Tech for Social Good : Digital Social Innovation

Combined Report of Seminars:

3rd April 2014, Belfast Technology Conference

10th April 2014, NICVA

Keynote Inputs

Ashley Elizabeth Ball from the Young Foundation opened up the Belfast Technology conference plenary session on Tech for Social Good with some thoughts on the potential for technology to produce innovative solutions for some of our most pressing social problems. She spoke about her own experience in this field, both through her involvement with the social media campaign that contributed to Barack Obama's election as US President in 2008, as well as her work for Lambeth Council in London. Ashley's presentation can be downloaded here.

Matt Johnston from Digital Circle and **Glen Mehn** from Social Innovation Camp also participated in the plenary discussion.

Following the Beltech plenary session there was a breakout workshop on the same Tech for Social Good theme.

Both the breakout workshop and the subsequent seminar at NICVA on 10th April began with a presentation by **Sophie Hostick-Boakye** from the Young Foundation on the research report 'Turning Up the Dial'. This research was commissioned by the Building Change Trust in order to explore the concept of Digital Social Innovation and its potential applicability in Northern Ireland.

Sophie's presentation can be downloaded here and the research report can be downloaded here (summary) and here (full)

Councillor Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, Lord Mayor of Belfast

The Lord Mayor co-hosted the breakout workshop on Tech for Social Good at the Belfast Technology conference, and opened the session with the following remarks:

- We want to see progressive social change in Belfast
- Many of the parts of Belfast that were suffering from severe deprivation 40 years ago are the same today – this must be our focus
- Tech for social good can help us achieve these goals
- Kiva is a great example of a tech for social good venture

Attorney Eugene O'Flaherty, Corporation Counsel, City of Boston

Attorney O'Flaherty co-hosted the breakout workshop on Tech for Social Good at the Belfast Technology conference and opened the session with the following remarks:

- There is a major difference between technology standards in public and private sectors – the latter is way ahead
- In Boston a number of initiatives have been launched in order to promote innovation and technology for the benefit of the City's citizens. Including:
  - An office in City Hall for Innovation and Technology
  - Wifi is to be made free throughout the city
  - [Citizens Connect app](#) e.g. for reporting potholes, emergency responder info, etc.
  - Have recruited a team of 'new urban mechanics' who are located on the same floor as the Mayor in City Hall and are charged with 'being crazy' – using tech to break down bureaucracy – have developed two dashboards for Mayor's office with key data, including maps of where public servants have been
  - Open Government portal used for performance monitoring http://www.cityofboston.gov/open/

Glen Mehn, Social Innovation Camp

[Social Innovation Camp](#) matches software developers and those with an understanding of a social problem to help them start and grow technology-based social ventures.

The Building Change Trust have been supporting a Social Innovation Camp project in Northern Ireland since 2012. The project is about to enter a new phase and Glen made a presentation at both seminars to share the proposed approach and gather feedback from participants. Glen also shared some of his extensive knowledge and experience of Digital Social Innovation through highlighting a couple of key examples that have emerged from SI Camp's sister company [Bethnal Green Ventures](#).

Glen's presentation can be downloaded [here](#).

Responses to Research

Stephen Gray, NICVA

Stephen Gray is Head of Information Management at NICVA, the umbrella body for the Northern Ireland third sector. He gave a response to the 'Turning Up the Dial' research report at the 10th April seminar, the following is a summary of the points he raised:

- This research report is welcome and timely
- We're (society) at the very early stages of digital and digital innovation
- The VCSE (Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise) sector is innovative but maybe not in relation to digital technology
- There is little space for digital research and development within the VCSE sector
- A fear of digital exclusion may have held the sector back from digital innovation
- Many sector organisations are using outdated technologies
- Bad previous experience with tech companies providing poor service has coloured the experience of many, but the new breed of local tech companies operate to a much higher standard
- Digital innovation should put users are at the centre
- Much can be learned from the Agile development processes that tech industry uses
- However, we can't simply transpose solutions from elsewhere, they need thought through – we're delivering solutions for people in need not just building widgets
- Developers are motivated by solving problems,– the same as many people in the VCSE sector, we have more in common than many might think
- Language is an issue but also how we work (Agile (constant iteration) vs traditional project delivery approaches)
- Drupal is one open software project that uses a community organising approach familiar to many in the VCSE sector – this is now used by (amongst others) the NI Assembly education service, the White House, Community NI and Grant-Tracker
- Over 1 million people acorss the world join together for common goals but with different motivations. They use tech to collaborate and organise
- Collaborative open source development is is essentially like community development on steroids
- The key challenge is can we work together for better outcomes

Ben Bland, Farset Labs

Ben Bland is a Director of Farset Labs, Belfast's first and only hackerspace / makerspace. Ben gave a response to the 'Turning Up the Dial' research report at the 10th April seminar, the following is a summary of the points he raised:

- Farset Labs now describes itself as a makerspace, partly because hackerspace is not a well-understood term in NI
- The concept of a 'tech sector' is flawed – technology is horizontal i.e. it exists and applies everywhere, to all sectors; to say otherwise is to reinforce the perception the tech is for 'other people'
- Fear is not an excuse – there is plenty of help available these days
- Democratisation is one of the key trends in tech e.g. open source
- One key resource that the sector could use is the Human Centred Design Toolkit

- The Agile approach is very useful – design it quickly and put it out to users for feedback; rapid iterations produce things you wouldn't expect; better to use a bad tool quickly, measure its problems and improve it, than wait forever for a pre-planned perfect solution
- Using OKRs (Objectives and Key Results: see http://tinyurl.com/lpxuugm) and data metrics are key
- Hackathons are a key approach for tech for social good – it's a great way of getting developer time for free
- Customer Relations Management software is used more and more by third sector and one of the world's most popular platforms, Salesforce, is now free for non-profits

Participant Contributions

The following are the key points emerging from the discussion at both seminars, grouped according to themes:

Accessibility of and Attitude to Technology

- Young people are driving the digital revolution but it needs to be made accessible to older people too
- Older people tend to predominate in the VCSE sector, perhaps this contributes to the lower rate of use of digital technology
- Fear of technology can be a key barrier
- The urban-rural divide is also an issue – initiatives like Citizens Online are attempting to ameliorate this
- Inclusivity is key e.g. disabled access, gender, etc. need to be considered
- Some new technology e.g. Smartphones are seen as luxuries rather than essential tools for innovation

Innovation Culture in Northern Ireland

- NI is not short on innovation but tends not to finish the job – we lack imagination and there is a stifling environment
- The social innovation terminology is new and can be a blockage for people – this needs addressed, partly by showing people they are already doing it to some extent
- The social/third sector needs to be enabled to take risks – a sink or swim approach
- A lack of thinking time is a key barrier – people are bogged down in the day-to-day of their work

Funding and Resources

- Start-ups – there is a lack of investment and many tend not to focus on a social mission; there needs to be a mindset change
- Some resources exist already e.g. Fab Labs but we need to make better connnections
- Many funders are not interested in investing in Technology
- Revenue as opposed to capital funding will be key
- An asset-based approach is needed rather than continuously looking for funding

Practical Considerations

- Tech people are great at solving problems but need to know what the social problems are
- Need to break down the barriers between the tech sector and third sector to promote cross-sector collaboration e.g. promote joint events
- We need more examples of Digital Social Innovation – an information resource would be useful
- We need a group of passionate people to push Digital Social Innovation forward and foster collaboration – sharing and transparency will be key though
- Basic tech advice for third sector organisations would be useful to help them become more fluent, including around cyber-security and related risks
- Geeks-in-Residence – great idea, aspects of this are happening already but needed on a wider scale
- Could Digital Social Innovation ventures avail of existing Innovation Vouchers
- We need a dashoard of accessible data for people to use to inform ideas / development
- The [Culture Tech](#) Challenge site could be used for the third sector to set a challenge to the tech sector
- Idea of a Hub – central place for support, resources, ideas, what's been done; should enable different levels of entry for organisations
- Challenge Prizes – good idea but needs investment to make it work
- Service users need to be integrated into the process
- An online hub back by physical meetings would help stimulate learning
- High level buy-in within organisations is key i.e. management committee / Trustee level

Social Innovation Camp Project

- The process of engaging FE college students is the right one, although more detail would have been useful
- Need to ensure language is jargon-free
- Focus on problems rather than technology in the first instance
- Participants from the third sector could contribute both as citizens and staff members of organisations
- Is this ageist? Focus is on young people
- Maybe the project should engage with young children who are not already 'spoiled' by the FE structure
- A mix of urban and rural themes would be good
- Practical planning issues – location of sessions (should rotate), themes, timing
- Engage with tech companies to free up staff – need to be able to sell it to managers
- Need resources and incentives to carry the solution through build and into market
- Need to be open and democratic
- Focus should be on ideas that challenge the status quo and how to make them happen
- [Social Enterpise NI](#), [CO3](#), the [Consumer Council](#) and local authorities are key stakeholders

Annex 1: Examples of Tech for Social Good Reference by speakers and participants:

Spacehive (crowdfunding)   http://spacehive.com

Slivers of Time (micro-volunteering)   http://slivers.com

Shaped.By.Us (Cornwall-based open innovation)http://cornwall.shapedbyus.org/

Bethnal Green Ventures (DSI accelerator)   http://bethnalgreenventures.com

Social Impact Tracker (Impact Measurement)   http://socialimpacttracker.org

WIMPS (youth civic engagement)   http://wimps.tv

Change.org (e-petitiioning)   http://www.change.org

Kiva (microfinance)   http://www.kiva.org/

Citizens Connect (Boston civic engagement app)
                                   http://www.cityofboston.gov/doit/apps/citizensconnect.asp

Boston Open Government Portal   http://www.cityofboston.gov/open/

London Dashboard   http://data.london.gov.uk/london-dashboard

Fab Labs NI (Digital Fabrication)   http://fablabni.eu/

Coderdojo (youth-led open source coding)   http://coderdojo.com

Flip (now Represent – youth career guidance)   http://thisisrepresent.com/

Flowy (game to help with panic disorder)   http://flowygame.com/

Annex 2: List of Participants – Belfast Technology Conference Breakout Workshop, 3rd April

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Annex 3: List of Participants – Seminar at NICVA, 10th April

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