

EXPLORING INFORMATION LITERACY THROUGH THE LENS OF ACTIVITY THEORY

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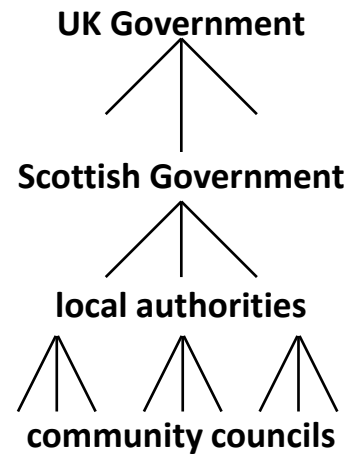
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WHAT ARE COMMUNITY COUNCILS?



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- 26% are 'out-of-date'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

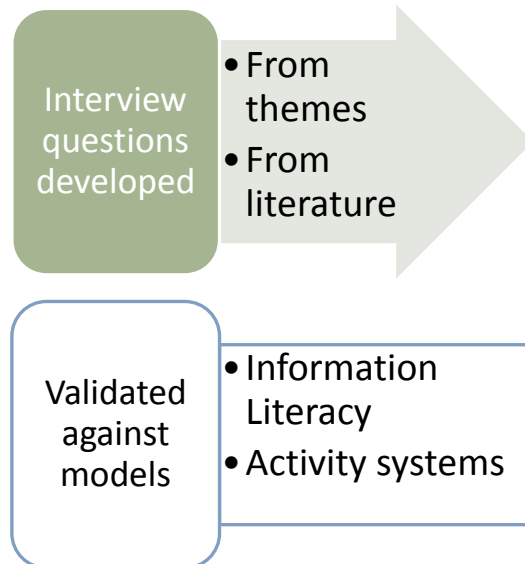
ABOUT THE PROJECT

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’

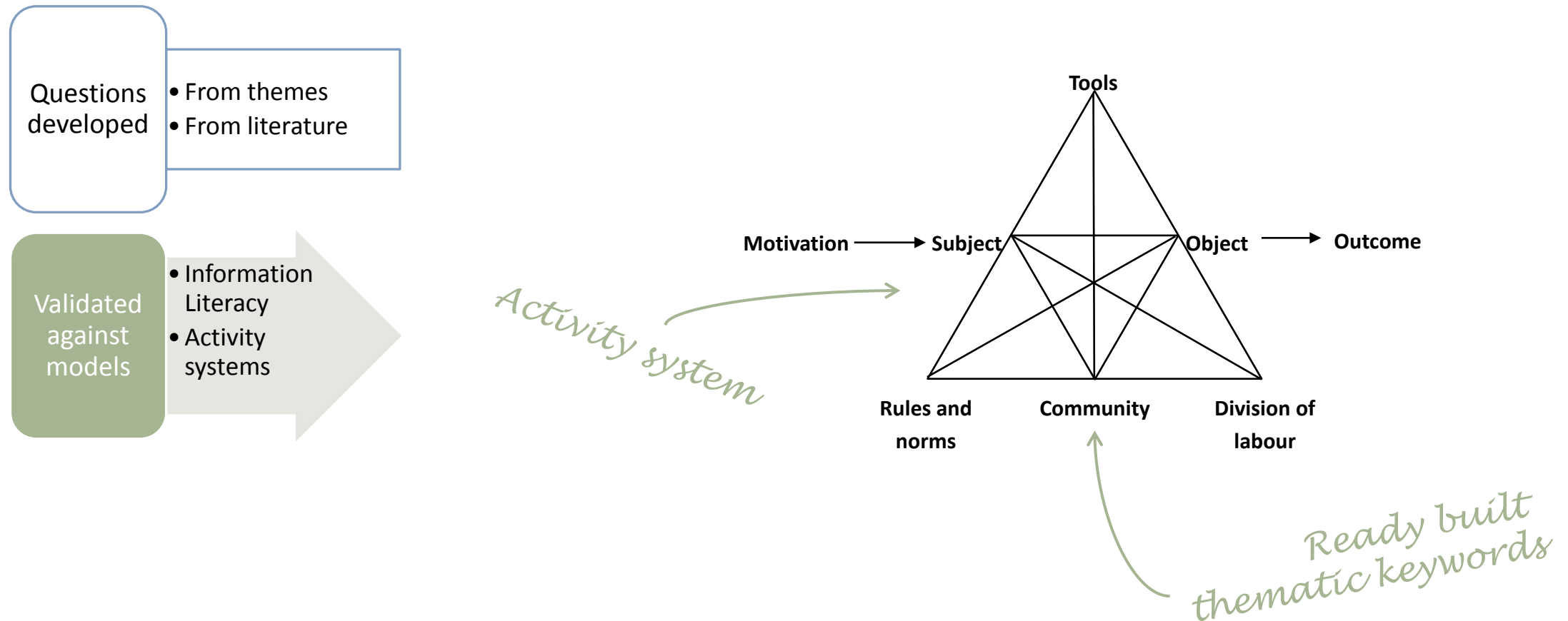
- Stems from work by soviet psychologists Vygotsky, Rubenstein and Leont’ev.
 - AT’s early history: Mironenko (2013)
- Developed into CHAT by Bergstrom

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)





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

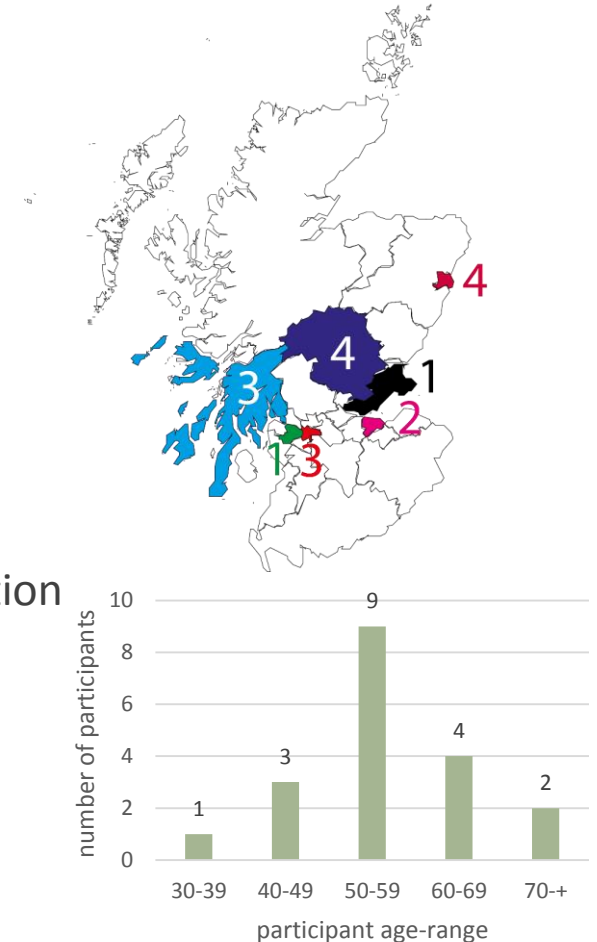
PARTICIPANTS

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



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.

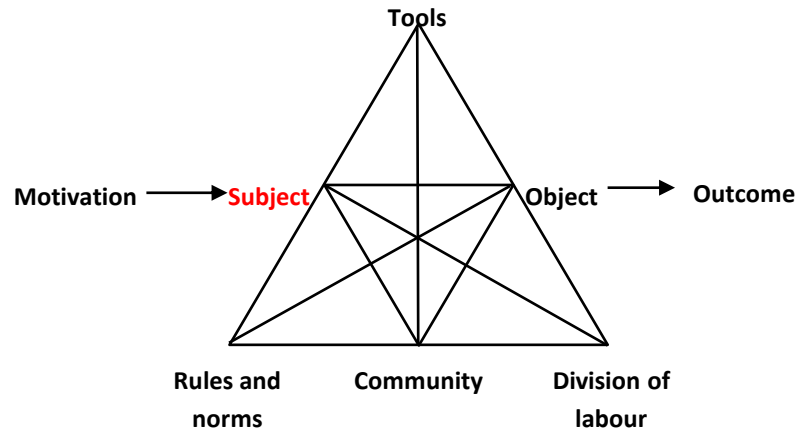
The full project findings are in other outputs.



information:
interactions
and impact



FINDINGS: *WHO ARE THE SUBJECTS?*



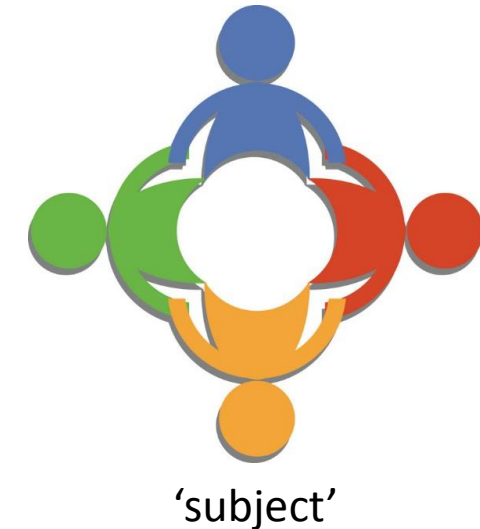
Definition

Subjects are people undertaking activities.

Problem

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

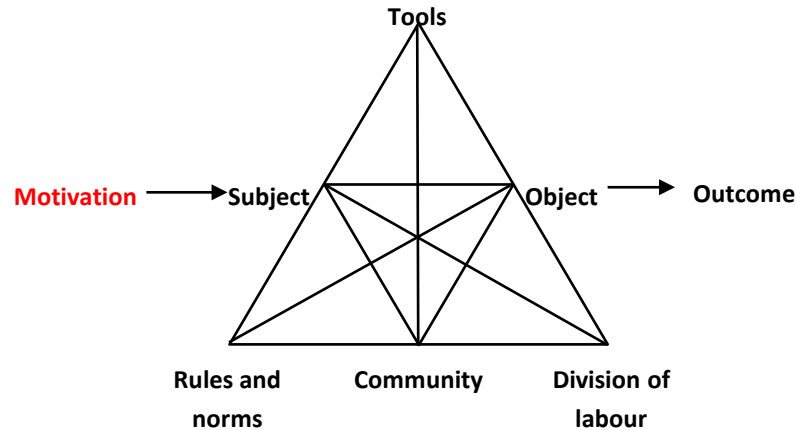
Our solution



Precedent

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

FINDINGS: WHAT ARE THEIR *MOTIVATIONS*?



Definition

Motivations are the reasons why subjects undertake activities

Anticipation

- responses to legislation
- response to local authority 'schemes'

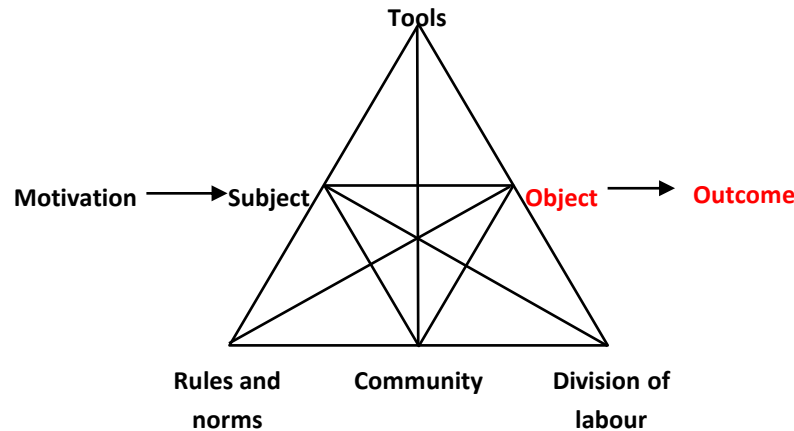
Findings

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*?



Definitions

Objects are the goals *subjects* wish to achieve

- can change over time

Outcomes are the actual results of activities

- can include unexpected results

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

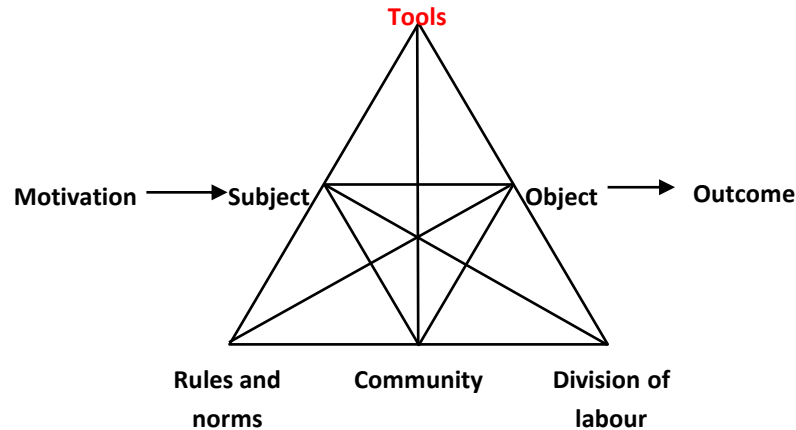
confirmed by 15 of the 19 interviewees

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

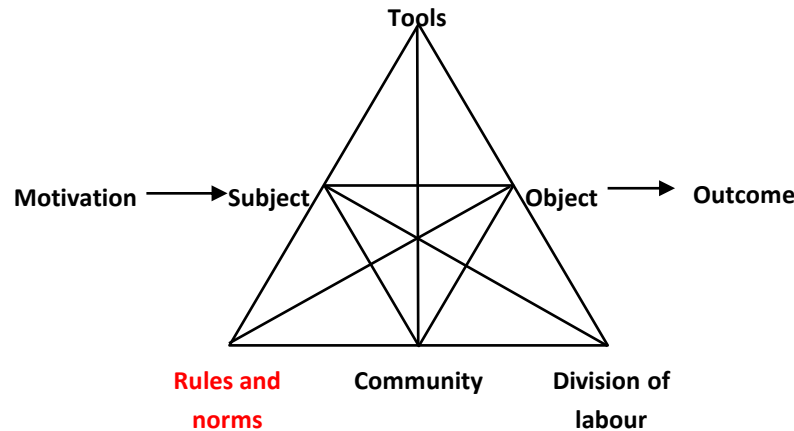
- bodies, e.g. local authorities
- individuals, e.g. citizens by word of mouth
- traditional media, e.g. local press
- internet sources, e.g. Facebook.

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

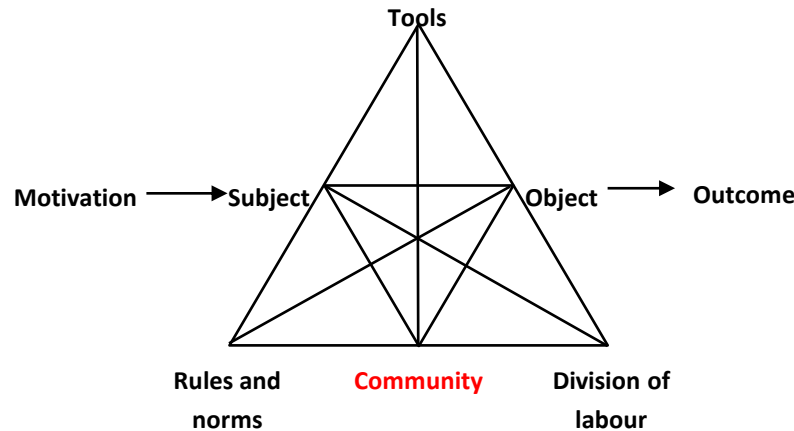
Findings

- 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

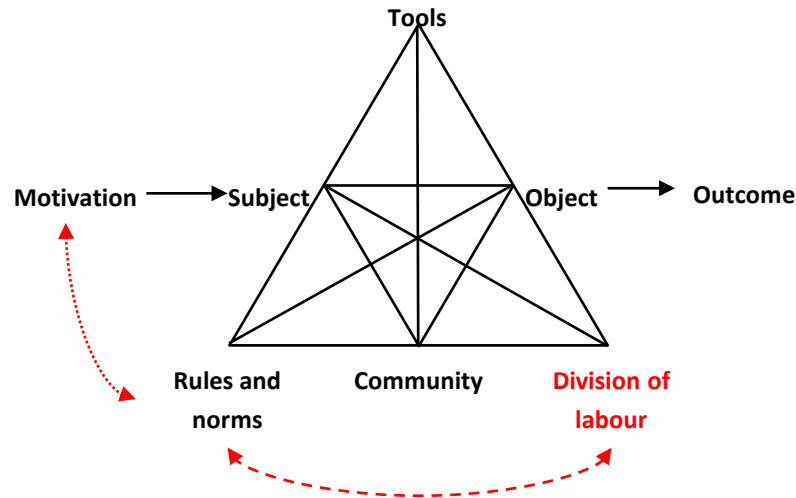
additional commentary provided on levels of engagement across the *communities*

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*?



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

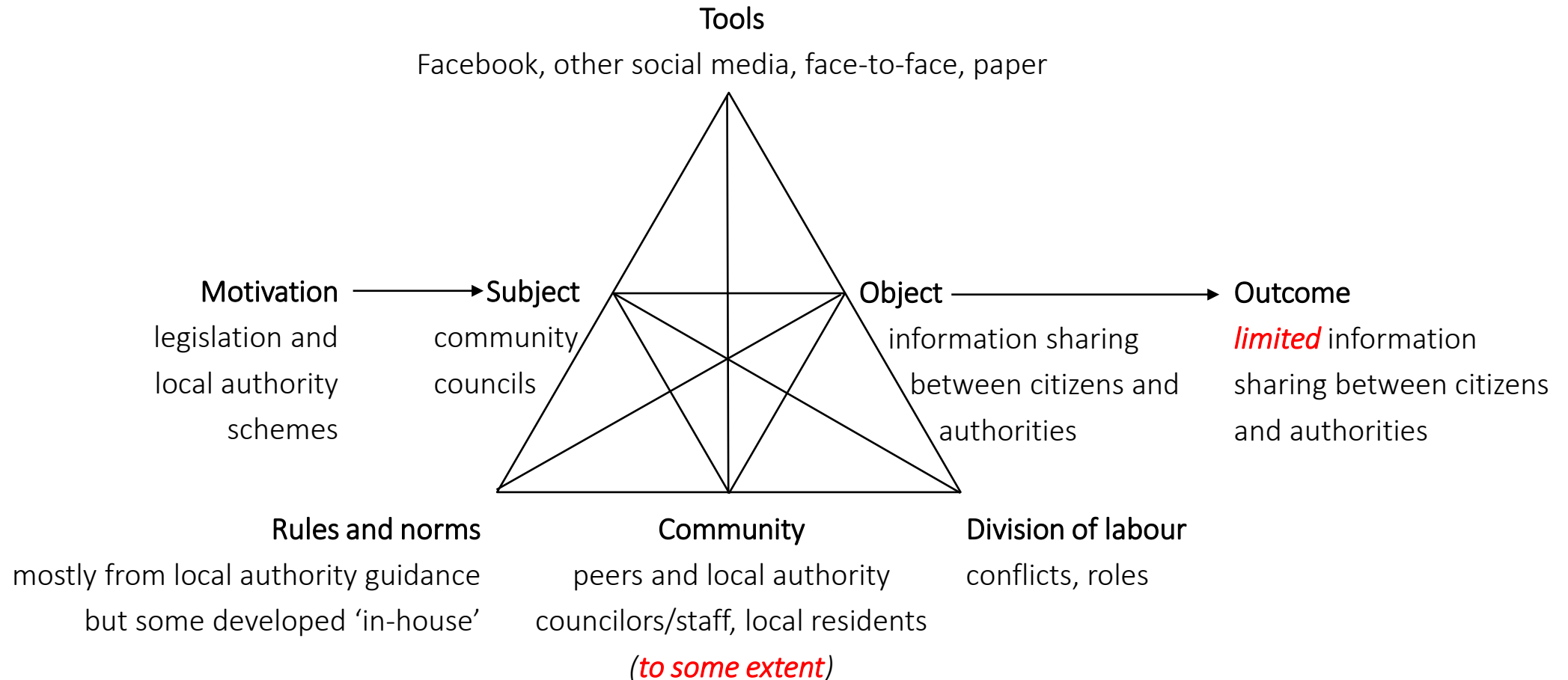
AT could establish an overview of the means of task-allocation.

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



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

SELECTED REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

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THE END

...FOR NOW

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