

Connected Communities

A Roadmap for Big Society Research and Impact

Prof. Jon Whittle



Background

Executive Summary

"Big Society Research" (www.bigsocietyresearch.com) was a networking project that brought together academics from multiple disciplines as well as governmental, charity and private sector individuals to discuss existing research relevant to the 'big society', to identify research gaps, and to brainstorm future research directions.

The project ran four interdisciplinary workshops, each based around a central theme relevant to 'big society'. Key gaps identified were: (1) Lack of an evaluation framework for planning and measuring social innovation interventions. Despite hundreds of case studies in citizen-led societal change, there is no single repository for lessons learned and few guidelines for future initiatives; (2) Lack of research into institutional structures that support localism. Universities and organisations are often structured in a way that is in conflict with citizen-led initiatives (cf. the individuality of PhD study). Research should be undertaken to suggest new organisational structures; (3) More research into the concept of 'listening'. A big issue in any locally-oriented initiative is the ability to listen to a full cross section of community voices; (4) There is a need for a structural macroeconomic model to analyse the current faults in the system and to evaluate from an economic perspective the value of localism.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Key words

'Big society'
Localism
Social change
Grassroots innovation
Technology-enabled change
Sustainable design
Inclusive civic engagement
Economics of localism

Rationale and Research Context

'Big society' is a policy initiative from the UK's coalition government, which aims to decentralise many aspects of government services and places a strong emphasis on community-led schemes to improve local services, local environments and the local way of life. Although it has its detractors, proponents and critics alike agree on the core principles: an emphasis on volunteer organisations, reduced bureaucracy so that local champions can enact transformational changes, and an enhanced sense of community.

Big society has clear overlaps with the Connected Communities cross-council research theme.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this project was to harvest current research relevant to big society and place it under a single banner. Concretely, the objectives were:

- To hold four interdisciplinary themed workshops to bring together researchers working on issues relevant to the big society.
- To use these workshops to map out existing research relevant to the big society and furthermore,
- To discuss future big society research that may lead to future proposals developed collaboratively between workshop participants.

Description of Activities

The project ran four workshops, each focused on a particular theme of big society. These workshops were run as follows:

1. Technology and the Big Society

Held at Lancaster University, April 4/5, 2011. Organised by Prof. Jon Whittle (Lancaster University) and Dr. Paul Egglestone (University of Central Lancashire).

2. Design and the Big Society

Held at Lancaster University, May 3/4, 2011. Organised by Dr. Valerie Carr (Lancaster University).

3. Inclusion and the Big Society

Held at the University of Surrey, July 6/7, 2011. Organised by Prof. David Frohlich and Dr. Kristina Langhein (University of Surrey).

4. Financial Implications of the Big Society

Held at the University of Sheffield, October 25, 2011. Organised by Prof. Jane Binner (University of Sheffield).

Each workshop invited participants from a wide range of academic disciplines, the public and private sector.

The chief outcome of the project is a large cross-disciplinary network of researchers and policy makers interested in research areas related to the big society. The table below summarises numbers of participants of the workshops by discipline¹. In some cases, workshop reports include names of attendees.

¹ Attendees participating in more than one workshop were counted multiple times. Some participants were inherently multidisciplinary but were counted only towards one discipline.

Academic

Computing	10
Arts and Design	12
Business/Finance/Economics	13
Geography	2
Architecture	2
Sociology	7
Journalism	4
Education	4
Health and Medicine	1
Public Policy	1

Non-Academic

Government	3
Media	3
Private Company	5
Charity/NGO	5

Workshop Summaries

Technology and the Big Society

Objectives

The first workshop looked at how technological developments such as online social networks and mobile computing have contributed to civic engagement and how they can support localism in the future. The workshop began with an overview presentation from Prof. Jon Whittle from the School of Computing and Communications at Lancaster University.

Notion of Big Society

The organisers decided to tackle the definition of big society head-on by starting with a discussion of the concept, and, in particular, allowing the participants to decide on their own set of terms which they felt were positive concepts related to big society. The following terms were agreed upon as relevant and important concepts to discuss: Equality of access, Localism, Co-presence, Greater citizen influence, People finding a voice, Formation of new groups, Individual opportunities to contribute, Better use of existing resources, Ability to run services/taking control of public sector, Diversity, Importance of there being someone on the other end of the phone, Collaborative advantage, Greater transparency about how resources are used, Community self-reliance, Reciprocity of values.

Major Points of Discussion

Through a combination of breakout and group discussions, the participants agreed that the following research questions are the most important to address:

1. How can localism/social innovation be managed in terms of privacy and ethics?
2. What evidence is there that localism and social innovation has any benefit?
3. How to ensure that people who don't want or can't engage aren't disadvantaged?
4. What guidelines are there for a successful localism/social innovation initiative; i.e., what is the architecture for building it?
5. What is the role of technology?

Interestingly, apart from the final question, the others are not specifically concerned with the theme of the workshop (i.e., technology). This was because of a widespread opinion that the core issues needed to be discussed before any technological solutions.

The workshop participants then spent a significant amount of time identifying existing research publications/projects that address the key questions above.

Design and the Big Society

Objectives

The second workshop explored the role of design in a big society – how to design it, how to sustain it, and how to circumvent it where necessary. Key questions asked included:

- How should community-led initiatives be designed and managed?
- Can we develop a cook-book of design principles for big society?
- How do principles of open, participatory design reflect on big society?

The workshop included an opening presentation from Andrea Siodmok from Dott Cornwall.

Major Points of Discussion

Three main themes formed foci of discussion during the workshop:

- Business and funding models and restructuring institutions.
 - » How can design for social innovation projects be sustained beyond the initial seed funding through both monetary and non-monetary means?
 - » How can institutions be restructured to support project sustainability?
- Harnessing the power of subversion, building trust and incentives.
 - » This theme focused on subversion as a powerful source for changing society.
- Evaluation, measurement, replication, scalability and 'joining up' of research
 - » This theme focused on the importance of building an evidence base of what works in design for social innovation.

Two major conclusions came out of the discussion during the workshop. Firstly, it was repeatedly remarked upon that there already exist lots of research resources related to design and social innovation. There are lots of methods and tools and case studies around Design for Social Innovation and Design for greater social benefit from Service Design, Social Design and even product design. Crucially, however, these have not been brought together in one place. The other major theme that emerged is that we are missing a framework for evaluating design/social innovation initiatives. There is no rigorous scale of measurement related to the size of projects which provides a truthful assessment of the impact of the project. There are lots of toolkits that currently exist but institutional, educational and governmental models restrict the sharing of these.

Inclusion and the Big Society

Objectives

There are many discussions of digital and social inclusion in the literature which cover the quite different areas of engagement with technology and engagement with society. However, the relevance of inclusion to big society is more related to 'civic inclusion', defined at the level of engagement of citizens with their local community. Such engagement is largely through unpaid (voluntary) work rather than paid employment, and involves a diversity of activities such as running local organisations (churches, sports clubs, community centres, etc), taking part in community events, and taking the initiative in improving community services and lifestyle through activism, social innovation and enterprise. Rather than looking at civic inclusion as a dichotomy between those who are included and excluded, the workshop examined (research on) levels of engagement with and participation in local community life, and how to improve them. Three areas of research were relevant to this:

- Voluntary community activity and community belonging – how do people currently engage with their communities?
- Social innovation and entrepreneurship – how are local initiatives generated and sustained?
- Methods of participatory and inclusive research and design – how can communities be democratically involved and engaged in processes of research and design?

The workshop included two opening presentations from Prof. David Frohlich at the University of Surrey and from Alex Oliver of the Futures Company.

Major Points of Discussion

Through a series of group exercises, the workshop participants identified a number of key themes for the workshop:

- Community location and interaction: Where is community and how do community members interact with one another?
- Learning from experience: What are the lessons of previous initiatives in community volunteering and engagement?
- The role of institutions: What kinds of organisations address and promote inclusion?

The group spent a significant period of time mapping out existing knowledge in these three areas (see full workshop report on www.bigsocietyresearch.com/reports). The second day of the workshop focused on identifying research gaps and proposing new research directions – the results can be found in the workshop report and are also summarised in the final section of this report.

Financial Implications of the Big Society

Objectives

The workshop aimed to address the following questions:

- What are the financial implications of the big society?
- What factors are necessary for success and sustainability in a citizen-led initiative?

Key Points of Discussion

New public management is full of contradiction and there is a need for clarifying the fundamental terms in the different areas of government, terms such as partnerships, modernisations. Some withdrawal of centralised control will allow a focus on locally relevant and locally directed processes. Funding cuts will force innovation in organisations. Many local authorities have had little issue with funding levels in the recent past. With the funding cuts, local authorities will not be able to just cut services; innovation in their approach to service provision is required.

The main conclusions were:

- Behaviour
 - » How practical is big society across the different groups? It was felt a cultural change was needed to achieve financial success.
- Funding Accountability
 - » Incentives are needed for partnerships to work successfully together. There is a need to understand differences between democratic and delivery accountability. Has adequate risk assessment been undertaken?
- Roles and Responsibilities
 - » There is a need to define the roles and responsibilities of charities and to create and enhance the sense of ownership associated with these roles.
- Sustainability
 - » How do voluntary community based financial groups sustain themselves in the long term? Key areas of debate included: Does the lifespan of the service match that of voluntary groups? Are taxation incentives for charitable giving adequate?

Recommendations for Future Research

The real value of a network like this one, of course, lies not just in the ideas it generates (and the workshops did this in spades), but also in the connections between people that are made. The eclectic mix of disciplines and backgrounds in this project has created new strands and challenged researchers' established way of thinking. The project has identified a number of research gaps, which are summarised below:

1. Although there have been many attempts at case studies for social innovation, these are not 'joined up', which makes learning lessons and replication very difficult. The first project recommendation is for a research programme that will make a detailed study of historical and current case studies and based on these, devise guidelines for successful social innovation projects. These guidelines could include both qualitative and quantitative elements.
2. The second project recommendation is a research programme to investigate whether we need new forms of institutional structures to better support connected communities. For example, PhD study emphasises the work of the individual, which seems to be opposed to the notions of collaboration and community. Research should be instigated that looks at the structures of universities and government and devises new forms of organisational working that better support and involve communities.
3. Finally, one interesting proposal that came out of the Inclusion workshop was a research programme based around the concept of 'listening'. A big issue in any locally-oriented initiative is the ability to listen to a full cross section of community voices. This problem is shared by research projects (who to sample?) as well as government. A proposal was made for a project that would examine the properties of listening and being listened to as a democratic human process.
4. On the financial side, there is a need for a structural macroeconomic model to analyse the current faults in the system.



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