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Contemporary Governance Discourse and Digital Media

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Chapter 10 Contemporary Governance Discourse and Digital Media: Convergences, Prospects & Problems for the 'Big Society' Agenda

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Introduction

This chapter looks at how concepts and vocabularies emerging in relation to the Internet (online) could usefully be applied to understandings of off-line contemporary community life and practices. It is an account of this exploratory enterprise into the linkage between the discursive practices of the Internet and contemporary governance. The chapter has four sections.

The first considers the discursive resonances between the Internet (as a form of digital media) and contemporary governance as articulated in the 'Big Society' agenda of the UK coalition government. The second considers how such discourses are embodied in digital media practices of 'hacking' and 'read-writing' that provided the conceptual framework for the development of an innovative public artwork in Wester Hailes, Edinburgh - Scotland.

Section three is an account of the practical application of 'hacking' through the design and functionality of the 'totem pole' as a public digital artwork. The section explains the context from which digital technology was 'hacked' into by local residents to create a public art, the research team's role in it, and how the created physical digital platform was in turn used to 'hack' into images and memories that enabled individuals to engage in collective conversations and to share a sense of community.

Section four offers insights into how an embedded 'read-write' facility in public art presented possibilities for community engagement and regeneration. It also highlights that this form of 'hacking' into technology through community-generated public art was possible through co-production. While we acknowledge the varied conceptions of this term, by co-production, we mean a research approach that emanated from and is informed by the community. It is about working with communities in an empowering way that offers them greater control of the research and opportunities for learning. Such control implies involving communities in all stages of the research process, from design through implementation to dissemination of research outcomes and outputs (Pohl et al., 2010: 271). Co-production is also about striving to maintain respect and openness in negotiating terms of engagement between researchers and the communities to reflect their lived experiences (Robinson and Tansey 2006: 159). Given that our use of the 'hacking' concept is heuristic and metaphorical, section four highlights the utility and risks of employing discourses derived from digital media culture to inform and inspire new models of governance, social reality and community regeneration.

Exploring discursive resonance in digital media & the 'Big Society'
The coalition government's 'Big Society' policy was seemingly inspired by new media technology. For instance, a key characteristic of the 'Big Society' is 'open source planning' and 'localism', as a means of encouraging individuals and communities to participate in civic engagement and collaborative work to find imaginative and sustainable solutions to everyday social, political and economic challenges they face (see Lesley, 2010; Conservative Party Green Paper No.14).

The coalition government suggested that 'open source planning' was inspired by the digital media industry, where the aim is to make computer programming accessible or open to all in a flexible and adaptable way (Conservative Party, Green Paper No. 14). The discursive logic of the coalition is that through 'open source planning', citizens would be encouraged to participate collectively and collaboratively in local initiatives and the inherent decision-making processes (see Lesley, 2010). As Phil Jones et al. and Morag Dermont and Sue Cohen have enunciated in this edition, the aim is to influence and shape all aspects of initiatives, make policymaking transparent and accountable to citizens who are the recipients of such service provision (see Chapters 4 & 11).

The figurehead of the 'Big Society's', UK Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that 'open source planning', among other initiatives, will enable people feel empowered enough to help themselves and is the 'biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites to the man in the street' (Conservative Party, Green Paper No. 14). By so doing, 'open source planning' becomes a bottom-up process that transforms policymaking and service delivery from a centralised bureaucratic control system to one that is grass roots-led, decentralised and localised. As others in this edition have suggested (see Chapters 2, 4, 5, 11),such 'localism' makes citizens active or even proactive social actors of development and regeneration of their neighbourhoods and communities, hitherto the exclusive terrain of bureaucrats and elected representatives (see Lesley, 2010; Localism Act 2010). Services are more likely to be tailor-made to the needs and specifications of local people, and at the same time with greater quality. This transforms service users into stakeholders in the design and delivery of local services.

In order to reduce structural inequalities in delivering, accessing and benefiting from welfare services by citizens, the coalition government created the 'Big Society Bank' (see Chadwick, 2009). The bank is tasked with financing social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups to widen participation in service delivery. Proponents of the bank claimed this would promote diversity in the markets, innovation and entrepreneurship by opening up local service provision to market competition (Conservative Party, Green Paper No. 14). Here it is worth noting the discursive parallel with the digital media software industry: the 'Big Society' proponents claimed that market access would promote transparency, lower cost and contribute to quality improvement as service

users become part of the collaborative design and delivery of services. Policymaking and service provision therefore moves from a one-shoe-fits-all design approach to one that gives service users the freedom to shape and choose services (see Chadwick, 2009).

Another digital media feature that has stimulated contemporary governance is Web2.0. The latter marked a departure from a top-down or elite-led dimension of Web1.0 'read-only' to a bottom-up or grass roots-led approach with a 'read-write' facility for users. It has been argued that Web 2.0 has improved and widened public access to knowledge and information that was hitherto restricted and available to political elites (see Mayo and Stenberg, 2007). Through 'tweeting', 'blogging', 'Facebook' and other social media, individuals can formulate, disseminate, access and share their own and others' news and information much more easily and at lower cost than before. These digital media platforms are avenues for networking, sharing and mobilising resources among individuals toward social, political and economic ends.

The practice by politicians to sound public opinion and consult in an adhoc basis on their policies and actions through 'tweeting' and 'blogging' is an attempt to be part of the network society that is common characteristic of contemporary governance (see Chadwick, 2009). It is also an indication that attempts are being made by elected representatives to elicit the views of the electorate and to engage them in collaborative democracy, as advocated by the 'Big Society'. Individuals can also probe, query or seek information from their elected representatives through such media.

New media's role in widening collaborative democracy and access to public knowledge underpins the coalition government's 'open data' and 'public government data' programmes. These facilitate an individual's right to access some government-held datasets including the publication of local crime statistics on a monthly basis. This mimics the 'network society' and 'file sharing' practices of Web2.0 by which the public can learn about developments and initiatives elsewhere and link up with other citizens and communities (see Margetts, 2011). The potential to influence the re-designing or copying of initiatives that have been successful elsewhere and to enable citizens to compare the performance among public officials and service provision is also central to the 'Big Society'.

At this juncture, it is worth noting a key criticism of 'Big Society' policy, which is a ploy by the coalition government for 'uploading' social problems onto citizens. It is another reminder of the propensity by political elites to evoke the vernacular of digital media to highlight the policy as another tool to deflect the harsh consequences of the current economic austerity programme when welfare services are 'cut' or 'downsized'. What the above discussion suggests, however, is that the characteristics, rhetoric and logic

deployed to articulate the UK government 'Big Society' agenda seemingly mimics and is aided by digital media culture. It is therefore not surprising that proponents of the 'Big Society' have argued that, when individuals use digital technology to access information and knowledge; participate in the formulation and delivery of policies and services; make choices among welfare services and hold public officials to account; they become empowered social actors and responsible 'active' citizens. As Phil Jones et al's MapLocal project of Chapter 11 reminded us, digital media are crucial to the 'Big Society' in achieving 'localism', 'open source planning', and citizens' 'sense of community', access to information, networking, sharing and mobilizing resources (also Conservative Party, Green Paper No. 14).

Political elites also claim that the 'Big Society' agenda subsists on 'reciprocity' and 'resilience' of community ethos, given that residents, either individually or collectively, harness social capital within their neighbourhoods to respond to and cope with social problems they encounter in their everyday lives (see Crabtree, 2003). This is because individuals and communities can share their experiences, skills and resources with others in other parts of the polity who are faced with similar social challenges to help them cope. They, in turn, would expect others to reciprocate in a similar manner. Such reciprocity and resilience among users to solve societal challenges is parallel to 'file-sharing' of Web2.0, where individuals depend on each other to pull skills and resources together for mutual benefit. In addition, there is also a reciprocal benefit for individuals for feeling as being part of a community or belonging and identifying with their community (virtual and actual), and a sense of sharing a common purpose with others (Tonnies 1957). It is worth noting here that other contributors to this edition including Peter Matthews and Dave O'Brien (Chapter 3) and Phil Jones et al. (Chapter 11) have cautioned about the elusiveness of such claims by the coalition government (see also Chapters 4, 5 & 7). We have only singled out the 'Big Society' as a façade for 'uploading' social problems onto society insofar as this criticism is relevant to consideration of the discursive linkages with digital media culture.

The above discursive parallels provided the context from which digital technology was hacked into through a process of co-production between the research team and the Wester Hailes community to create the digital totem pole. We were interested in the consideration of the hypothesis that concepts and vocabularies emerging in relation to the digital culture could usefully be applied to understandings of off-line contemporary practices. Our assumption was that community-generated public art that is contingent upon the Internet (Web2.0) activity of connecting individuals and communities is akin to 'hacking', as the next section explains.

The 'hacking' metaphor: relevance to community & the 'Big Society'

The concept of 'hacking' is drawn from the techno-scientific domain and widely perceived 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). Internet 'hacking' can be understood to involve individuals and communities who are interested in modifying aspects of the web in ways that challenge messages and the representation of circumstances. They do so through creative ways that could be perceived as proactive social action, which can be positive deviance and or transgressive. Kulikauska (2004) argues that individuals actively engage in groups (online and offline) to help each other remake and restructure their lives and their world as well as to challenge social norms (laws and morals). By challenge, we refer to both breaking and not-breaking social norms to facilitate action by linking and bringing together different individuals, groups and communities.

The process of 'hacking' encourages other social actors or agents to create and link up with other worlds, communities and networks through the Internet. This is not to say that 'hacking' activities are exclusive to the Internet. However, individuals, either participate in 'hacking' inadvertently, or were they deliberately do so, might not perceive or conceptualise such activities as 'hacking'. Kulikauska therefore 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 on-line users deploy that are fluid, constantly evolving and responsive to specific social circumstances. 'Hacking' is also associated with digital media to connote simple approaches that are deviant or resourceful that on-line users deploy. 'Hacking' has therefore been associated with positive and negative connotations, transactional in nature and is part of network culture.

Given these conceptions and practices of 'hacking' and the onset of cuts to government support to families and individuals with low incomes, the concept has utility in exploring how communities dealt with government cuts within the 'Big Society'. In addition, given the methods of user-generated content that defined Web2.0 and now constitute social media processes, the contemporary internet could provide spaces for 'hacking' by communities towards everyday social processes and relations. Our use of the term is therefore metaphorical and heuristic. Consequently, we went on to use the term to frame a cooperative community designed artwork through the development of an innovative public artwork and the use of local historical images to 'hack' local perceptions of a deprived area of Edinburgh, Scotland. We assumed that, as other digital interventions featured in this edition, with the appropriate design intervention in to a community, related activities could potentially facilitate 'hacking' and the attendant co-production of social engagement, social connectivity and social interaction, which are the focus of the 'Big society' agenda. As suggested by others in this edition, such social

networking has transformative potential to connect citizens with policymaking, foment a shared digital culture and nurture communities (see Chapters 6 & 10, and also Mayo and Steinberg, 2007). Our exploratory work is significant because it will shed significant insights on the relationship between community-generated public art, digital media culture and design practice. In addition, by developing a system for networking, our project moves beyond a 'read only' dimension, to creating an opportunity for 'writing back' into a community-generated digital platform. Hitherto, digital media platforms tended to focus on read only social media components as an instrument for empowering communities (Moulder et al., 2011). Much of the interactive component of community-based digital art occurs on the Internet web sites by which individuals contribute text (Bowie and Fels, 2009; Andreyev, 2010; Moulder et al., 2011).

The rest of the chapter will demonstrate how a 'read-write' component was embedded in public art - the 'digital totem pole' that has possibilities for community engagement and regeneration. We further demonstrate that this form of 'hacking' into technology through community-generated public art is possible when the design intervention is shaped by and among the community.

Wester Hailes and the design process

The 'digital totem pole' was a significant social design output of 'The Community Web2.0: creative control through hacking project' funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) under the *Connected Communities* theme. Wester Hailes is a large housing estate constructed in the 1970s in West Edinburgh, Scotland. It has been characterised by urban regeneration, and generally perceived as afflicted with social and economic deprivation, crime and unemployment. These problems have provided the impulse for residents to organise community development and service delivery initiatives as observed in similar geographies of Birmingham and Bristol (see Chapters 4, 7 & 11). In addition, Wester Hailes has historically deployed community art towards community development, regeneration and empowerment. Community art has also been central to projecting a positive image of the community to contrast a mainly negative representation of its residents.

At the outset of the research project, two local service providers, Prospect Housing Association (Prospect) and Wester Hailes Arts for Leisure and Education (WHALE Arts) became very interested in how social media offers a platform to exchange ideas. Interested in exploring this aspect to recover, circulate and comment on past images within Wester Hailes and its diaspora, Prospect set up a Facebook page to post images of the area that were originally published in the community newspaper; the Wester Hailes Sentinel; latterly the West Edinburgh Times that ran from 1989 to 2008. The page quickly became popular with photographs attracting many comments about whom,

when and where they were taken (http://on.fb.me/mOPPwp). This 'write back' facility began to enable residents to recover memories of the past and drew out many connections beyond the image itself. By the summer of 2010, the project had found a design method that encapsulated 'hacking'; simply the development of platforms that facilitated the community 'writing back' on to representations of Wester-Hailes. Whilst the Facebook page offered a globally accessible online platform for exchange, the residents were interested in offering a hyper local and physical access point to make visible the development of the community network. Consequently the community in collaboration with the authors developed what became known as a digital totem pole.

The production of the four metre pole was coordinated by WHALE Arts involving its design and carving. A steering group of community members and project partners was created to ensure that clear targets are set and achieved. The steering group also facilitated networking, engagement and capacity building that underpinned the five participatory workshops within the community. The workshops were held during local civic events including the Tenth anniversary celebration of the Union Canal, AGM of service providers and the annual community Road Show in the Westside Plaza shopping centre. Participants to the workshops include local residents, staff of services and community activists.

A central element of the workshop was the display of a portable banner with embedded QR codes (as proof of concept) and historical photographs depicting people, events and places of Wester Hailes on the outer wall of a portable shed. The portable banner and photographs were used in combination to introduce residents with different levels of technological expertise and interest to the technology used in the project. Participants were asked to look at the photographs to trigger their memories or any other associations that they might have with the people, event or place depicted. They were then encouraged to share their story/memories about these, which were captured through a voice and film recorder. Participants were also encouraged to scan the QR codes embedded on the photographs and to record and upload their stories to the www.talesofthings.com website directly from their smart phones. They were then asked to scan and listen to the replay. This exercise gave them experience of the opportunities that the technology would offer, which is the ability to read and write into the codes. The workshops were also opportunities for participants to ask questions and provide any suggestions or views about the project and how best to improve it and to get their sustained involvement in its future development. The overall ethos of the workshops was one that promoted engagement with residents and their exposure to new developments in web-based technology in a way that was empowering, collaborative, non-threatening and meaningful. The workshops were therefore central to community participation in all aspects of the digital totem pole project including the design, timescales and location of the pole.

A professional artist led a group of 5-10 people to carve the wooden totem pole. The final product was installed within Wester Hailes. The wooden totem pole had carvings and 5 QR codes that give access to a variety of services, residents' stories and memories of the area. The QR codes offered the network dimension to the pole from which it gained the name: digital totem pole. A significant practical dimension of the totem pole was that it provided 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. People could scan one of the labelled tags and to access and contribute to historical photographs, stories, video and audio clips. The intention was that pole would act as a social resource to help build connections between the people and the place, as well as drawing upon online resources (see Margetts, 2011).

Connecting Communities: prospects & risks for 'Big Society'

What then can we infer from the design and practicality of the totem pole that is relevant to developing our understanding of the implications for using discourses derived from digital media to inform new models of governance, community engagement, regeneration and actual practices within communities? The digital totem pole was perceived by local residents and those beyond it including the press, as public art that adds to the aesthetic beauty of the locality. It was also celebrated for being a networked museum or repository for audio, written and visual recordings of current and past memories, narratives, works and ideas of local residents and others in the diaspora. While these benefits of community-generated digital art have been observed elsewhere (Moulder et al., 2011), the totem pole moved beyond its aesthetic and archival value to have a symbolic relevance to Wester Hailes as a community with historic problems of marginalisation. The general feeling among residents was that the totem pole served a symbolic function – that of community resilience and regeneration. In addition, it symbolises the community's resilience to contest negative depictions of their community as afflicted with social delinquencies and deprivation.

The digital totem pole also suggests that co-production of a public artwork is a process that incorporates a mix of approaches to enable social connections, human interactions and networking (Tacchi et al., 2003, Moulder et al., 2011: 4). The community/human agency was also possible because the process of designing and producing the digital totem pole depended on the input of residents. As Moulder et al. (2011: 2) observed during their 'Talking Poles' project, most public artwork that incorporate digital technology and produced by non-professional artists tended to exclude people from the final stages of the creative process. Our work, as with Moulder at al. (2011) and others in this edition, facilitated community participation at every stage - from the design process of the pole and the QR codes, the web content and themes therein contained,

to the installation of the finished product. This involvement of residents as co-creators of the artwork cemented an ownership of the project.

We were also mindful of the need for the project to contribute to the skills of locals for it to be a successful participatory community art project in ways similar to those employed by other projects featured in this edition (also Moulder et al., 2011: 8; Ackoff, 1974). The lack of digital technology skills, therefore, did not preclude anyone from participating. As explained earlier, the workshops were aimed at building such skills among those that lacked them. Overall, the process of design nurtured an engagement between professional and non-professional artists, academics and non-academics, and digital media technologists and non-technologists. This process and the functionality of the pole, as a network museum of services, works, ideas, histories, and narratives of individuals and service providers, made this digital art platform to connect different communities. It connected Wester Hailes and the academy, local residents and service providers, residents in different neighbourhoods of Wester Hailes, those outside Wester Hailes, and the diaspora. The social connectedness and networked communities is only possible by the in-built 'read-write' component of the digital totem pole. In this way, we generated significant social capital by engaging with the diverse ages, backgrounds and interests present in the Wester Hailes community to explore and capture their memories of the area and also to articulate a collective future ambition for the community. This, therefore, demonstrates that community-generated public art could draw from or be informed by online practices associated with everyday social media platforms.

What the above highlights is that 'hacking' is not restricted to online activities, but also to everyday life situations and challenges. It is about the capacity of individuals and communities to deploy digital media spaces to develop or organize innovative social solutions, whether transgressive or conformist to established protocols (norms, laws) for the improvement of their lives and neighbourhoods. The co-production in the design and delivery of 'hacking' is characterized by reciprocity, resilience, intentionality, functionality, imaginativeness and creativity. These characteristics are crucial for mobilising social capital and practices by and among marginalized communities. These have the potential to enable citizens collaboratively take control over their welfare and cope with everyday challenges. The actions constitute a kind of social responsibility, community empowerment and active citizenship that is consistent with localism and the 'Big Society'.

We anticipate the totem pole to have relevance and potential for achieving the 'Big Society' agenda. As already stated, the government expects service users through 'open source planning' to become part of the collaborative design of services through public consultations, among other channels. The totem pole provides opportunities for this by enabling local residents, service providers and politicians to share opinions,

information and knowledge. This has a potential to influence the design and delivery of services to meet local needs and tastes and in reducing structural inequalities to access and benefit from such services. It facilitates a network community and we anticipate residents can use its 'read-write' facility to hold local service providers and politicians to account. Service providers and politicians can also use this as avenues for generating feedback and views from residents. This has the potential to influence the re-designing or copying of experiences of services within the locality. More importantly, as residents share memories through uploading photographs and stories of the community, they will have a feeling of belonging and identification with Wester Hailes.

However, any digital media intervention in marginalised communities like Wester Hailes is bound to be fraught with risks, which constitute a hindrance to realising the 'Big Society'. Firstly, in a networked community of participants, reciprocity may not be spontaneous and symmetrical. While policymakers would expect appreciable and equal levels of participation, it is likely that these will be asynchronous. This is because individuals will choose when and where to participate in online spaces, and their level of participation based on their abilities and resources at their disposal. This is a potential risk to achieving the 'Big Society' agenda: not all individuals and communities will participate either in all services or activities or in equal measure. There are structural inequalities that are bound to affect, in different ways, individual and community participation, an issue also raised earlier by Peter Matthews and Dave O'Brien (see Chapter 3). There might be varying access to and in using digital technology due to prohibitive costs and lack of skills in using them. We anticipate that the asynchronicity in the way networked individuals contribute might be caused by the differences in abilities/capabilities and the availability of resources (Internet) among them. It is likely that those who can afford Web facilities are likely to be empowered middle-class citizens, which could lead to a widening of inequality and the social divide, as other contributors to this edition have observed.

Secondly, a potentially contentious issue relates to the extent and form of participation by individuals in service delivery and other 'Big Society' initiatives. It is not clear how policymakers will respond to activities of individuals that are outside the stipulations or rules of engagement of a policy or service. Will the government tolerate such transgressive behaviour by individuals and communities, albeit it in their own interest and benefit? If tolerated by policymakers, will they provide the facilitative base for other grassroots or community inspired services that can be shared with or disseminated to others within the polity? Such opportunities to develop independent community action should be accorded prominence by the government. As Peter Matthews and Dave O'Brien stated earlier, policymakers should direct energies in creating the legal and funding framework to enable communities to achieve their preferred activities. If these were to be the case, then localism will be a radical and real prospect. This kind of

service provision will empower residents in driving forward the 'Big Society' agenda.

Given the heuristic nature of our work and speculations of risks, we propose that research energies ought to be devoted towards an empirical project to investigate the intersections between online practices (virtual communities) and offline practices or the daily experiences of individuals and actual communities. As highlighted in the preceding Chapter, David Harte, following Parker and Karner (2011) argued that such empirical research is urgently needed to enrich current debates about the exclusion and "everyday activism" that citizens undertake in online and offline spaces with a view to counter 'hegemonic' accounts of communities. Adding to this, we should also seek to understand how the intersections between online and offline practices by citizens could influence political culture and governance. We believe that the metaphor of 'hacking' offers an understanding of community processes and one that anticipates how people are likely to turn to 'creative' processes to sustain their lifestyles. The nature of the investigation will offer radical insights into how the digital media culture can inform new forms of community engagement and regeneration. Of the many problematic strategies that such empirical studies are likely to record, there will be an equal number of completely new processes that will challenge traditional models of community support and governance. These new constructive processes will offer new methodologies with which to facilitate aspects of the 'Big Society'. We can anticipate that by definition, these methods will be best understood through the use of cross-disciplinary research: social science, arts and humanities and models of co-production. These will provide insight into the implications of using an extended metaphor derived from the contemporary internet to inform new models of governance and social responsibility (Margetts, 2011).

Conclusion

The chapter has explored that community-generated public art that is contingent upon the Internet (Web2.0) activity of connecting individuals and communities is akin to 'hacking'. It has explored how Wester Hailes residents have used the digital totem pole to derive maximum benefit from their use of virtual and public spaces. It considers that through a collaborative partnership with our research team, the Wester Hailes community 'hacked' into images and memories that would enable individuals to engage in collective conversations and to share a sense of community. This case study offers unique insights into how a 'read-write' facility in public art enabled community engagement, regeneration and digital inclusion. The latter is made possible because through workshops individual learn digital media skills. It has been highlighted that this form of 'hacking' into technology through community-generated public art was possible when residents inform the design process.

We have considered that community participation in 'hacking' embodies the resilience of

individuals and communities to address everyday challenges in society through on-line and off-line practices. The 'hacking' metaphor is therefore relevant insofar as the 'Big Society' agenda of the current UK coalition government expects both local communities and service users to become part of the collaborative design of services through public consultations in a way that is empowering. It has also been explored that 'hacking' into digital media has the potential for community regeneration. We hope this will demonstrate how concepts and vocabularies emerging in relation to the Internet could usefully be applied to understandings of off-line contemporary relations and practices, and vice versa.

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