

CHI workshop 2011 design exercise proposal for

HCI, Politics and the City: Engaging with Urban Grassroots Movements
for Reflection and Action

Keeping in Touch: A design and reflection exercise

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This is a proposal for a non-technical design exercise which will ask people to map out when, where and why they have used their phone in a way that strengthened their feelings of being connected to others in their community.

The exercise would involve using large sheets of blank paper which the workshop participants would annotate with their local landmarks, both shared and personal, such as community centres, schools, shopping centres, local parks, housing. They would then map on top of this with post-its that would include information about the phone calls they have made that they feel are relevant to the exercise. Participants would be asked questions to stimulate reflection on what they do and don't do with regard to community activity; which practices are everyday and which are unusual.

For example, initial questions might be:

- ⤴ Who did they call/contact/connect with?
- ⤴ Why did they connect to that person/organisation?
- ⤴ What stimulated the contact?
- ⤴ Where were they when they made the call?
- ⤴ Was any one else with them?
- ⤴ Was it with a text message or voice?
- ⤴ What sort of things did they say to the recipient (whether an individual or an organisation)?
- ⤴ Did they connect to other social media via their phone, such as facebook or twitter?

This would be the beginning of reflection on how phones and other common everyday technologies might be already being used in community strengthening practices, and if not, what would make it easier. For example; if there was a need for points around the city where people can upload text or picture messages without having to pay, but would enable them to share comments on local developments or events.

A Keeping in Touch design exercise would be applicable to different communities, whether geographical or communities of interest. It could acknowledge different needs of the overlapping communities and seek appropriate 'solutions', if any 'problems' are identified by participants. It is also the sort of exercise that could be

replicated by the participants without any need for reliance on external researchers every time.

The idea for this design exercise is based on a planned research project here in Bristol UK called Keeping In Touch (KIT) which will be exploring the technologies that people use on an everyday basis in ways that strengthen their feelings of being connected to their community.

This CHI workshop would be a chance to share and explore some of these ideas with people who will understand the tensions at the crossover of research, community engagement and activism.

The exercise would aim to encourage reflection on our current practices as members of diverse communities, and how we might support people with appropriate technologies to engage in community activities.

Background to the idea

I am a researcher at the Digital Cultures Research Centre (DCRC) at the University of the West of England in Bristol, UK. The DCRC is currently developing the Keeping In Touch project with a community based partner in Bristol, Knowle West Media Centre (KWMC) with whom we have a common interest in exploring the promise and the reality of everyday digital communication in community settings.

Knowle West Media Centre, based in Bristol, is engaged in developing the creative, educational and social potential of people within the surrounding community and the city as a whole. The media centre acts as a creative focal point for communities in Knowle West, providing access to project facilities, training and mentoring, as well as managed workspace for local businesses.

These are some of our shared points of interest for Keeping in Touch:

- △ What can we learn about people's *everyday use* of mobile media and communication technologies that would support the aim of strengthening communities?
- △ How do people already use mobile media and everyday communication technologies in their daily lives to 'keep in touch' with significant community networks?
- △ How can you replicate or augment a strong face-to-face social network with people who may not engage with social media like twitter and facebook?
- △ How can we explore the claims that are made about the potential of pervasive, mobile and gaming media to connect people, especially those who may be isolated or less mobile, so that they can engage with their communities, whether online or geographical.

A shared interest between DCRC and KWMC for joint research in the future is in how might communities control the data generated by and about them is used and represented. The aim is to not only enhance academic research and understanding but through the research process to promote tangible beneficial effects on people's daily lives. This would also build on work currently being initiated in links between the DCRC and Bristol City Council looking at collaborative projects around open data and how reflection on activity might affect future behaviours.

DCRC is the hub of a network of researchers from across the University of the West of England who share a common interest in the transformations of everyday life that are being brought about by digital communications technologies. The DCRC investigates the way people make culture through their interactions with media

technologies and is not 'just' concerned with technologies, nor 'just' in audiences and users. It aims to create new knowledge about media applications in real world contexts. More information about our range of projects and publications is available at www.dcrc.org.uk.

The DCRC is based in the vibrant community of applied research at Bristol's Pervasive Media Studio, a place that hosts SMEs, developers and artists at the conjunction of media and computing, offering them space to develop and share their ideas. DCRC is also collaborating with the Bristol City Council's 'Connecting Bristol' partnership which aims to bridge the divides that hold back the city from achieving its full potential through promoting digital literacy as a key to social inclusion.

Our specific interest in this field flows from the DCRC's aim to generate knowledge about how people make cultures through their relationships with technological systems. Our starting position for the investigation is that technologically determined accounts of the future of the 'Smart City' fail to take account of user experiences and therefore run the risk of producing 'top down' solutions to imagined problems. The Keeping in Touch research project aims to introduce knowledge about human uses and values into the engineering and design discourses.

The practices under investigation are at the intersection of urbanism, pervasive computing and design. Sensors, databases and live data streams are being built into the fabric of urban space affording newly reflexive relationships between citizens and their environment. These potentials have been conceptualized in engineering and design discourses. For overviews see for instance the IEEE Journal 'Pervasive & Mobile Computing' special issue on Urban Computing, (6:3 2007) and the recent address by DCRC external advisor (and collaborator) Dr Tim Kindberg's address *The City as Machine* to the International Conference on Pervasive Sciences 2010.

These approaches to the engineering problems of creating Smart Cities are now complemented by design perspectives present in, for instance, Duncan Wilson's work at Arup's Foresight Programme¹. They are also reflected in policy scoping documents such as the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology's *Pervasive Computing* report of 2006².

Studies inspired by the advent of wireless and broadband explored the beneficial potential impact of joining geographical communities up to technological networks, with an emphasis on increased levels of educational achievement as well as social engagement. These experiments were usually confined to an institutional context or campus bound³ and as such have limited validity for communities at large. In the field of ubiquitous computing, researchers have experimented with wearables and instrumented spaces but usually with a wellbeing and health agenda, such as exploring ways to support assisted living. We now see an emphasis on the potential of ICTs to deliver e-democracy and e-inclusion through people using technology installed in approved locations such as local libraries and schools, being able to access information about their local authority and 'engage' with state-run services in a more efficient way. These projects all take a top-down 'service-user' model approach to community uses of technologies and rarely take people's actual practices and their relation to community as their focal point.

¹ <http://www.slideshare.net/djdunc/city-as-system-design-london-living-labs-global>

² <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/post/postpn263.pdf>

³ e.g. Blacksburg electronic village project www.bev.net/about or the active campus project activecampus.ucsd.edu

There is a growing field of research into social networking platforms such as Facebook and their potential for transforming educational practices⁴ and an existing body of work on community informatics projects⁵, but there is little literature on how people might be appropriating and using digital communication technologies to strengthen communities. Existing research around connecting particular pre-determined 'community nodes' often focuses on the community organisation as a whole and its access to technology, rather than the practices of its users outside the organisational setting, thus overlooking the existing everyday uses of technology that people use to 'keep in touch'.

Here at the DCRC we are building on an interest in these *everyday means of keeping in touch*; such as talking at the school gates, texting friends and family, Facebook posting and messaging, blogging, online or console gaming with friends and family, and media sharing. The design and phone-use mapping exercise will be used as an initial tool for the KIT study, to introduce the participants to each other and the research team and begin to build a network of co-participants in the research into uses of everyday technologies in community strengthening activities. We also hope to scope best practice examples of community technology projects where intervention has been made using everyday communication technologies to strengthen communities, with the aim of sharing these further afield with other communities that might be able to share their insights.

There are many potential issues for this type of academic research meets community project, not least the need to build trust with co-participants by demonstrating long term commitment to a project, not just 'helicoptering in' for a week or so then taking the results away. Issues are wide ranging and will involve negotiation over coordination and control of the project, ensuring that the project is not just led by academic assumption of what constitutes important community-strengthening activities. Academic involvement needs to be clearly defined from the outset, and shared goals of what the variety of outcomes will be needed to satisfy all participants – not just organisations but individuals. We aim to make time and space for reflection and meaningful feedback with all participants, with the aim of building something lasting and useful.

Constance Fleuriot Bio:

Occasional artist, ex community activist, currently an academic, I have a history of working on research projects that introduce innovative technologies to non-technical people.

From 2002 to 2005 I was Principal Investigator on the UK government funded Mobile Bristol Project, investigating the social impact of emerging pervasive and mobile technologies. I coordinated and managed different strands of the project, involving partners from academia, business research, education and arts. From 2005 to 2010 I was a freelance consultant in user research and locative media design, facilitating location-based mixed-media projects with people of all ages from education, business, community settings and academia.

⁴ see for example the socialmediaclassroom.com initiated by Howard Rheingold

⁵ Community Informatics Research Network at cirn.wikispaces.com