information: interactions and impact

Abstract Submission Form

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Submission Details

Title of Abstract	Practices of community representatives in exploiting information channels for citizen engagement	
Type of Submission (please select ONE):	Full Paper	X
	Short Paper	
	Round Table Discussion	
Themes (please select all that apply):	Information Literacies	X
	Information Behaviour	X
	Impact	
	Information as agent of change	X
	Methodological Paper	
Abstract (Please check Call for Papers for requirements):	This paper presents results of an investigation of the practices of community representatives (in this case: Community Councillors in Scotland) in exploiting information channels for citizen engagement. Most information literacy research considers formal education, while there are few investigations of workplace information literacy (Williams, Cooper, & Wavell, 2014). The role of information	

literacy in citizenship has also been studied, for example (Lloyd, Kennan, Thompson, & Qayyum, 2013; Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012; Qayyum, Thompson, Kennan, & Lloyd, 2014; Smith, 2014, 2016a, 2016b), but there is a dearth of investigation into its use by elected representatives. This paper evaluates 'workplace information literacy' (Crawford & Irving, 2009) as a model for understanding the activities of community-level representatives.

Governments and Local Authorities invest in information professionals to engage with citizens. However Scotland's Community Councillors do not have budget for professional help (Bort, Mcalpine, & Morgan, 2012), so must undertake their own engagement activities. This is despite one of their statutory roles being dissemination of information from communities to authorities. Prior research has shown a related democratic deficit: only 10% of Community Councils have Internet presences facilitating engagement, and many do not use the Internet at all (Ryan & Cruickshank, 2014), even though many citizens use the Internet to obtain information.

This prompted a study addressing *inter alia* the research question: What are Community Councillors' current practices in exploiting information channels for (a) learning about their roles and (b) engaging citizens in democratic processes?

Methods
Questions were derived from SCONUL's 7-pillar information literacy framework (SCONUL, 2011), chosen for recentness and extensibility (for example (Secker, Coonan, Webster, & Wrathall, 2016)) and summarised below. Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987; Detlor, Hupfer, & Smith, 2016) enabled development of an activity system supporting evaluation of the context of activities (**Figure 2** below).

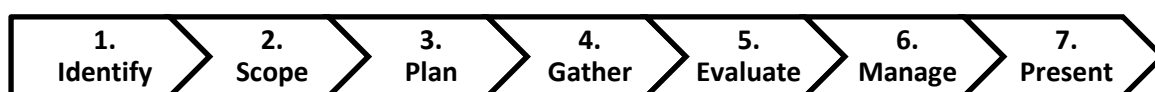| 1. Identify | 2. Scope | 3. Plan | 4. Gather | 5. Evaluate | 6. Manage | 7. Present |

Figure 1 The SCONUL 7-pillar model of Information Literacy

Data was collected from volunteer Community Councillors, from localities ranging from very urban to remote rural, and from deprived to well-off, using semi-structured interviews (n=19) supplemented by an online survey (n=10); questionnaires were sent to relevant librarians and Local Authority officials for triangulation. Interviews were transcribed, then manually coded around the research question and activities. A limitation is the self-selected sample: 17 had degree level qualifications so it is likely that only self-efficacious respondents participated.

Findings
The first area explored was how Community Councillors learn about their roles. They generally understand from Local Authority guidance that they should communicate citizens' opinions to public authorities. Also, some present information in the other direction, and some undertake quasi-governmental roles. This leads some to explore their roles by gathering information from other community councils and community bodies. However, information gathering is not rigorously planned. *Ad-hoc* approaches are taken, with most reliance being placed on Local Authority sources. Other sources include peers, 'official' web sites (e.g. Scottish Government, national Community Council website) and independent Facebook groups. Hence information evaluation is unlikely. Community Councillors do not generally need to present information on their roles.

The second area of research was discovery and sharing of information about local issues, including engaging citizens. Spatial planning information is the basis of a significant element of Community Councillors' work. Although they automatically receive some relevant information from their Local Authorities (sometimes supplemented by the Scottish public information notices portal[1]), there are issues in obtaining information and being heard, as has been previously reported (Improvement Service, 2015). Only one participant was clear about scoping his sources. Official sources are supplemented by citizens, the local press and Facebook, and to a lesser extent developers and construction workers.

Citizens' opinions are obtained from: social media (principally Facebook, though this ranges from complete avoidance to high use). Offline sources are important: they mix word-of-mouth and local

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[1] Tellmescotland.gov.uk – a Scottish Government web site that lists active planning and travel notifications.

networking with survey-type approaches; some respondents were aware of skill gaps in gauging public opinion.

Community Councillors take steps to fill information gaps of which they are aware. They generally evaluate information by considering its provenance, such as whether it comes from 'authoritative' sources (with social media given a low rating by some). Some Community Councils use email headers, such as 'for information', to facilitate information management.

Different approaches are used for presenting information. Digital channels include blogs, email and Facebook (Twitter is hardly used) but there is a general lack of audience analytics skills. Non-digital channels include: newsletters; word-of-mouth and local networking; and the local press. Obstacles to sharing information with citizens include poor leadership and internal communication issues.

Conclusions

Overall, Community Councillors recognise that information skills are 'critically important' in an environment where information serves as a form of currency. They use information skills to benefit others, for example addressing planning issues, acting on dog-mess. Some exhibited awareness of information skills gaps, a few even recognising that they are unaware of how much they are under-skilled. Community Councils are also challenged by lack of sufficient members to undertake all their tasks. This issue has been identified elsewhere (Goodlad, Flint, Kearns, Paddison, & Raco, 1999; Ryan & Cruickshank, 2012, 2014).

Activity Theory proved a useful tool for the analysis of information sharing processes (simplified overview in Figure 2 below). Community Councillors (the **subject**) are **motivated** by understandings of their roles to use **tools** (such as Facebook and traditional channels) to try to create the desired **objects** (shared information), but the **outcomes** they achieve have room for improvement. This happens in the context of perceived **rules and norms**, and is also influenced by peer groups and local communities. One emergent theme was issues around **division of labour**. While many Community Councils have teams for different topics, some lack teamwork and/or trust in colleagues' information abilities.
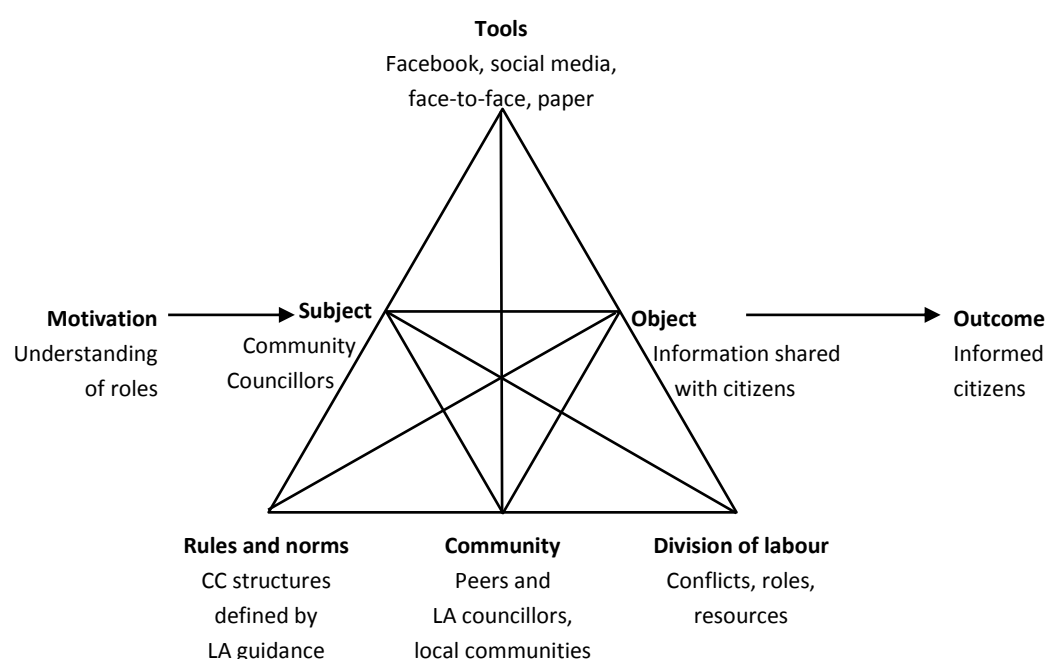

Figure 2: Activity system for Community Councillors sharing information with citizens

The 7-pillar information literacy model allows an analysis of strengths and weaknesses in participants' information behaviour. In summary, they **identify** information needs. **Scoping** and **planning** to fill information gaps lack rigour. Information is **gathered** from relevant sources but is not rigorously **evaluated**. In some Community Councils, information **management** has scope for improvement. Information **presentation** is highly variable. Overall, while Community Councillors procure and publish information, information literacy does not contribute as much as could be wished to their democratic roles. Future work will explore the potential issues raised by this project.

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