Connected Communities
Community Web2.0
Creative control through hacking
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Background

Executive Summary

The Community Web2.0: Creative control through hacking project sought to explore whether concepts and vocabularies emerging in relation to the Internet could usefully be applied to understandings of off-line contemporary community relations and practices. The project particularly focused upon the role of hacking and read-writing as a characteristic of contemporary online practices and how this is mirrored in aspects of actual life within and across communities.

The project was largely based within the Wester Hailes area of Western Edinburgh, where a network of residents and community based organisations worked alongside the academic team to establish design methods that put into practice the theoretical framework that had been developed through the project.

Using storytelling as an initial method with which to investigate social practices, the team identified the principle of ‘writing back’ to a subject as a form of hacking. Subsequently the team ran a series of workshops that encouraged community members to ‘write’ their memories of the area on to photographs that were taken from the archives of a local newspaper. As a result of this formative work, the team (including the community partners) developed two design interventions for the area that would offer ‘write back’ facilities as constructive hacking platforms.

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Key words

Hacking, Design, Digital
Community Hacking

Introduction

The project was conceived following the introduction of the term Big Society and its expanded vocabulary. Loaded with terms that referenced the social networking properties of contemporary online activity, Big Society and its American counterpart Gov 2.0, embrace the recognition of an interactive network society but tend to focus upon seemingly positive practices to infer methods for transforming the models of governance of communities. In contrast, the research team were keen to explore how practices often viewed as criminal and/or deviant such as hacking, cracking and file sharing, might be of equal relevance to understanding off-line community engagements as were seemingly more metaphors and concepts drawn from ideas of Web2.0 by Governmental bodies and others.

Grasping the implications of living in the network society (Castells 1996; see also Chadwick 2009) is more complex that adopting a vocabulary for decentralising governance, and offering platforms for constructive feedback. Ubiquity (as it may be termed) is a complex condition that presents radical shifts in the way that communities may be thought of and the means by which they may constitute themselves. During the past few years we have seen the stress that network initiatives such as Wikileaks have placed upon the same governments that embrace the principles of an all encompassing web of communication. With these tensions in mind, the research team were keen to understand how networking principles (good and bad) offer a framework within which communities can be understood and are able to benefit.

Hacking

Hacking is provocative term that infers a range of practices from the hobbyist who wants to adapt personal possessions, to the more destructive processes of someone who wants to damage to a shared service (see Burnham 2009). Thought to derive from student pranksters who ‘hacked’ a car on the MIT University campus to make it look like a police patrol car (Burnham 2009; see also Levy 2002, Lapsley 2011), hacking as a concept is transactional in nature, and is part of network culture. Through early analysis the team spent time researching the term hacking and its meaning. Kulikauska (2004) argues that 'hacking' becomes a metaphor for the practices and actions that exploit (or explore) weaknesses or deficiencies in a system to behave or function in a certain way (see also Dan 2011). ‘Hacking’, in this sense, connotes simple approaches that citizen on-line users deploy that are fluid, constantly evolving and responsive to specific social circumstances.

The social and or civic dimension to ‘hacking’ becomes a manifestation of individual and collective resilience to cope with emerging problems and demands that citizens (non-citizens too) encounter in their everyday lives in the community. This is not to say that ‘hacking’ is always motivated by reciprocity (see Dan 2011, Crabtree 2003). It might be that there are altruistic and communitarian reasons behind an individual’s sharing of skills and resources to facilitate ‘hacking’.
Context

The team had intended to develop a series of hubs within differing community contexts, however during the research into hacking it became clear that a deeper connection with a community was required to both understand the complexity of community hacking, and also foster a relationship that would lead to design interventions. With the research associate located in Edinburgh, it was felt that Wester-Hailes offered the appropriate context to develop connections.

Wester-Hailes is a huge housing estate constructed in the 1970s on the Western outskirts of Edinburgh, city of Scotland, UK. Since then, it has been characterised by urban regeneration projects, and generally perceived as being afflicted with high levels of social and economic deprivation, crime and unemployment. The social and economic challenges of the area have provided the impulse for local residents to organise community development and service delivery initiatives. Wester-Hailes was therefore chosen because investigating ‘community/social hacking’ is expected to yield interesting insights. This is because the social problems, challenges and opportunities residents face on a daily basis was bound to trigger creative practices that can be ‘transgressive’ or ‘positively’ deviant.

Method

The process of engagement and ultimately collaboration with Wester-Hailes took place through close contact with two primary organisations and one individual known for their enthusiasm for the understanding of the community and enthusiasm for interaction: Prospect Community Housing Association, Whale Arts and Eoghan Howard.

The project followed three steps:

1. Gather stories from local residents. This offered two benefits:
   » Understand in what way people use methods to ‘made do’ and ‘get by’ using any given technique.
   » Foster an engagement with members of the community that would be conducive to trust and a desire to offer a constructive design intervention.

2. Run workshops that extrapolated some of the ideas learnt from the stories, and use them to inform a method of engagement that would lead to a design outcome.

3. Identify a design opportunity and strategy with members of the community and work toward its production.

Stories

During July and October, the project collected fifty stories from a wide variety of people. Following transcription and editing, aspects of these stories were anonymised and offered for reading on the project website. The people whose stories are featured on the website were selected at ‘non-random’, on the basis of convenience and on their willingness to tell their stories. They were also recruited through opportunistic means, snowballing and through the help of the WHALE Arts Project, The Wester-Hailes Health Agency and through personal network of community activists. The stories were collected between July and October, and took a semi-structured interview format allowing people to narrate their experiences individually and in the presence
of the researcher, with no constraints on the length of time that they took. The conversation focused on experiences of living in Wester-Hailes and the activities residents participate in that help them to meet everyday challenges in their lives.

**Workshops**

Parallel to the story gathering, Prospect Housing Association and Whale Arts became very interested in how social media offer a platform to comment and exchange ideas. Interested in exploring this aspect to recover images from the past and circulate them for comment amongst the existing Wester-Hailes community as well as its diaspora, Prospect set up a Facebook page and began posting images of the area that were originally published in the community newspaper; the Wester-Hailes Sentinel; latterly the West Edinburgh Times. The page quickly became popular and with photographs attracting many comments about who, when and where they were taken (http://on.fb.me/mOPPwp). This ‘write back’ facility began to show signs of a recovery of the past and drew out many connections beyond the image itself.

Through five events/workshops; an adult learning fair, the tenth anniversary of the reopening of the local canal, the Dove community centre, Gate 55 community centre and Whale Arts, the team developed a consistent method of eliciting stories in order to generate conversation and expand upon the often black and white images that documented the area and its community in the past. In total 35 stories were captured from over 200 people who engaged with our contribution to the events. Many of these had stories to tell, some of which conflicted with each other, but all recovered memories of a vibrant, self organised community from the past, and allowing residents to articulate their story of Wester-Hailes.

**Design Strategy**

By the summer, the project had found a design method that encapsulated hacking; simply the development of platforms that facilitated the public ‘writing back’ on to representations of Wester-Hailes. Two design projects were developed by the community members and initiated toward the end of the project: a large wooden totem pole, and a health agency walking ‘code-book’.

**Totem Pole**

A significant practical dimension of the Community 2.0 project involved the development of carved wooden Totem pole to provide a physical platform for ‘hacking’ images (through the ability of people being able to comment and create new meanings for the images) and sharing conversations about the area. The pole features QR barcodes that are gateways to cloud based material relevant to the location of the pole. People can scan one of the labeled tags and access and contribute to historical photographs, stories, video and audio clips. The intention is that pole will act as a social resource to help build connections between the people and the place, as well as drawing upon online resources (see Marggets 2011).

**Code-Book**

The Wester-Hailes “Code-Book” is a 24 page A6 pocket booklet produced for use in conjunction with the local Health Agency’s series of guided social history walks throughout the estate that have recently been added to
their “It’s Good to Walk” programme. The booklet features written text to inform the reader of the area they are walking through and other information that is likely to be of interest to them including photos, route maps, street directions & points of interest. QR codes offer a chance to write back to the images and text as well as link to more historical information about the area.

**Plans for future research**

The research project has successfully sought AHRC funding in the follow-on project *Ladders to the Cloud* that seeks to understand the implications of the design social/technical interventions. The project provides a context in which to understand the capacity for the totem pole and code-book demonstrate community bonding across sub-communities within Wester-Hailes, and their potential in building bridges between sub-communities. The academic team has expanded to further include Heriot-Watt University and the Royal Commission for the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) who will support the extension of the functionality of the poles beyond the reading and writing of memories, to social processes such as help services, community event listings and a jobs database (see also Marggets 2011, Lesley 2010, Chadwick 2009, Green Paper No, 14).

**Learning from engagement with communities**

Through close collaboration with key stakeholders in the Wester-Hailes area of Edinburgh: Prospect Community Housing Association, and Whale Arts, the Community 2.0 project identified an opportunity to explore a practical strategy that would not only build on the existing activism local residents but also offer a platform across which engagement and communication (see Marggets 2011, Lesley 2010, Chadwick 2009, Mayo and Stenberg 2007) could be fostered that had ‘read/write’ characteristics.

The creative breakthroughs generated a series of identifiable insights:

1. Reflection upon ‘times past’ is an engaging process that recovers positive memories about how the community was constituted.
2. Recording these memories on an open web platform allows a conversation to develop regarding the past, and reinforces ties across a community.
3. As reflections and conversations build, they gain traction and constitute a consensual ‘image’ of the past that may be used to contest external perceptions.
4. That there is a role for both ubiquitous and localised platforms that have different affordances: the ubiquitous (Facebook) allow a previous members of a community who have moved away to contribute to a conversation about ‘times past’, localised services that restrict external input allow communities, based within a neighbourhood, the opportunity to explore and reinforce their own identities (Green Paper No, 4).

**Outcomes and benefits**

Following the investigation into the concept of hacking the academic team and the organisations within Wester-Hailes developed a series of design methods that actually applied the original aims of the project. These practical
applications far exceed the expectations of the team, who planned to achieve them only on a theoretical level. The project is documented and explained through the project website: www.communityhacking.org

The development of the totem pole and code-book embody ‘radical processes’ to support strategies for community hacking. These innovative design ‘tools’ replace the original intention for an academic book, and the team are proud of the investment that they represent within the community itself.

Three academic texts are in production to reflect upon the role of storytelling, the concepts of hacking in the context of Gov 2.0 programmes and the role of mobile/digital technologies.

The project has also generated positive portrayal of Wester-Hailes in parts of the Scottish media, which residents and policy actors say is in contrast to the stereotypical negative representation of the community. www.scotsman.com/news/scottish-news/top-stories/arts_project_to_create_15ft_wester-hailes_totem_pole_1_2087859
Clockwise from top left:
1. Memory capture event during the Learning and Information Fair at the Westside Plaza Shopping Mall, Wester Hailes, Edinburgh. 2. The QR tags on the mock-up pole linked to audio stories that were being associated with the photographs hanging on the memory shed.
References and external links

Project website
www.communityhacking.org

Community Facebook project
www.facebook.com/FromThereToHereaWesterHailesStory

References


The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly interconnected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx