EXPLORING INFORMATION LITERACY THROUGH THE LENS OF ACTIVITY THEORY

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CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INFORMATICS
**What are Community Councils?**

Community councils represent small areas within local authorities:
- Legal duty: *Ascertain, co-ordinate and express to the local authorities for its area, ... the views of the community which it represents*
- In practice, also *communication of key facts to citizens*
- Some rights to be consulted on planning
- Small budgets (around £1000 annually)

Community councillors:
- Unpaid volunteers
- Around 11,000 community councillors
  - No solid demographic information exists
WHY COMMUNITY COUNCILS ARE INTERESTING FOR ECIL

Pure representation role

- Almost entirely oriented to information finding and sharing
- May give an insight into approaches to ‘facts’ by representatives

Small scale, community-based nature:

- Analogies with hyperlocal media?
- ‘channel-blurring’
RESEARCH MOTIVATION

2014: looking at community councils’ online presences
- 16% don’t exist
- 36% exist but are not online
- 26% are ‘out-of-date’
- Only 22% are ‘up-to-date’

Subsequent work used models of knowledge sharing and CoPs (Cruickshank & Ryan, 2015)
- information science could provide useful insights
- how do community councillors acquire skills and information?

Research gap: information literacy in representatives

Personal motivation/perspective
ABOUT THE PROJECT

9-week project at the end of 2016.

Project aims

◦ How do community councillors
  1. access and understand information on their duties and rights
  2. keep up to date with local developments of relevance to the communities that they serve;
  3. disseminate information to their communities?

◦ Where do future efforts need to be directed to improve the skills and practices of this group?

◦ What are the roles of public library staff in the training of community councillors?

◦ How do community councillors information literacies contribute to their communities, to building social capital, and to their or others’ citizenships?
RESEARCH APPROACH (1)

Identified themes ...
- **Information literacy**
- Behaviour and practices
- Lifelong learning/everyday life
- Libraries
- Communities, social capital and citizenship
- **Becoming information literate**
RESEARCH APPROACH (2)

IL focusses on the individual

Activity Theory (AT) provides ‘a language for making sense of complex, real-world activities in cultural and historical contexts’
- Stems from work by soviet psychologists Vygotsky, Rubenstein and Leont’ev.
  - AT’s early history: Mironenko (2013)
  - Developed into CHAT by Bergstrom

Sees human activities as systemic and socially-situated phenomena.

Provides ready-built framework for contextualising and understanding underlying issues around social/collective activities.
- AT has been used in IL research (e.g. in Wilson, 2008)
  - not in the context of democratic representation (or specifically, the actions of representatives)
  - Inspired partly by Detlor, Hupfer & Smith (2016)
RESEARCH APPROACH (2)

- Questions developed
  - From themes
  - From literature

- Validated against models
  - Information Literacy
  - Activity systems

Diagram:

- Subject
- Object
- Outcome
- Tools
- Motivation
- Rules and norms
- Community
- Division of labour

Activity system

Ready built thematic keywords
RESEARCH PROCESS

METHODS

Semi-structured interviews
- Interview questions validated against SCONUL model
- 1 hour
- Most by phone
- Thematic analysis (RQs and AT constructs)

Triangulation through
- Online survey
- Direct contact with LA support staff
- Desktop research

PARTICIPANTS

19 volunteers across Scotland
- From 17 CCs
- Recruited via LA officials and CC KnowledgeHub group
- 11M, 8F
- CC areas SIMD range 5 to 10
- Almost all have degree or PG education

Lack CC demographics information
- But untypically high self-efficacy

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HALL, CRUICKSHANK, RYAN - ECIL (SESSION D323)
FINDINGS:
EXPLORING THE AT CONSTRUCTS

Illustrative examples follow, showing
- How we used AT constructs
- How AT was useful in this information literacy project.
  - thematic analysis
- We didn’t specifically search for contradictions, though some contradictions did emerge.

The full project findings are in other outputs.
**FINDINGS:**

**WHO ARE THE **SUBJECTS**?**

**Definition**

*Subjects* are people undertaking activities.

**Problem**

- *individual* community councillors, because they are the people who undertake the activities?
- the community councils, as ‘inanimate’ *groups*?

**Precedent**

Detlor, Hupfer and Smith (2016) collected data from individuals but classed libraries as *subjects*.

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![Diagram showing the relationship betweenMotivation, Subject, Object, and Outcome with Tools, Community, Rules and norms, and Division of labour](attachment:image.png)

Our solution

- ‘interviewee’
- ‘subject’
**FINDINGS:**

**WHAT ARE THEIR MOTIVATIONS?**

**Definition**

*Motivations* are the reasons why subjects undertake activities.

**Anticipation**

- responses to legislation
- response to local authority ‘schemes’

**Findings**

A majority of interviewees engaged in information activities that fit with the *motivation* construct of AT. In addition, the interviewees explained their more general *motivations* to volunteer as hyperlocal representatives.
**FINDINGS:**

WHAT ARE THE **OBJECTS AND OUTCOMES?**

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**Definitions**

*Objects* are the goals *subjects* wish to achieve
- can change over time

*Outcomes* are the actual results of activities
- can include unexpected results

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**Anticipation**

Main *object* of information activities would be to gather, process and convey information about citizens’ opinions.

- ‘We don’t transact actions, we don’t have any financial power. Our currency is information’

**Finding: objects**

confirmed by 15 of the 19 interviewees

**Finding: outcomes**

Evidence of poor information practices
- ‘mailing list [has] 60-odd people [but] there are 25,000 people in the area’.
- Another interviewee was considering resignation due to lack of peer support.
**Findings:**

**What are the tools?**

**Definition**

*Tools* are the physical or mental devices used by *subjects* in their activities.

**Anticipation**

- digital
- traditional
- face-to-face

**Question**

We asked interviewees how they

- gather information about local issues
- share information with their citizens.

**Findings**

Identification of a range of *tools* including

- bodies, e.g. local authorities
- individuals, e.g. citizens by word of mouth
- traditional media, e.g. local press
- internet sources, e.g. Facebook.

**Bonus**

Data on perceived usefulness and levels of comfort when using these *tools*

- practical information (training needs)
**Findings:**

**WHAT ARE THE RULES AND NORMS?**

**Definition**

*Rules and norms* are the regulations and conventions that mediate activities and relationships within the activity system.

**Anticipation**

Imposed: legislation and LA schemes

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**Findings**

- Imposed: legislation and LA schemes
- Self-devised:
  - e.g. mark email as ‘internal only’ etc
  - e.g. ignore all planning matters that not directly impinging on CC’s area.
- Two mentions of autocracy
- one subject aims for ‘open-ness, information- and resource-sharing, and accessible paper-trails’.

**Bonus**

Revealed factors influencing how information tasks are undertaken, including whether or not they are undertaken at all.
**Findings:**

**What is the Community?**

**Definition**

*Community* is the activity’s stakeholders. It may be

- the *subject’s* immediate work group or team
- the wider organisational community
- society at large

**Findings**

- NB each community council has its own AT ‘community’
- Fellow community councillors
- Local citizens
- Local authority staff and councillors

**Bonus**

additional commentary provided on levels of engagement across the *communities*

**But...**

Subsequently found indications that most engagement is with local authority, not with citizens ‘represented’ by community councils.
**Findings:**

**WHAT IS THE DIVISION OF LABOUR?**

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**Definition**

*Division of labour* refers to the manner(s) in which work is allocated among actors.

Findings

- range of approaches, e.g.
  - individual skills
  - designated roles

Result

AT could establish an overview of the means of task-allocation.

But...

Problems understanding how *division of labour* is mediated by *rules and norms*.

- difficult to find clear-cut distinctions between these two constructs.
CONCLUSIONS:
A PICTURE OF INFORMATION ACTIVITIES

Object
information sharing between citizens and authorities

Outcome
limited information sharing between citizens and authorities

Motivation
legislation and local authority schemes

Rules and norms
mostly from local authority guidance but some developed ‘in-house’

Community
peers and local authority councilors/staff, local residents (to some extent)

Division of labour
conflicts, roles

Subject
community councils

Tools
Facebook, other social media, face-to-face, paper
CONCLUSIONS:
ADVANTAGES OF USING ACTIVITY THEORY

Systematic data collection and analysis
Ensured comprehensive data extraction to answer RQs
  ◦ Checking each construct was in interview schedule
Ready-made framework for coding the data
  ◦ analysis of activities reported by the interviewees
  ◦ see alignments between the data put under AT constructs and the SCONUL IL pillars
  ◦ e.g. data relevant to both tools and community fit with the gather and present pillars.

Brought out important findings about IL amongst community councillors in Scotland and the factors that influence these

Contradictions/tensions identified
  ◦ foundations of future practical benefits, by ‘exposing opportunities for change’.
  ◦ e.g. community councillors are part-time volunteers
    ◦ do not have time to undertake all possible activities.
  ◦ community councils’ low use of the Internet to engage with citizens.
  ◦ Practical recommendations
CONCLUSIONS:
ADVANTAGES OF USING ACTIVITY THEORY

Overall

AT is valuable to research design in projects concerned with group information practices.

AT can contribute to the generation of findings that relate to existing IL models in this case the SCONUL 7 pillars.
CONCLUSIONS:
CHALLENGES AND FURTHER WORK

◦ Who are the subjects?

◦ rules and norms v division of labour

◦ Choice of ‘best’ activity system
  ◦ from local authority to community council to citizens?
    OR
  ◦ from citizens to community council to local authority
  ◦ both may happen simultaneously, e.g. in Facebook

Activity diagrams are snapshots at a certain time

Ideas for future work:
◦ Explicit study of contradictions
◦ Longitudinal studies
  ◦ observe impact of interventions
  ◦ such as our recommendations, if implemented

Next: Bigger online survey of IL


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The End
…for now