

# Connected Communities

## Localism, Narrative & Myth

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## Executive Summary

*Localism, Narrative & Myth* was a research project funded by the Connected Communities programme of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in 2012-2013. The project consisted of two strands of arts-based intervention research. In Wales and the South West, rather idealised and idyllic artistic interventions understandings of 'the local' were performed, including stories and photography at a May Day celebration, storytelling events and a photography shoot of a local choir. This prompted an often rather lyrical response by participants, identifying both the presence and the absence of 'the local'. In the North East, meanwhile, the artistic interventions were more observational of daily life, documenting in film, photography and interviews how people understand and engage with their locality. The primary reason for the distinction was the creative freedom given to the practitioners. While the scope of the project had been broadly defined, it was the creative practitioners' imagination of the local that governed the artistic interventions.

The central finding of the project is that participants could identify a, and even 'the', local in a specific area, which was often noticeable both by its presence and by its absence. This absence was both because people moved to somewhere different (though these were often younger, more affluent people, who felt that they could become local) and, more strikingly, because the public spaces in which people interact, such as shops, pubs or cafes are missing in more economically deprived areas. A lack of associational space led people to describe how 'there is no local here'.

The outputs for this project are a methodological article for the SAGE Methods Collection (*Localism, Narrative & Myth: Method in Action*, submitted and accepted, forthcoming online in 2014), a website [localismnarrativemyth.weebly.com](http://localismnarrativemyth.weebly.com) as well as journal articles in preparation.

## Researchers and Project Partners

Antonia Layard, Hilary Ramsden, Joe Painter, Raksha Pande, Martin Maudsley, Rebecca Bernstein, Laygate Stories, Michael Smith, Durham Book Festival, Hamish Fyfe, Beyond the Borders Festival

## Key words

Local, localism, storytelling, film, photography, arts based interventions

## Localism, Narrative and Myth

This project used arts based interventions to grapple with whether there might, or might not be, a local and if so, what this (or these) might be. The project was designed to be methodologically innovative. It drew on narratives to provide 'data' from audience members and, through questionnaires, from the creative participants, through which to interrogate academic and narrative understandings of 'the local'. The aim was always to draw out plural understandings from different participants and creative practices, interrogating the tension between singular and multiple understandings of the local.

In particular, by drawing on innovative methods and situating the engagement with creative practitioners at the heart of the project, this research has contributed to the development of a distinctive Connected Communities approach to research by promoting productive engagement with communities of creative practitioners from the 'bottom up'. The 'data' was co-produced, facilitated by an outline specification but resting primarily on the creative talents of the storytellers, filmmakers and photographers who engaged with the participants directly, without academic mediators.

There is also an ongoing policy angle to this research, as it was specifically formulated to consider these understandings of 'the local' in light of the current UK Government's localism agenda, including the Localism Act 2011. The final, journal writing stage of this research, which will outlive the project, aims to interrogate these relationships between governance of and by the local more explicitly.

### Methodology

A number of assertions support the use of the arts for inquiry: that words are proxies for direct experience; that we know more than we can say; and that the arts access the range of human emotion and make a more holistic contribution to our understanding. Estrella and Forinash suggest that arts-based inquiry allows us to retrieve and explore the "marginalized, controversial, and disruptive perspectives that have often been lost in more traditional research methodologies" (2007: 377). Through these methods research "becomes a process of overcoming distance rather than creating it" (2007: 381-2).

This working assumption was particularly useful in our project and was our first reason for using these methods. The 'local' is a unit of governance but it is also a feeling, a place, a felt place. We wanted to tap into some of the emotional resonance of 'a local' to see whether we could get beyond a more familiar understanding of the local as local government (the local authority, local schools, local police beats). We agreed with Estrella & Forinash (2007) that arts create a sense of knowing through the creative process and the experiencing of it.

Using these methods allowed us to draw on 'tacit' knowledge (Tsoukas, 2002), which opens up 'undiscovered avenues of understanding' (Estrella & Forinash, 2007: 381) making the invisible visible, and bringing into the foreground that which has been suppressed and silenced (Taylor, 2002). This seemed to us to support Taylor & Ladkin's (2009) argument that arts-based methods can enable those involved to apprehend the 'essence' of a concept, situation, or tacit knowledge in a particular way, revealing depths and connections that more propositional and linear developmental orientations cannot.

Accessing tacit knowledge would, we hoped, enable participants to communicate the 'unthought known'.

A second reason for using arts-based interventions was that these methods allowed us to give voice to those not heard through traditional mechanisms. Vaara, Tienari and Sötti (2003) have suggested that such methods elicit different kinds of thinking from people who have not found voices through traditional mechanisms. This is because such methods enable us to explore the places we do not usually go to comfortably, releasing what Taylor (2002:827) describes as "aesthetic muteness" where "discourse about the aesthetic aspect of day-to-day experience is not legitimate." Arts based methods are a participatory process that invite and validate people's personal narratives, enabling individuals to feel empowered to take "constructive action." Empathy for the other also becomes possible through the multiple perspectives that "allow for recognition of the otherness of the other." (Estrella & Forinash, 2007: 381- 2).

There was also a very practical reason why arts-based methods gave voice to participants whose views and understandings might not have been captured through conventional research. This was because we were lead by the creative participants and followed their networks, researching in locations that were different from those that we places that academics conventionally focus on. This led to a very rich series of comparisons between more privileged (in terms of public and green spaces and community facilities as well as income) 'locals' and places where both financial and other resources were in much shorter supply.

Thirdly, arts based methods of inquiry ask participants to suspend their habitual patterns of mind or understanding of the world, their cynicism, their indifference, their negativity, in order to find new ways of imagining, perceiving, creating and analyzing (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006; Estrella & Forinash, 2007). New understandings may begin and emerge from an interruption in or a questioning of the "accepted ways of understanding the world." (Estrella & Forinash, 2007: 379).

This was useful for us since storytelling, film and photographs are media that can help us in exploring the different ways in which the local and localism is understood and experienced in communities. Stories may be told, photographs and films may be taken from multiple perspectives, the variety of which has the potential to spark a corresponding multiplicity of responses from audiences and participants. Diverse, even contradicting responses offer increased opportunities for exchange and communication, with the potential for creating more nuanced understandings of complex issues instead of simple broad generalisations.

### Creative Outputs

The project produced a series of creative outputs that can be seen on the website [narrativelocalismyth.weebly.com](http://narrativelocalismyth.weebly.com)

**Photojournalism:** One of the films commissioned was *Yusuf's Story* made by Laygate Stories, a multimedia project that portrays in their own voices the lives of those living and working on Tyneside in the North-East of England. Yusuf is a community





organiser working with Yemenis in the Laygate area who reflects both on his own memories of Laygate, as visitor when he was young, and its prospects in light of wide-ranging immigration as well as his hopes for economic prosperity in South Shields.

## Writing:

The project commissioned a piece of writing from Michael Smith, called *Are You Local?*

I'm not local anymore, but I used to be, and I miss it.

Waking up to a strange, familiar spare room, the rag'n'bone cry through a ghostly, misty morning, like some Marie Celeste of the Old Town.

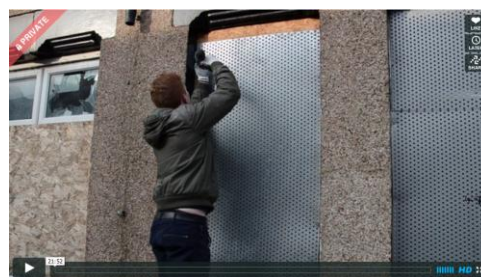
Walking out the front door, soaking up the street, a nose full of sea air, the squark of the seagulls, the fresh quiet light on the red northern brick, the big seaside skies of summer sighing into autumn, of back to schoolin' time.

The pomp of Victorian clocktowers and customs' houses dwarfed by oil rig legs, wind farms being assembled, the medieval sandstone seawall that guards the fishing village where it all began.

(the full piece is available on the project website)

**Film:** *Another England: Granada* is a film made by Michael Smith and Maxy Bianco.

It explores the immigration of the Bianco family to Hartlepool, identifying their family shop as well as recording its destruction. This sense of the loss of a local, 'the loss of a yesterday, romantic and gay' as expressed in the song *Granada* sung by Bianco's great uncle, which is threaded through the film, is explored alongside a new wave of Pakistani immigration and the creation of what might be seen as a new local. As the film asks, but leaves unanswered, "how did all this unravel? how did all this disappear?"



While there is a reprise of a nostalgic notion the film captures a sense among some residents that this current local is not worth preserving. There is a sense of fatalism and acceptance, 'these landlords ... as long as they get the money they don't want to know ... that's the situation the world's in matey'. The current local is also not popular, 'it's all changed, we're like Beirut' or I'm glad that this area is getting knocked down'.

## Durham Book Festival:

A session called, 'Are you local?' was held at the Durham Book Festival in October 2012. It featured three authors discussing their writing on the theme of localism and its consequences. Emily Cockayne, Peter Mortimer and Michael Smith discussing the theme of localism, its meaning and its consequences. Emily Cockayne read from her book *Cheek by Jowl: A History of Neighbourliness* (Bodley Head: 2012) tracing the story of the British neighbour through nine centuries - spanning Medieval, Tudor and Victorian periods, two world wars and up to today's modern, virtual world. Michael Smith read the piece 'Are you local?' commissioned for the festival and reproduced in full on the project website. Peter Mortimer read from his book *Made in Nottingham* (Five Leaves,

2012) part memoir, part documentary and social commentary, which describes how he took up residence in the same street he grew up in, on the Sherwood council estate in Nottingham.

**Storytelling:** Storytellers were commissioned to explore what 'local' meant to them in their creative practice. One set of stories were told by Malcom Green who led a Storywalk (transcribed on the project website) at the Beyond the Border Wales International Storytelling Festival. Another set of stories, called *Whose Land is it anyway*, were developed by Martin Maudsley and performed by Martin and Fiona Barrow on accordion in Bristol, Patchway (an economically deprived suburb) and in Dorset. After Martin Maudsley told his stories, he and Antonia Layard gathered responses from audience members about how they understood the local or whether they were local. These responses found 'the local' where we might have expected it but also, strikingly, an absence of local in other places.

**Photography:** Rebecca Bernstein, a photographer, was commissioned to take photographs of 'the local' and local events in Bristol and Patchway. Her images document communal activities, with people coming together in key community sites (in a distinctive local tunnel, at a May Day celebration or a community centre). They document interaction and engagement, presenting an optimistic understanding of 'the local'.



### Analysis:

While all the researchers identified different findings each specific to their own research, one of the most striking was the repeated assertion that there was such a thing as 'the local' and that this was evident both to those who felt part of it and by its absence. This was interesting given wide acceptance of critiques of spatial imaginaries of the local, which have stressed that any idea of the local is overly singular and that it does not adequately represent the interrelationships between the global and the local.

These glocal interrelationships have been borne out by the artistic interventions. In the film *Another England*, for example, or in *Yusuf's story*, even here immigrants to the UK have been concerned with making their homes in the locality in which they find themselves, with interests that are not particularly distinctive as a result of their global connections. Yusuf's primary concern, for example, is that 'good harmony' between different communities continues and that the economic situation of South Shields improves. As David Campbell, the producer, who made *Yusuf's Story*, explained, South

Shields turns out to be as multi-cultural a place as any other, notwithstanding its status as a stereotypically 'white working-class community'. But people in this multi-cultural local appear to be concerned with this locality, while always acknowledging connections beyond.

Certainly such multiplicity may not always be as evident. Inevitably, the local you find, as our research demonstrated over and again, depends on what you set out to look for. In Bristol and Dorset, in more affluent and less ethnically mixed locations, imaginations of the local by creative practitioners drew remarkably consistent understandings of the local, whether present or absent, from respondents that were (apparently) much less interrelated with the global. Responses included, for example, that 'the local is as far as I can cycle before breakfast' or defining the local as '[k]nown relationships based on a loose shared identity – friendliness, connection, support' with repeated references to allotments and local food production. In Dorset we even found surprisingly localist understandings: 'I'd say if your family is buried in your locality, then you feel local', which were explicitly challenged by participants in a storytelling and presentation of this research in Balsall Heath in Birmingham.

Perhaps one of the most striking findings was how often this focus rests on shared experiences of food and drink (the pub in Smith's, *Am I local?* the purchases from the local shop in *Another England*, the Arab hops bread and coffee made from coffee husks mentioned by Yusuf and the allotments and locally grown vegetables mentioned repeatedly by respondents in Bristol and Dorset). Representations of the local are more than discursive, they are, as we would have expected, frequently embodied and material, even if these too are formed by interactions between the local and the global.

Certainly, local spaces are made through interactions at all levels yet the local level remains significant and distinct. Repeated understandings illustrated that 'the local' still exists and that this is more than a scalar interpretation (for our participants at least, this assumption is more questionable in the context of Government policy). There is in Lippard's term a 'lure of the local', it is still seen as a site of belonging, in Lippard's phrase, the "the pull of place that operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation" (Lippard, 2007).

Explicitly engaging with this tension between plurality and singularity through diverse creative approaches, this project did find multiple locals, though these were often overlapping rather than concurrent. We agree for example, with a critical report on the UK Government's localism agenda, which suggested that "[t]he word 'local' ... is defined by the context and intention of its use. Unpacked, it is loaded with spatial, social and cultural assumptions, and not a few emotional undertones" (TUC, 2012). Nevertheless, it did not appear in our research that as the quotation also asserts, the local "doesn't mean anything" or that "[m]y 'local' is probably not yours..." If we are people physically nearby, engaged in 'the politics of propinquity', there is a consistent identification of the local, or where the local facilities should be.

The policy question this raises is how to fit in these repeated findings of 'the local' with the UK Government's policy agenda and the Localism Act 2011. One point that recurred in the research was the lack of local resources, including shops and other facilities within

which to interact in economically deprived areas. When these disappear as a result of property transactions beyond the control of individuals or the local community, the loss of these spaces within which to meet can have profound effects upon 'the local'. Then the local is more imagined, and may still be remembered or conjured up, but it is not observable by respondents in their everyday lives.

While the 'right to bid' for listed community assets under the Localism Act 2011 might address this and is being used in more prosperous communities, it is clear that in more deprived areas, raising the thousands of pounds to buy a local pub, shop or other asset is impracticable for most. The net result of this is that being local becomes something that is in the past, noticeable by its absence, perhaps best summed up by the elderly respondent in Patchway, noting the lack of local shops, cafés or facilities, describing the monthly Elder Person's tea party in the community centre as "an oasis". When spaces disappear and streets are increasingly violent, then the locality is more like Beirut (as described in *Another England*), very far from local. And again, when the only shop is a Tesco superstore and there are no pubs, cafés or community spaces, where people can meet and congregate in comfort, then, as one elderly respondent put it: "there is no local here, love".



## References and external links

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## 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](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx)

