Please cite the Published Version

Information for Localism? Policy Sensemaking for Local Governance

Rob Wilson*, James Cornford**, Sue Baines***, John Mawson****

*Newcastle University

** University of East Anglia

*** Manchester Metropolitan University

**** University of Durham

Abstract

Recent policy changes emphasising localism as opposed to centrally driven performance management have potentially significant implications for the use of information in local policy shaping. This paper explores the challenges that this implies in terms of the framing of the problem and of the current and future and uses of information for local governance.

Introduction

Achieving the vision of responsive and agile public services was once hampered by a shortage of information. Increasingly the problem is now the opposite – an apparent overload of information, or at least data. A decade of 'modernisation', 'e-government' and 'transformational' government has resulted in the "instrumentation" of many public service relationships and the automatic capture of vast quantities of data. New assessment and record systems have added to the deluge. What is less clear is the extent to which these data are being effectively transformed into information that can be used to inform service planners and practitioners and help them to make sense of and begin to resolve local problems and issues.

There is, a voluminous literature, both normative and empirical, on the various ways in which organisations should and do manage information. The overlapping, but distinct, traditions of research labelled as information management, knowledge management and organisational learning all provide a range of valuable insights. However, each of these traditions focuses mainly on the individual organisation, limiting their usefulness in the kind of multi-agency service environments, characterised by the interaction of range of organisations with very different structures, histories and missions, which characterise much contemporary welfare provision.

One of the outcomes from a recently completed ESRC Seminar series on "Re-mixing the Economy of Welfare" (http://www.socialwelfareservicedelivery.org.uk/) was a set of emerging discussions around the role of information and information sharing in the domain of local governance. Organisations involved in local governance activities including local authorities, NHS trusts and larger national Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) organizations (such as Barnardos and The Salvation Army) have gone through a profound process of informationalisation - becoming the owners of large datasets containing information about their customers or clients, both in terms of records (of individuals and interactions) but also in terms of management and performance information (e.g. the National Indicators sets).

Information, and importantly the sharing of this information, has been seen as essential to the vision of modernised public services which are joined up, or holistic (Ling, 2002; 6 et al.; 2002; Hudson, 2007) as well as "customer focused" and efficient. Since the late nineties, the British Government has been engaged in a series of policies aimed at joining up the local delivery of services at a number of levels (national; regional, local). At the heart of these modernisation drives was the generation of data in order to drive 1) evidence-based policy 2) performance management frameworks (targets), 3) the management of risk (for instance of benefit fraud or patient safety) 4) the achievement of joined up policy making and service delivery 5) efficiency improvements (e.g., Gershon – public sector efficiency savings and current Total Place agenda) and overall improved 'customer' satisfaction. Part of the argument for the 'e-enabling' of public services was that policy makers, managers, professionals, service users and ultimately the public could draw on these data to monitor, improve and ultimately transform services. The indications from the ESRC seminars (particularly the ones on information sharing and articulating value) is that these organisations involved in local governance activities tend to be data-rich yet at the same time information poor. The much heralded transformation in the use of information to drive improvements in services has seemingly failed to materialize. Why is this so?

Developing Local Knowledge for Local People
Researchers in the fields of information science and knowledge management make a strong distinction between data and information. "Data" is usually glossed as a set of discrete facts about events – the kind of material which is increasingly available from information systems. Information, by contrast, implies the presence of a sender and receiver of information and that, if the communication is effective, that there is a change in the way the receiver perceives something. In short, information must inform somebody. A third term – "knowledge" – is critical to the process of transforming data into information. Knowledge is has been defined as "a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information" (Davenport and Prusak, 2000; cf. Brown and Duguid, 2000). It is only in the context of a specific body of knowledge that data can be interrogated and be made to offer up information. This is not a purely technical matter of finding the 'right analytical technique,' important as that might be. Rather is about an active process of "sense making," of fitting the data into a wider body of knowledge, guided by a wider set of strategic priorities.

If the new regime is keen to see the locus of sense-making in public services shift to the local level, the body of knowledge within which the data deluge is to be interpreted must also be more substantively 'local knowledge.' What is much less clear from our work with local public services is whether the community that might support such local knowledge still exists. The dominant informational paradigm in public services for much the past two decades has been modelled on a vision of universal, comparable knowledge (for example, forms that can be easily ranked in league tables) rather than information to inform local priorities. For local policy makers and practitioners in the public service, interpretative schema have been things that have predominantly come from outside, wrapped up in the language of "Best Practice", National Frameworks and Common Assessments. While there has been a nod towards local priorities, localism has been seen in terms of selecting from, or prioritizing within, a predefined set of nationally defined indicators or categories. While we might argue over the costs and benefits of such an approach, what is clear is that it has also been associated with an undervaluing of, and an atrophying in the capacity to develop, truly local knowledge.

Entanglement and the Moral Economy of Information
While data are defined as discrete facts about events, the moment that we try to extract meaning from a set of data, their discrete character becomes blurred. For example, to interpret a piece of data it is important to know, if only implicitly, why they were collected, by whom, from whom, under which conditions and with which instruments. Information gathered from an opinion survey is different from information gathered from a benefit review interview. Data then are, in Anderson and Carlson's (2007) phrase 'entangled' with the conditions of their production and bring with them a history or provenance which must be taken into account when interpretations are made.

Data can be seen as something *created* through interaction – usually something as simple as the pairing of a question and answer. The answers clearly depend on the questions that are asked. But the answers also depend on a wider "moral economy" under which the data is gathered. In this moral economy the perceived status of the questioner – the "collector" of data– is important. What people are willing to disclose depends on what they perceive to be the interests and values of the questioner. Both the Labour government and the coalition have increasing sought to involve the voluntary community sector (VCS) in local service provision, and position that is often justified in terms of the the 'special' relationship that VCS organisations have with their clients. Some clients, it is argued, will tell VCS agencies things that they will not tell statutory public agencies, and this serves as the basis of the VCS 'special' relationship with their clients. Where VCS agencies are then asked/contracted to share data with 'official' public sector agencies, this 'special' relationship is compromised. From the point of view of this "moral economy" of information it is important that those providing the information are able to understand the purposes for which that information is gathered, to know what is done with the information (for example with whom it is shared), and to have an aggregate of the information they provide fed back to them. Without these feedback loops, the provision of information comes to feel like, at best, a bureaucratic game, and at worst, disciplinary surveillance (Zuboff, 1988; Nutley and Davies, 2000).

Learning from the previous approach: Improving the quality of the mistake
What are the governance structures, data capture processes, analytical techniques and interpretative schema that might help to create information to support the new localism? How might they differ from the structures, processes, techniques and schemas which have characterised New Labour's modernisation efforts?

If we examine the last years of the previous government we can see attempts to rationalise the centrally driven data collection process including the 'Lifting the Burdens' taskforce which suggested:

- Remove irrelevant performance indicators
- Ensure indicators are clear and unambiguous in their definition
- Ensure a single Customer Satisfaction Survey
- **C**ollect **O**nce **U**se **N**umerous **T**imes – COUNT

One of the previous government's responses to this was approach to public service data was to create the DCLG 'Data Interchange Hub'. The hub guide stated that the reasons that it has been introduced are to "reduce the burden on collecting data for local authorities and to ensure that local authorities have all the information that they need to gauge their own performance against the National Indicators" (CLG, 2008). The hub (which was basically a 'data warehouse' of public sector performance data), which was described by one of its proponents as a "a 'bucket', a 'hoover' and a 'window'", was a mechanism for collating and sharing national indicator information to support the

monitoring of Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and sharing national indicator data sets. Presentations about the hub stressed that "the Hub is not an analytical tool but it should feed [analysis] tools (e.g. CLG's Floor Targets Interactive, CLG's Places Database)" (CLG, 2008)

Clearly the 'hub' was in its early stages. One possible (even likely) trajectory was an increasing number of functions (such as decision-support tools) being provided to *add* value. If local or sub-national areas are truly going to *localise,* the agents of local governance (e.g. the Local Economic Partnerships) need to be able to appropriate these data to place-shape. A productive approach could have been to engage with members of various local communities (including academics) to interpret hub data with a view to assessing *outcomes* in combination with other data covering localities (quantitative and qualitative; geographic and narrative; locally, regionally and nationally sourced) supporting diversity and articulations of value(s).

The role and responsibilities of academics and others in such contexts is a further potential rich area for such exploration (for instance the cases of the Institute of Local Governance - see www.ilg.org.uk - and the Local Government Transparency Programme - see www.lgtransparency.readandcomment.com/local-transparency and the Openly Local website www.openlylocal.com as examples of emerging spaces in which these sorts of conversations are beginning to occur). Outcomes may be defined for service users as individuals or as collective demographic groups. These higher level outcomes are important to both the service delivery and corporate commissioning worlds to evaluate their performance. It is also important to define internal outcomes, the results of multi agency or collaborative working on the effectiveness and motivation of practitioners and service managers (Framework for Multi-agency Environments (FAME) www.fame-uk.org, SocTIM, 2010). This would require a change from the prevalent discourses of inspection/audit/shop windowing (performance agenda) to a discourse of sense-making – exploration, detection, navigation – to support the co-production outcomes through engagement with communities

However, a note of warning must be sounded. Data integration approaches have their problems. During the period of the last government we also observed the experiences of the DfES/DCSF ContactPoint programme whose attempts to integrate or 'cleanse' data from a number of systems became fraught with issues of 'data matching' and identity management (Baines et al. 2010; Wilson et al. 2011). The metaphor of cleansing data is grounded in a familiar vision of data as objective, free of local biases and untainted by its conditions of creation. This vision of a quasi-Platonic, pure 'form' promises many advantages, not just freedom from subjective bias (Porter, 1995) but also the possibility of comparison over time and across space. For these desirable goals to be achieved, however, data needs to be 'disentangled' from the conditions of its production and this can both erode the moral economy of information and hamper effective interpretation of the data.

One way in which this can happen is illustrated by the lack of any kind of reporting tools in the early versions of the Single Assessment Process system applications supplied by Connecting for Health (Wilson et al., 2007; Wilson and Baines, 2009) to local care communities delivering care for Older People. Without such tools, the providers of information become alienated from the information gathering and information sharing activities and the Assessment Process comes to be seen primarily as an external imposition associated with surveillance and control, rather than something to support and aid management planning and professional practice. And where information gathering is perceived in these terms, the incentives to co-operate and collaborate in the production of

information are undermined, and thus the quality of the information-base is compromised. These are examples of the failure to understand the relationships and values that organisations, managers, practitioners and citizens have and potentially *have with* and *put within* information.

Another limitation of the approach based on disentangling the data is that, in breaking data into smaller, more standardised and easily 'cleansable' chunks, the capacity of the data to actually inform practice can be compromised. A good example here has been the extremely problematic Integrated Childrens' System (ICS). This set of standard forms and database structures sought to create a common information-base for professionals working with Children in each local authority area. However, in practice, the ICS was experienced by its primary user group – social workers – as fragmenting information on children, rendering it "bitty" and incoherent, impeding the development of a story or narrative to the case (White et al., 2010; Shaw et al. 2009; cf. Parton, 2008).

Free and Transparent Information
Lobbying by internet 'inter-preneurs' such as Sir Tim Berners-Lee has led to the Cabinet Office leading a drive to establish a much more open regime for public data in the UK. This has, in turn, led to the Power of Information Task force report (Cabinet Office, 2009) and the establishment of data.gov.uk. The requirement for increased transparency via data.gov.uk and local equivalents means that there will be pressure for datasets to be made publically available. This is both an opportunity and threat.

Recent work presented in the seminar series from the context of the use of performance management information in the Voluntary and Community (VCS) or Third Sector (Moxham), information governance in Local Government and Fire and Rescue Services (Wilson, Richter, Martin and colleagues), data sharing in local government (Ferguson/SocITM) identity management and joined-up assessment processes for Children and Young People across the four nations of the UK (Ellison) and personalised care and information for Adults (Hill), Freedom of Information (FOI) in Scotland (Burt and Taylor); social measurement issues in the health service (Cheatham) revealed a lack of wider strategic intent in these sectors and contexts towards information and information issues (see the ESRC Seminar Series website www.socialwelfareservicedelivery.org.uk). Policy and Strategic officers in these organisations have spent the last decade or more servicing Government (both central and local) need for performance information of all kinds. The new government purports to be less interested in performance by targets and keen to promote localism. What does this mean for the 'social life' of information within localities? Will it be allowed to move from its extended adolescence and become the focus of local debates about the prioritisation of local service provision? The future holds many challenges not least the capacity and skills of the organisations set to be involved in local governance such as Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to begin to work with their communities to begin to make sense of this data. In some local areas there has been considerable innovation often focussed on participatory or community budgeting or citizen jury approaches. Another idea that has been floated is the concept of a cohort of 'armchair auditors' who scrutinise the activity of local authorities. (see for example the cases of the Windsor and Maidenhead Armchair Auditor website http://armchairauditor.co.uk/ and the Guardian's Reluctant Armchair Auditor http://reluctantarmchairauditor.wordpress.com/)

We would argue that an increased emphasis on sensemaking is required as these kinds of data flows emerge from new systems, and as the emphasis in public service reform is shifting towards making more effective use of information to improve service delivery and the citizen experience. As policy

makers, managers and professionals – and even public service users – begin to make use of such data, a range of new and potentially innovative practices are beginning to emerge.

Conclusions: A Time and Opportunity for Active Engagement?
We believe that we are at a critical juncture before the data and emerging processes of interpretation become embedded and ensnared in the newly emerging local structures. In a short period these are likely to become increasingly fixed with the potential of a 'data driven' determinism with the *in*telligence being applied by pre-ordained algorithms in complicated computer systems (cf. Cordella, 2007). This reliance on determinism constrains the *ex*telligence (Stewart and Cohen, 1997) of a community sensemaking process and its capacity to provide insights and innovation. If the processes of interpretation become tightly coupled, fixed and in the hands of a privileged few, then the potential to engage, to co-produce and re-shape localised understandings and meaning is subsequently reduced, thereby also reducing interpretative diversity across the local governance landscape as a whole. The moral authority of the governance process through which local policy decisions are made may also be brought into question.

Three challenges arise from this. First can social scientists and information scientists (both within and outside Universities) meet the theoretical, conceptual, political and practical challenges that this entails? Second can resources and tools be created which support sustainable data-intensive community building activity? Third can capacity be built within communities to use these tools in action to create opportunity for constructive dialogue? In order to cultivate a richer set of discourse(s) around the possible range of 'locals' we need to challenge by asking who is sharing what information, what is being interpreted, for whom, for what purpose and in what context. Only by asking such questions do we begin to support the production of views from a HERE or at least somewhere(s) rather than nowhere.

References

6, P., Leat, D., Seltzer, K. and Stoker, G. (2002) *Towards Holistic Governance: The new Reform Agenda*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Baines S., Wilson R. and Walsh S. (2010) Seeing the full picture? Technologically enabled multi-agency working in health and social care, *New Technology, Work and Employment* 25(1): 19-33.

Brown, J. S. and Duguid, P. (2000) *The Social Life of Information*. Boston: HBR Press.

Cabinet Office (2009), The Power of Information Taskforce report. Cabinet Office website http://powerofinformation.wordpress.com/

Carlson, S. and Anderson, B. (2007), 'What *are* Data? The Many Kinds of Data and Their Implications for Data Re-Use' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *12*(2), article 15. [Available at http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue2/carlson.html]

Cordella, A. (2007), E-government: towards the e-bureaucratic form? *Journal of Information Technology* 22: 265–274.

Davenport, T. and Prusak, L. (2000), *Working Knowledge*. Boston Mass: HBR Press

Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) (2008) Data Interchange hub Guide (v1) Available at http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/732106.pdf Accessed June 2010

Hudson, B. (2007), 'Pessimism and optimism in inter-professional working: The Sedgefield Integrated Team' *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, $21(1): 3 - 15$

Ling, T. (2002), Delivering joined–up government in the UK: dimensions, issues and problems, *Public Administration*, 80(4): 615-642.

Nutley, S. and Davies, H. (2000), 'Making a reality of evidence based practice', pp. 317-350 in Davies *et al*. (eds), *What works? Evidence based policy and practice in public services.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Parton, N. (2008) Changes in the form of Knowledge in social work: from the "social" to the "informational" *British Journal of Social Work,* 38(2): 253-69.

Porter, T. (1994), 'Information, Power, and the View from Nowhere, 'pp. 217-230 in Lisa Bud-Frierman, ed., *Information Acumen: The Understanding and Use of Knowledge in Modern Business*. London: Routledge.

Porter, T. (1995) *Trust In Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

Shaw, I., Bell, M., Sinclair, I, Sloper, P., Mitchell, W., Dyson, P., Clayden, J. and Rafferty, J. (2009), An Exemplary Scheme An Evaluation of the Integrated Children's System, *British Journal or Social Work*, 39: 613-626.

SocITM Insights (2010) *Too many cooks: the information management implications of place-based public services* London, Society of IT managers (SocITM)

Stewart, I. and Cohen, J. (1997), *Figments of Reality: The evolution of the curious mind*. Cambridge: CUP.

White, S. Wastell, D., Broadhurst, K. and Hall, C. (2010) When policy o'erleaps itself: the 'tragic tale' of the Integrated Children's System, *Critical Social Policy*, 30(3): 405-429.

Wilson, R., Baines, S., Cornford, J and Martin, M. (2007) 'Trying to do a jigsaw without the picture on the box' Understanding the challenges of care integration in the context of single assessment for older people in England, *International Journal of Integrated Care*, 7

Wilson, R. and Baines, S. (2009) Are there limits to the integration of care for older people? in: B. D. Loader, M. Hardey and L. Keeble (eds) *Digital Welfare for the Third Age: health and social care informatics for older people*. Routledge. pp.17-27.

Wilson, R., Martin, M., Walsh, S. and Richter, P. (2011) Re-mixing the Digital Economies of in the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS): Governing identity and information sharing in the mixed economy of care for children and young people. *Social Policy and Society* (10,3). In Press.

Zuboff, S. (1988) *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*. New York: Basic Books.