching older people to use the Internet. In this study there were a number of examples of what might be called 'lukewarm experts' within our interviewee's families, i.e. younger family members who acknowledged the significance of the online world to their older relatives but were unable or unwilling to spend time with them in order to teach them how to use it.

4.1.2 Roles

Community organisations require many voluntary roles to be filled in order to sustain themselves. All of our participants were involved in local community groups of some form or another. These included residents' associations, community centres, church and faith groups, children's after school groups, local charities, exercise classes, bowling clubs, art, knitting,

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[6] a reference to using the genealogy site Ancestry.com

tailoring, computing, lunch and travel groups. The role that each person assumed within these groups was significant in terms of motivating sustained engagement and in maintaining a sense of identity through the activities and responsibilities that went with that role. Many had assumed quite significant roles in these groups such as trustee, treasurer, organiser, administrator, teacher or general helper as well as engaging as a user or beneficiary of other groups. Some of these roles also informed and motivated engagement with online forms of community.

We found many of our participants shared a similar route towards engagement with community groups, i.e. that of volunteering their services to help sustain an existing service or community centre. The roles they assumed often made use of skills they had gained during their working lives such as Peggy's accounting skills for her role as treasurer or Ben's skills in computing and teaching for running the computer club. In other cases the volunteering roles made use of more general skills such as Peggy's driving for 'meals on wheels' or Marie's selling refreshments and making tea at her grandchildren's football club. What can be seen as common to all these roles

The online roles of sharer, humorist and game player were emergent and implicit arising as a personal interpretation of online communities and SNS. The significance of social roles in retirement has long been acknowledged as a significant part of healthy ageing (Havighurst and Albrecht, 1953) and underpins a great deal of government policy aimed at the older generation (e.g. WHO, 2002). Roles can motivate local community involvement by providing structured activity and a renewed sense of purpose post retirement. The roles our participants took within local communities were informed not only by their previous work and family lives, but also from their present needs, i.e. to socialise, to positively contribute and to increase self-esteem. What was noted in our research was the lack of formally supported online roles within SNS and online communities. These social sites typically cater for the users or beneficiaries of the service without promoting specific roles that members can engage in. Using Facebook for instance

Whilst not common online community did have a part to play for two of our interviewees in relation to the loss orientation, helping them to deal with their loss by providing opportunities to

Other interviewees sought out playful interactive spaces as ways of engaging with community online. Three of our female interviewees played computer games online with others via Facebook. These included traditional offline games that had been brought online, like Bingo[7] and Scrabble[8], as well as online-only games such as Candy Crush Saga[9]. Such games combine gameplay with social interaction which is facilitated by a separate text-based chat window allowing informal connections to develop alongside the game. Usually these games were played with people they already knew locally but not always. One participant played Bingo on Facebook in a 'public room' and had developed a lasting friendship with someone that she had met there. A friendly connection formed with another player whilst they were playing this game and this developed into regular conversations via email. This friendship later moved offline with them meeting in person.

In other cases gregariousness and enjoyable social interaction were all that was needed to frame the online space. This was particularly true of those involved with elder-specific online communities like DropBy. Daphne, who had been an internet user for many years, engaged with numerous online communities via their general discussion forums. As part of this ongoing participation she had developed an ongoing relationship with a particular group of users that she described as her 'local forum' even though its members were from all over the UK and abroad.

> "Yeah, local online. Yeah, I shouldn't really use the word local should I really…they're scattered all over the country, because one of them's in Spain, he lives in Spain, but I don't, when I'm talking to it, I don't look at it that they're all over the country, we're just, sort of in a room together if you like…I think that I can honestly say that I'm closer to them than what I am my family" Daphne

This group which was made up of around 16 people who had first met on other forums some years earlier and had persisted as a group despite having to migrate to different sites a number

Joanne was married to her husband for 64 years and during that time they lived a fairly contented and self-sufficient life bringing up their daughter. Family was her focus and she felt no particular need to engage with the wider community. When Janet's husband died in 2010 this changed everything. She experienced extreme feelings of loneliness and after some time realised she needed to start making contact with new people. After a conversation with a fellow dog-walker she decided to join some local community groups. These included a Travellers Club at the local community centre which organised weekly trips out and a social group at the local church.

Figure1: Loss as a catalyst for greater local community involvement

Figure2: Family as a catalyst for greater involvement with SNS

Another common trajectory that we saw to local community engagement was that of volunteering their particular skills to support some 'worthwhile' venture or community group. This engagement often took the form of an active support role such as teacher, secretary, trustee or driver. Over time this would change a little and the engagement with the community becoming as much about social contact as about the function of the role. Joanne had a longstanding role as member of a local tailoring group where she made use of her skills in

regular use of local spaces and places. A mutual shared need to use a shop, doctor's surgery, bus/ train stop or in Joanne's case a park for walking the dog could lead to a shared life rhythm which would bring people into companionship and sometimes friendship.
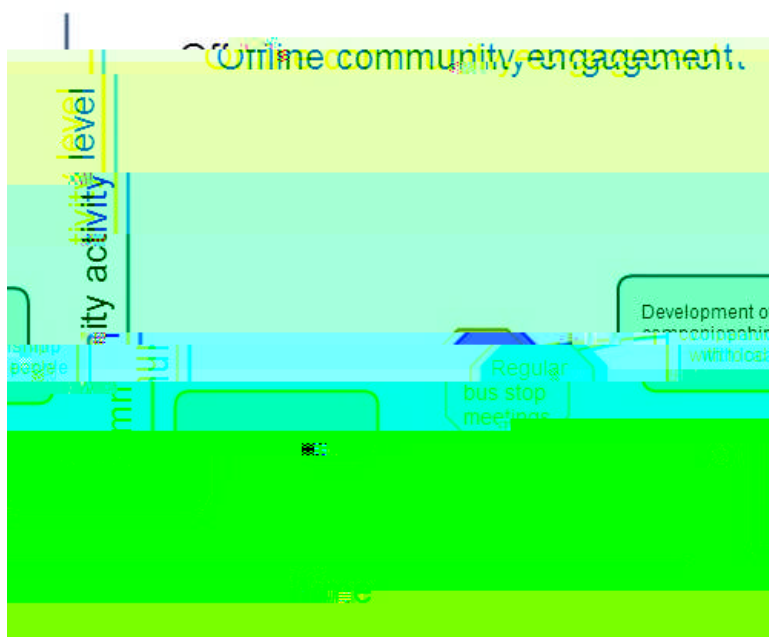

Figure4: Spaces and places as a catalyst for greater local community involvement

Joanne's story describes a very positive trajectory with regards to both local and online community. Other participants' trajectories were not always so positive with catalysts sometimes working to negate further community engagement particularly in an online direction. Those of our participants who were not online did not see the need for online social interactions at all viewing them with suspicion and lacking in the human touch.

5.   Key issues:

Social isolation is a central issue being addressed by this study, with our interviews highlighting the ways that the social resources of local and online communities were enlisted by our participants to maintain social cohesion in their everyday lives. Older people in developed societies are now more likely to live their later years physically separated from family and friends and are at risk of being more socially isolated than ever before in their local communities (McCarthy and Thomas, 2004; Lee, 2006). When social isolation is experienced as loneliness it is often detrimental to the wellbeing of older people (Tomaka et al, 2006) and encouraging greater community engagement is one way of addressing this.

Our research suggests that although there are some identifiable catalysts that can and often do have a significant effect on post retirement life, they do not in themselves guarantee greater community engagement. These catalysts can be seen to represent an opportunity space that can, if catered for, facilitate a trajectory towards online or local community engagement. The four catalysts (family, roles, loss, spaces and places) have the potential to encourage greater

community engagement in different ways and here we reflect upon how these can be used as points of focus for future community interventions. Further research is needed to understand these catalysts more thoroughly but future research and socio-technical interventions should seek to:

5.1 Shift the emphasis beyond the family context

Family was significant in determining a general awareness of the Internet and engagement with SNS through Facebook in line with socio-emotional selectivity. However alternative social motives were also apparent for participants engaging with all forms of online community. This challenges the use of socioemotional selectivity (Carstensen et al, 1999) as a model for understanding older people's use of these resources. There was a general willingness amongst our participants to make new friends and take social risks online through fun and light-hearted interactions. In addressing older people's social isolation and loneliness it seems pertinent to acknowledge the opportunities that remain in later life for companionship and support. Carstensen's theory rests upon a view that enthusiasm for social engagement is limited in later life by a perception of time as finite. Other theories such as gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 2005) have shown that this may not be an inevitable or permanent state of affairs with perceptions of time equally shifting towards time as circular and time as eternal. Such theories may be more useful in addressing the more open engagement that we have seen in relation to online community.

5.2 Address the inadequacies of SNS and online community for older people

There are aspects of the design and administration of SNS and online communities that do not encourage older people to use them. In particular the general lack of privacy was problematic for many of our participants along with the general blurring of private versus public boundaries. These online expectations acted to negate the development of friendships. Online spaces which support a clear transition from public to private interactions were conducive to growing intimacy (e.g. chat windows in Facebook games) and should be well signposted in online communities and SNS.

In addition most SNS and online communities do not encourage people to identify themselves through specific roles which can discourage older people's prolonged engagement. Establishing explicit online roles may aid their integration into certain communities. Finally opportunities for anonymous interaction appear to be important facilities that are currently absent from elder-specific online communities where bereavement is likely to be a common experience.

5.3 Resist the digital imperative and emphasise 'community'

The variety of trajectories encountered throughout this pilot study suggest that there is no common shift towards digital forms of community by older people as some digital policies might imply (e.g. Cabinet Office, 2012). Our findings show that community resources are important in dealing with the challenges of ageing but that the distinction between local and online is not helpful in addressing social isolation. There is clear resistance towards the "digital by default" trends that exist in public discourse and emerging social norms. It should be remembered that community itself is the resource rather than the way in which it is accessed.

Peace, S., Holland, C. & Kellaher, L.(2005), Environment and identity in later life. Growing Older. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press. Cited in Research Findings: 18 From the Growing Older Programme. ESRC. Available at: http://www.growingolder.group.shef.ac.uk/Go_Findings_18.pdf [Accessed 28th November 2013]