

Street Drinking, New Media and Public Engagement

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Executive Summary

This study set methodological precedents and opened up new vistas on public engagement theory and practice in pursuit of solutions to challenging social problems such as street drinking. A live webcast, a health-assets mapping and exploration of a virtual community resource were combined with socio-cultural and Christian ethical analyses. The combination of social science and arts and humanities approaches provided in-depth understanding of affective, aesthetic and ethical complexities, including unarticulated, often unconscious, dispositions and processes. How virtual and real audiences establish presence with one another would bear further research. So too would the ways in which the debate about street drinking and old/new media groupings polarised. This reflects deeper ideological battles between communitarian or Christian principles and the addictive propensities of a marketised society. Despite technical difficulties and social and emotional resistances encountered we concluded that coupling new media with emergent forms of social policy, such as asset-based (as opposed to deficit-based) approaches opens up novel, democratising avenues for research-informed policy and practice. New media showed significant potential for future co-ordination of assets identified in a way that could improve community responses to street drinking.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Key words

New media, street-drinking, assets-based, Christian ethics, scenic understanding

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Introduction

This study investigated how new media might address street drinking in the Ropewalks district of Liverpool. Project partners were University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), University of Birmingham (UoB) and Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT) (Liverpool). Chronic alcoholism and binge drinking were considered alongside two questions:

Can new media facilitate effective community engagement on a local issue?

How can new media be used to address street drinking?

Three analytical 'lenses' combined cultural and social policy perspectives: assets-based policy (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993); Christian ethics (Cook 2006) and socio-cultural depth-hermeneutic analysis utilising scenic understanding and compositions (Lorenzer 1986, Redman et.al 2010, Froggett and Hollway 2010).

Public drinking, which ranges from 'bingeing' to the addictions of street drinkers, is identified as problematic by government, police and local authorities. Despite local initiatives (Mistral et al 2007) questions of what community engagement might achieve are largely under-researched (Velleman 2009). The UK Community Alcohol Partnerships (CAP) supported by Baroness Newlove and the Big Society/localisation agendas take a traditional 'catchment' approach: stakeholders in partnership combining education and enforcement. However, the trend is towards an 'environmental' approach (Holder 2000; 2004) with community engagement viewed structurally and targeting influencers of local social, economic, and environmental structures (Thom et al 2007). Giesbrecht (2003) notes that promising interventions address 'environmental contexts ... and involve enforcement of public health policies' (2003: 40). Cairns et al (2011) conclude that interventions perceived as personally relevant are most effective. There are few studies of new media or art programmes in alcohol research (Linke et al 2004; Ormerod & Wiltshire 2009; Kalnina 2010; Atkinson et al 2011; Leyshon 2011; Suffolletto et al 2011; Health.gov.au, 2012). Our methodology provided an interactive media forum, 'democratic' and inclusive insofar as it offered both on-line and studio-based participation to explore stakeholder's experiences, include drinking communities and offer anonymity to those on-line who wanted it. The approach was both 'environmental' and 'personally relevant'.

Democracy theory in relation to new media and public engagement has been developing over recent years as new media tools are being employed to find better ways of enabling people to participate in decision making over issues of concern to communities. Carpentier's (2012) model of access, interaction and participation shows how those

involved in decision-making processes are positioned in relation to each other through power relationships that are not fixed. Participation is the object of power-play and intense, long-lasting ideological struggles, as reflected in the polarisation we observed in our webcast discussions.

This study opened up new vistas on methodology, theory and practice of public engagement in pursuit of solutions to social problems such as street drinking. This is the first time a health-assets mapping on alcohol misuse in Liverpool has been carried out. New media enhanced the ability to identify assets and through the socio-cultural and Christian ethics lenses a deeper understanding of complexities associated with access, interaction and participation in public engagement was revealed. We concluded that combining new media with emergent assets-based social policy approaches (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993) opened up new avenues for research-informed practice. New media could support future co-ordination of assets to improve community responses to street-drinking.

Methodology

Literature reviews on Christian ethical underpinnings of alcohol misuse, assets-based approaches and community engagement informed the study.

Three events were held. First, a FACT community webcast enabled a debate on street drinking involving a local studio-based audience and on-line participants. A moderator facilitated the interaction. Three researchers were studio-based and another accessed the event remotely. Invited stakeholders (studio) and others attracted by publicity (on-line) participated. Vox pops filmed by a local addiction project initiated the debate.

Second, a seminar at FACT demonstrated use of Stilwell, a multimedia virtual community, and Shine, a telecare application for recovering alcoholics.

The data were analysed and a feedback-event with local stakeholders was held at The Brink (a local dry bar). Findings were presented and consideration given to whether new media could provide a democratising digital 'agora', supporting public contributions to community-based strategies.

New Media

Stilwell, a virtual community presents text and video based scenarios of lived experience of fictional characters interacting with services. Stilwell's potential in public engagement applications to address health and social care issues was explored in the seminar.

Other technologies discussed included Shine, Developed by D2Digital for Bolton Primary Care Trust, a mobile phone technology that has reduced relapse rates by 50%.

Examples were offered for comparison (RedNet second life conferencing, Greater Manchester Police's Twitter use and Facebook support groups).

Discussion of these technologies raised further questions:

- How do the media affect ways that people think, speak and relate?
- How do they support public engagement?
- How do old/new media combine?

Assets-based

Assets-based approaches to community action re-orient from 'needs/problems' towards 'assets/opportunities' for sustained wellbeing (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993). By focussing on skills, resources, and capacities, communities apply social and economic assets to issues concerning them. Morgan and Ziglio (2007: 18) define a health asset as a resource:

'...which enhances the ability of individuals, groups, communities, populations, social systems and/or institutions to maintain health and well-being and to help to reduce health inequalities'

Health assets identified at events were listed as: 'community assets', 'traditional services', 'on-line/new media/technology'; 'alternative'. The feedback questioned how they should be prioritised, liberated, maximised, combined and progressed.

The 2007-10 (LPCT 2007) and the 2011-2014 (LPCT 2011) alcohol strategies focus on education and improvements to NHS and council services rather than wider assets identified here (Appendix 1). It has been previously noted that little co-ordination appears between assets (Fox et al 2005:8), and lack of consultation has impeded realising new ones. Assets-based approaches are expected to inform policy increasingly as austerity restricts statutory services (Whiting et al 2012). This study offers timely contribution to policy debate. Interested council contacts were named at the feedback and a follow-on project would engage at local and national levels.

Christian Ethics

Historically, Christianity informed the UK temperance movement and this influence is still felt today. Public trust favours Christian help groups who attract Government approval and become examples of 'Big Society' (Johns, Squire et al., 2009; Norman 2010). Alcoholics Anonymous, with roots in Christianity, retains elements of a Christian ethical approach to alcoholism, despite efforts to mitigate religiosity and has recently been endorsed by Public Health, England (Legge 2013).

Understanding the Christian background to debates around alcohol misuse helps identify how the trope of sin/redemption has informed approaches to street drinking. In the webcast, local retailers faced a dilemma between profit and moral responsibility as expressed through controlled sales, pricing and encouraging responsible consumption. The financial burden on the NHS and tax-payer stimulated indignation. Abstinence rather

than temperance was considered appropriate for a local dry bar. Protestant UK drinking-culture was contrasted unfavourably with the Mediterranean.

Condemnation, ambivalence and pity were enacted in the webcast. The Street Pastors exemplified a compassionate rather than judgemental Christian ethic and questioned whether Christian commitment should be overt when offering help in a secular culture. Voices in the webcast suggested binge drinkers were 'sinful through choice' and deserved little sympathy while chronic alcoholics were 'victims to be pitied'.

At the feedback session spirituality was endorsed, with some Christian groups identified as caring but failing to discourage drinking.

Socio-Cultural

'Scenic understanding' reveals experience as a 'whole' (Lorenzer 1986, Hollway and Froggett 2012). The concept developed by German cultural analyst Alfred Lorenzer through the interpretation of literary texts describes a primary mode of understanding through the apprehension of scenes embedded in the text, rather than analytic cognition. The 'scenes' are experienced by the reader through both biographical and cultural resources. The scene perceived is a personal/cultural composite rather than a 'dualistic' separation between 'inner/outer' experience, or 'psyche/society'.

Researchers worked in a panel. After discussion of associations aroused by the webcast, each wrote a scenic composition (Froggett and Hollway 2010) based on his/her webcast experience. These were read aloud. Further debate elicited themes and reflexive interpretations (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009). The team asked: What is being said? How is it being said? Why is it being said in this particular way? (Hollway and Volmerg 2010); also - What is the scene doing? Scenic compositions, field notes and transcripts were interpreted to identify emergent themes and affects. These were related to assets-based and Christian ethics analysis.

Each scenic composition spontaneously adopted a distinctive literary style (see below). For Czarniawska (1997) dominant narrative genres interact between art and life but others are available to authors. Conroy (2010) proposes Reality TV as currently feeding life and vice-versa: 'applying interpretive devices borrowed from literary studies...helps greatly with naming the range of experiences and meanings' (p.90). Similarly the chosen styles resonated with our experiences, filtering the web-cast through both personal and shared cultural imagination:

The **internet chat-room's** choppy syntax was playful, subversive, and voyeuristic – a moral 'wild west' which alarmed the researchers.

The **novel's** author and moderator (older generation) mistrusts new technology with tragic resignation, in contrast to the young woman who embraces new media

The **rap poem** rhythmically attunes to street drinking through media-savvy, streetwise-cool, and delivers social criticism with shock-factor.

The **fantasy fiction** produces a wonderland - mirrors, illusion, un-reality. New media is like the Jabberwocky: exciting, unpredictable, nonsense to the uninitiated.

The scenic understandings surfaced personal and shared resistances, ambivalences, and commitments. The compositions unwittingly revealed the contradictory excitements and resistances related to both addiction and new media (Dourish and Satchell 2011); anxieties stimulated caricature and were projected onto the moderator and others. The morphology (Propp 1928) of the literary forms adopted contained these paradoxical excitements, ideas and emotions.

Findings and Discussion

The facilitation of community engagement

Three themes were identified:

Relational

Combining real/virtual media in an effective public forum means overcoming differences in (dis)embodiment and communication style. The media produce different emotional climates affecting what discussants attend to. The studio audience focussed on chronic alcoholism whereas those on-line focussed on binge drinking. A detached on-line commentary developed, sympathetic to binge-drinkers. The internet chat was playful, just as binge-drinkers appear to be.

Access

Street drinkers, voluntary alcohol services, business community and street pastors were vocal in the studio. However, the Police did not attend and social and medical services were largely absent. The potential of new media to 'democratise' and unsettle hierarchical representation systems (Sandercock & Attili 2012, Karppinen 2009) needs further study in a social policy context. The moderator's co-ordination of on-line and studio-based contributions sometimes proved difficult and the online audio-feed was intermittent, which underlined pit-falls in new media that need to be avoided in future research.

Polarisation

Mixing old/new media facilitates thinking and speaking in different ways. The researchers' experience in the webcast (studio and on-line) was of some polarisation in the debate (compared with the creative dynamic tension experienced during analysis). Generational stereotypes of new-media-savvy youth and technology-avoidant elders were questioned, as was the notion that the homeless chronic alcoholic would not have access to new media. It may be that binary thinking and moral evaluation of alcohol-related behaviours influenced by Christian ethical tropes of sin/redemption and temperance/excess inhabits public discourse. This links strongly to the notion of the

moral economy (Dourish and Satchell 2011): in this case, the moral economic resistance to new media as a carrier of anti-communitarian influences emerges in the four scenic compositions. As Carpentier (2012) concludes, the ideological positions behind the surface debate are revealed in the power relations. A further paper will develop these ideas.

Addressing street drinking with new media

This pilot study sets a precedent, showing that when creative forms of new media were combined with our lenses a nuanced understanding of community issues surrounding street drinking emerged. Mobilisation of the assets would be the next step in the assets-based approach.

Few of the health assets identified (Appendix 1) are co-ordinated in Liverpool (LPCT 2007 & 2011). However, contacts at the city council were identified as interested in developing this work. Fox et al (2005:8) found a similar picture when they reported on a Health Impact Assessment of the alcohol strategy:

'... there is a lot going on in Liverpool...However this work is often piecemeal and...opportunities are being lost for partnership working.'

The Christian ethics literature review indicates embedded Christian ethical assumptions within alcohol services that could promote/inhibit mobilisation of assets, depending on whether compassionate or judgemental dispositions are uppermost.

The evidence collected suggests this is the first time a health assets mapping has been carried out to tackle the problem of alcohol misuse in Liverpool. New media has enhanced the ability to identify assets and facilitated an understanding of Christian ethics by injecting new dimensions to public engagement. New media shows much potential for supporting the future co-ordination of the assets in a way that could improve community responses to street drinking. The study has also shown that engagement and consultation could be positively impacted by the use of new media.

Conclusions

The literature review found no reference to public engagement activities related to alcohol studies that used webcast or Stilwell type platforms. There are, however, some studies of the effects of digital technology on alcohol consumption, especially among young binge drinkers. Normally, this is focused on social networking and mobile phones and texting. The webcasting methodology employed in this study moves away from targeting specific audiences to opening out to 'environments' – effectively a new form of public forum - to engage a wider public. This research, therefore, fills a gap and is located within current academic concerns. It is 'environmental' and structural in its approach and it uses new technology, an area of growing interest in the field.

We tested the potential of new media to engage local communities on street drinking by investigating the creation of a real/virtual agora to engage stakeholders unlikely to participate in conventional public consultation. However, the interaction between real/virtual audiences was problematic. How they establish 'presence' and communicate with one another requires further research.

We concluded that mixes of old/new media can facilitate participation of a wide range of stakeholders on an issue of public concern, and identify and link community assets. It may be that the more complex the form, the more fallible the technology. The simple SMS based technology in Shine can be individually tailored and 'therapeutically' effective with target groups of drinkers, but is not designed to accommodate the diversity and tension of a public forum. Stillwell straddles old and new media forms embodying the different ways in which information is adopted and exchanged in a new media age. By combining asset-based and Christian ethical lenses in the analysis we understood that mobilisation of community assets must accommodate ambivalence and conflicting moral evaluations. The promise of complex old/new media mixes is that opportunities for engagement are multiplied so that social, emotional and moral complexities can be expressed and considered.

An interpretive socio-cultural lens based on scenic understanding showed both overt and unconscious psychosocial processes operating in community responses to street drinking involving resistance, anxiety, projection and polarisation. This was particularly evident in relation to moral evaluation (already polarised by Christian ethical assumptions). It also showed how polarisation could be compounded by resistances and affinities towards old/new media, and the ways in which they help to produce a distinctive emotional environment and moral economy for debate. It is argued that this deeper understanding of participation could contribute to democratic theory but this will need further examination in another paper. Understanding unarticulated, and often unconscious, dispositions and processes is vital if old/new media mixes are to be useful in relation to public discourse where there is tension, discomfort and disagreement.

Implications

Implications for research methodology

Webcasting as research method was an innovation that produced rich data. However, identifying the conditions and skills of webcasting as a research tool requires further study.

Further innovation included using scenic compositions comparatively and interpretively, combining arts-based and social scientific approaches. In recapturing their experiences, the researchers' compositions unconsciously adopted a literary genre, which was then available for interpretation. This is both a finding and a methodological development requiring further application and inquiry (paper forthcoming).

Implications for (Democratic) theory

This study has identified specific tensions associated with real/virtual participation and engagement adding richness to broad categories associated with democratic theory, for example, as highlighted by Carpentier (2012: access, interaction and participation. It is suggested that binary thinking may hinder the creation of a new participatory 'agora' with structured encounters and anonymous participation on-line.

Implications for future research

How virtual and real audiences establish presence with one another bears further research, as does the potential of the digital aesthetic to underwrite dualistic thinking both among those comfortable with the medium and those new to it. Democratic participation theory is an option for making further contributions to the literature.

Implications for policy and practice

Assets-based approaches are expected to inform policy as austerity measures impact on statutory services (Whiting et al 2012). This study offers a timely contribution to policy debate. Interested council contacts were named at the feedback event and a follow-on project would have much potential to pro-actively engage at local and national levels.

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Appendix 1

The assets identified were broken down into four categories:

Community Assets

Traditional Services

On line/new media/technology

Alternative

Community Assets

Brink Dry Bar

The Wet Day Centre

Street Pastors

Training/ education: retailers, police officers, schools, parents,

Ex drinkers

Basement and residential detox facility

Transforming Choice residential unit

Little Sisters of Mercy

White Chapel Centre

Traditional Services

Alcohol outreach nurse

Addiction Services: community alcohol service

Police

Paramedics

GP services

Local Authority: e.g. public health social services, housing, adult social care

NHS: e.g. secondary care, occupational health, mental health services

National: Drinkline, AA, Addaction, Adfam, NACOA

On line/new media/technology

FACT

Social Media: Facebook, Twitter, Youtube

Tele-healthcare

Web based, on line help e.g. Sober24.com, Wired in to Recovery

Emotional constellations and moral economy of new media

Alternative

Carnival

Café culture

Wet Garden

Corporate Social Responsibility and ethical business practice

Academic/research: e.g. this study, Stilwell, Visible Voice, JMU

Gorilla Media: e.g. used by recovery groups?

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 inter-connected, 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

