
Module 4

Guidebook

This Module opens a conversation with you about your relationship with digital technologies, and what that suggests about you as a researcher and a 'digital participant.'

To begin, we explore some of the changes brought to the structure and location of communities through the arrival of digital technologies, in particular 'smart devices' like smart phones and portable tablet computers, and what that means for social research in community engagement. We then discuss what 'thinking digital' brings to local government contexts and ask you, as a practitioner-researcher, to consider your own digital skills and literacies and how your role in community engagement is, or could be, organised by them.

Finally, we discuss how to capture, store and interpret 'digital data' so that data like social media posts and text messages can have a practical purpose and inform understandings of community engagement research and initiatives.

Module 4-1 Community and Digital Media

There are now over 150 million blogs on the Internet. This figure includes personal blogs as well as community blogs and about fifteen or so other categories (including *School*, *Business*, *Political*, *Sport*, *Non-Profit*, and further categories of blog identified in a recent post from WordPress.Com; see the link <https://wordpress.com/types-of-blogs/>). Online, or digital, communities also include email lists, forums, chat rooms, video games, virtual worlds, like *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*, and social networking sites such as the photo sharing site flickr or Tencent QQ, 'Double Q', which originated in China and is now the largest chat site in the world, overtaking Facebook.

The locations in which a sense of community can be generated and experienced have expanded well beyond where we immediately live. While this may not be news to you, when you think of 'community engagement' what are your first thoughts about community; *where* is this community? Does it include communities in the 'digital sphere'? Importantly, does it include the ways that members of your local

Module Content

Module 4 explores some of the changes brought to the structure and location of communities through the arrival of digital technologies, in particular 'smart devices' like smart phones and portable tablet computers. In particular, this Module focuses on:

- rethinking community spaces
- skills and understandings for 'thinking digital'
- how to capture, store and interpret 'digital data.'

Module 4 suggests new directions for thinking about, and with, communities, their locations and structures. It asks how 'thinking digital' can expand community engagement and research into and about communities.

Module Activities

4-1 Where is Community?

4-2 Generating Research Using Digital Media

Social Research Toolkit:

using social research in local government
community engagement

communities engage with others 'beyond the local'?

Module 4-2 Digital Media as Data

Social research today can include inquiry into pretty much everything we do as human beings, and all of our forms of communication. When applied to the social research discussed in this program, the implications of social media for considering community are immense. For instance, in the 'research design' stage of planning for research, as discussed in Module 3, decisions on a research focus as prescribed by a set of research questions need to be considered carefully to focus the research inquiry. In terms of digital media, how might the formulation of these research questions effect the collecting of *digital* data?

Thinking digitally, multiple techniques for collecting digital data can be included almost simultaneously; audio, video and still image recordings might be contained within the same social media posts, Twitter tweets and re-tweets, 'chat' or instant messages, and so on. All provide a source of data for considering the ways that events and phenomena are considered within the digital sphere, but importantly offer opportunity for accessing views about these events or phenomena via multiple forms of media.

While many digital communications may be 'social' and appear ephemeral or short lived, in reality they create almost permanent archives that are very useful to researchers. One of the advantages of having mobile devices today is that many of these archives can be generated, and accessed, by using just one device. Once you've decided on your data gathering strategy, your smartphone or computer tablet, for example, is capable of performing all of the techniques required for accessing and determining community views of an event via, say, a Council facebook page, or Twitter feed.

Working with communities can be equally rewarding and challenging when the boundaries of those communities are reasonably well known. Where new digital technologies and social media are concerned, assumptions around what a community is and where it is located may need to be relaxed to include some more expansive conceptualisations.

There's no doubt that online communications generate complex interactions which, as social researchers, we can treat in different ways to effect meaningful and engaged outcomes.