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Designing public policy for co-production: theory, practice and change

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DRAFT

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Section Three: Grammar in co-productive policy design

Using technology to help communities shout louder¹

Phil Jones, Colin Lorne and Chris Speed

This contribution from an inter-disciplinary team of academics offers an attempt to support communities in ‘shouting a little louder’ within policy-making. It models its own aspiration in reflecting the importance of bringing together different forms of expertise: in planning, interface design, engaging communities. The contribution focuses on the development of an app, MapLocal, which aims to draw in the local knowledge of people who may not usually get involved in neighbourhood planning. The app provides a tool for mapping community assets and contributing to planning by tapping into the fine-grained understanding of a place, which comes from living there, but also providing a way of generating and harnessing community creativity and imagination. MapLocal is an example of the potential of such spatial and visualisation tools to shift the parameters, power and potentialities of policy by enhancing the engagement and interaction of communities for local problem-solving.

The UK’s Coalition Government, which came to power in 2010, took a flamethrower to the English planning system. Superficially, the Localism Act, 2011 offers a major transfer of power to communities: you can write a legally binding Neighbourhood Plan and bid to buy community assets or to run community services. The rhetoric is that this enables communities to co-produce their neighbourhoods and shape their own local planning destiny. Looking at the detail of the Act, however, co-production only seems to go so far. Communities can suggest which areas of their neighbourhood should be a priority for development and the kinds of things they would like to see built, but these suggestions have to be in compliance with local and national planning guidance. If they aren’t, then they cannot be included in a Neighbourhood Plan. Similarly, and perhaps more significantly, communities cannot *prohibit* types of development in their area. Planning, that restricts tall buildings, McMansions, chain coffee shops and so on, is simply not possible within the new legal

¹ MapLocal was funded by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, AH/J006580/1. We'd like to thank all the residents of Balsall Heath and the Jewellery Quarter who helped us with the pilot as well as MADE, Chamberlain Forum and Joe Holyoak.

framework. Economic growth is everything and planning is not permitted to act as a 'constraint' upon this.

Neighbourhood Planning as conceived by the Localism Act, then, allows for co-production of planning so long as communities are happy to co-produce the things that policymakers want. More so, Neighbourhood Plans are profoundly technical, legal documents and thus communities need to muster the expertise and resource to translate aspiration into a formal plan. In the face of swingeing cuts, local authorities are broadly unable to help communities with this job of translation; central government funding meanwhile was restricted to a relatively small number of 'Pathfinder' Neighbourhood Plans. Given the shortage of public funding, if you do not already have the necessary money and expertise within your community you are extremely unlikely to be able to put a Plan together. By the end of 2013, only around 40% of Birmingham's 1.1m residents lived in an area that had established a Neighbourhood Forum — the local bodies given the power to draw up Neighbourhood Plans. Few of these Forums are actively working on a Plan and to date no Neighbourhood Plans have been approved within the city.

Rather than being frustrated by how the game of co-production seems to be rigged in favour of already well-resourced communities, we chose to think about ways to help communities realise the potential for co-production embedded in the rhetoric of localism. Our approach starts from the position that the people who live in an area have significant expertise, even if that expertise is not necessarily recognised in formal policy-making processes. At a basic level, this can simply be a fine-grained knowledge about problems in the area — the streets that are prone to being used as rat-runs, the parks used by local drug dealers, the empty properties kept in poor repair by their owners. Beyond this, however, suggestions can be made for changes to the area based on this detailed local knowledge — converting an old pub to a new use, turning a long abandoned site into a development opportunity, getting a local artist involved in improving the look of an area and so on.

Gathering this kind of material can of course, take place in town hall meetings. Although these can be intimidating for those not used to public speaking, be held at inconvenient times and often require a degree of spatial literacy for discussion around maps and plans. They also take place at one remove from the sites under discussion — being *in* a place prompts people to talk about it more than they might in a meeting room. Even before the Localism Act, Phil had been talking to urban design charity MADE about the possibilities of using mobile technology to help communities take some control over the planning of their neighbourhoods, while Chris has experience in interface

design and engaging communities with technology. Together we received funding to produce and pilot a smartphone app to draw together the expertise of community members who might not otherwise get involved with local planning.

We consulted with Chamberlain Forum (a self-styled ‘think and do tank’ in Birmingham) about the kind of features that should be included in the app. This discussion was followed by discussions with an app developer about what we could practically deliver given our timescale and budget. Phil’s recurring refrain was that the app should be simple, intuitive and have ‘big, granny-friendly buttons’. It would also be based around a map, so that people could gather spatially-located information of the kind necessary when speaking the language of formal planning.

We settled on three core functions:

- i) taking photographs, giving them a numerical ranking and the ability to add text-based comments
- ii) recording audio clips
- iii) marking boundaries by walking around them.

The idea was that you could simply walk around your neighbourhood and use the app to share your understanding of how the area works. Chris put an elegant interface design together and commissioned a former student to write the code for an Android-based app we called ‘MapLocal’. Working intermittently, initial design and testing took about six months. Photos, audio clips and boundary marks recorded by users are tagged with GPS coordinates and uploaded to a website hosting the community map. An example of what this looks like is shown in Figure 7.

FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE

All of this, however, was designed to happen automatically in the background — from a user point of view you simply walk around your neighbourhood taking photos and occasionally talking into the phone. Simplicity was key.

As a pilot scheme we needed people to try out the app and give us feedback on how it worked. Antonia Layard, one of our co-investigators, pointed out that a lot of the rhetoric around co-production comes with an implicit assumption that people should volunteer their time for free. But, this didn’t feel particularly in the spirit of co-production, particularly when working in more deprived communities. Given that we were asking people to do a piece of work for us in testing a newly

developed app, we felt it was important to pay our participants (£100 each) to trial the app and give us feedback — an important symbol of how vital their contribution was to the project.

Colin was hired to recruit participants, undertake training sessions and gather feedback about the experience of using the app. Cheap Android phones were then loaned out to participants. The revolution kicked off by the launch of the iPhone in 2007 has meant that carrying a smartphone has been normalised even in more deprived neighbourhoods. Five years earlier there would have been considerable health and safety concerns about asking people to walk around openly carrying small, powerful personal computers. By 2012, our participants looked unremarkable, chatting into phones and taking photos. A range of recruits, teenagers to septuagenarians from different backgrounds took part, all of whom were very quickly able to get to grips with the app and begin collecting material about their neighbourhood. As an example, Colin's field diary records an instance during a training session where Sanjeer started teaching his friend Abdul how to use the app, despite only having learned it himself moments earlier.

We picked two sites in Birmingham: Balsall Heath, a fairly deprived area which had received central government Pathfinder funds to begin developing its Neighbourhood Plan; and the Jewellery Quarter, primarily a district of small businesses which had not started work on its Plan. Across eight weeks, the fifty participants produced over 1000 photographs, 626 audio clips and 182 boundary marks. The kinds of material generated tell a story about the appetite for sharing local knowledge and ideas. Audio clips accompanying photographs give insights into local histories, suggestions for new facilities, opinions about the problems facing the area and how they might be tackled. Some ideas were fanciful, others less-than-PC, but the majority were thoughtful and grounded in an intimate knowledge and engagement with the spaces of the neighbourhood.

Balsall Heath faces a number of challenges, primarily relating to economic deprivation and rapid population turnover. It is all too easy to dismiss such neighbourhoods as 'failed'. Indeed, prior to 2008 the model for regenerating this kind of area would be large-scale demolitions and re-building to the tastes and aspirations of middle class gentrifiers.

"...it's just an eye-sore at the moment and it's serving no purpose to the community. So it was once a well-used sports centre and astro-turf and a lot of the local residents are worried about what will be built here eventually."

(audio clip, Balsall Heath)

The quote represents a well-founded concern that the people who live in this kind of area tend to have developments imposed on them that are designed to suit the needs of outsiders. Of course, there is a tension between the kinds of developments that would be valuable to residents — a new health centre, re-opened train station and affordable housing were all mentioned — and the kinds of developments that would attract private sector funding. We do not propose that a smartphone app can reconcile these tensions, but it does enable community voices to shout a little louder about the specifics of their neighbourhoods to make it clear that tensions between community and developer agendas *do* exist.

The Jewellery Quarter is primarily a business district with a small, largely white, residential population and thus faces different kinds of challenges. Within the neighbourhood there is a rich legacy of historic industrial buildings that present many opportunities for redevelopment:

“Nice little building, empty, no-one seems to want it, loads of homeless people. Okay it's burned out inside but how little would it take to do up and turn into some cheap, liveable accommodation and get some people off the streets. 1916 on the building, not even 100 years old. This is what needs sorting.” (audio clip, Jewellery Quarter)

A hostel for homeless people can be seen as a socially responsible use of a derelict building, although would not necessarily be something that everyone living and working in the Jewellery Quarter would want, even if the money could be found. This example highlights a critical point in any co-produced approach to neighbourhood redevelopment — attempting to reconcile different needs and desires of individuals living there. Some people do not like what new supermarkets do to local retail, others are desperately glad when they open because of the convenience they bring. Some might be wryly amused by the presence of a massage parlour while others are offended and upset. There simply is no single community voice with a clear agenda for taking forward development in a neighbourhood.

The vast quantity of data generated by MapLocal in just eight weeks highlighted a significant problem with the project. We had deliberately been very conservative with what we sought to achieve on a small pilot: the app was designed to allow people to collect information and opinions, but offered no help with how to analyse these. The danger with this kind of approach is that you

turn residents into surveillance drones merely collecting information for more powerful people who then make the decisions — Goodchild (2007) uses the phrase ‘citizens as sensors’. In some ways, however, a bigger danger with something like MapLocal is that, faced with a mass of unfiltered and contradictory material about an area, decision-makers simply ignore it.

One solution is to provide a means for users of the app to rank the relative importance of different issues that they are concerned about. Such a process would allow hotspots to emerge on the community map where multiple users have highlighted priority issues. Of course, this relies on people’s willingness to give a ranking to the materials they and others have gathered — another demand on busy people. Nonetheless, such a facility would start to shift MapLocal from being a mere information gathering tool, to one that helps people make sense of that information.

For this project to itself operate on principles of co-construction, we needed to draw participants into the process of designing the functionality of the app. Based on feedback as part of focus groups held at the end of the pilot, we significantly improved the web-based interface for viewing the shared community map. Unfortunately, we did not have sufficient remaining budget to develop a revised version, which would add a system for ranking priorities for action, which was a key suggestion from one of the focus groups. We were, however, able to fix the many bugs participants had identified and make the app available for free download via the Google Play store.

A key issue that emerged from the focus groups, however, was a reminder that the expert knowledge of communities can be just as fallible as other forms of expert knowledge. An example of this is in the discussion of a pub that had closed down in Balsall Heath. One participant suggested it closed because the neighbourhood is in transition; as white and African-Caribbean populations move out and Muslim residents move in, so a pub business is less viable. When presented with this version of events, however, a local councillor present at a focus group noted that the owner of the pub had refused to pay protection money to a local gang and had chosen to simply close the business instead. This story illustrates the importance of triangulating different kinds of expert knowledges — community, police, policymakers, health professionals etc. — in order to make informed decisions about taking a neighbourhood forward.

Localism seems to offer community empowerment and co-construction of neighbourhoods, but in an age of drastic cuts to public funding the reality appears to be very different. The MapLocal app is no cure for the ravages of austerity, but it suggests ways in which new technologies can be used to

help communities find ways of more directly influencing the future planning of their neighbourhoods. Fundamentally, such technologies can amplify community voices in discussions where they are all too easily drowned out by more powerful stakeholders.

The authors repeat the important, if obvious, point that initiatives such as MapLocal do not take place in a vacuum. Rather, they are set against a policy background, in this case the reform of neighbourhood planning set out in the Localism Act 2011. Sharing a critique made in the opening chapters, policy-making — here, specifically neighbourhood planning — has been problematic when detached from the lived experience and priorities of those affected by such decisions. As was seen in the vignettes from New Mexico and York, rhetoric of community empowerment through localism is set against the realities of local dilemmas about economic development and growth versus growth which includes local communities. These different, potentially conflicting agendas, serve to illustrate the political dimensions of even the most seemingly legal and technical areas of local policy-making.

The authors point out how opening up neighbourhood planning policy is done in a ‘substitutive’ way, rather than with professionals working with communities in an ‘additive’, synergistic way. This leaves communities to navigate the technical and legal demands of planning alone. It further denies access to neighbourhood planning and shaping the future of the places, to all but those communities with access to particular resources. By doing so, the reform of neighbourhood planning serves to reinforce and perpetuate social inequities as well as hierarchies of expertise, rather than challenging them. But the example of MapLocal demonstrates the possibilities of making an intervention into implementation, in a way that offers a different rationality and purpose. In short, whilst features of conventional closed and complete designs may be rigged against a more co-productive way of doing things, technology can provide a way of giving people voice.

The piloting of MapLocal demonstrates that technology can challenge some of these inequities: opening up neighbourhood planning to people that may not usually get involved or have a voice in policy decisions, which affect their everyday lives. In particular, enabling participants to be in a place, not removed or abstracted from it, generates conversation and exchange. MapLocal also challenges the assumption often made, that such technological fixes are only for particular demographics — the young with the resources and know-how to use them — by showing that by providing access and training, they can be open to far wider parts of the community, tapping into a latent appetite to

share local knowledge. Whilst an app may be initially perceived as offering an individual form of co-production, the potential for peer-to-peer interaction and collective action should not be dismissed.

Whilst tools like MapLocal offer a way to tap into and value the experiential and local forms of knowledge which are often marginalised and ignored in policy-making. The authors make the point that whilst the inclusion of the significant expertise held by citizens is necessary, on its own it is insufficient. Rather, it should be 'triangulated' with other forms of knowledge, in this case legal and technocratic expertise. By doing so, creative possibilities and ways of doing things differently may open up. Geo-ICT apps provide a different kind of 'boundary space' with the potential to re-negotiate power, by offering voice, transparency and accountability (de Vries, forthcoming).

Although parts of the app work well: its simplicity and accessibility and the core functions of taking photos, recording audio clips, adding text and marking boundaries on a neighbourhood map, MapLocal is an incomplete design. Two significant challenges remain: first how to draw participants into the design of the app. This challenge reminds us that MapLocal is a tool, not a panacea. The issues of how to motivate citizens while meeting their different demands and priorities, and how to recognise and value the homogeneity of citizen voices, are not resolved. But, MapLocal's incompleteness at least offers the possibility for co-construction of its future development. Second, how to filter, order and marshal the material which the app helps to generate. Resonating with other contributions the author's critical reflection on their own work illustrates that providing a way of generating and giving voice to different forms of knowledge is not enough to shift how policy is made. This knowledge may be ignored or indeed manipulated. So, how this knowledge is marshalled and directed is of crucial importance. Apps such as MapLocal, are insufficient on their own, but making such technological tools easy-to-use and widely available may be an important part of imagining a co-productive alternative to policy-making and analysis.