

'Talking Out of Turn: Getting Community Voices Heard'

20 November 2014

Annual Conference & AGM (Registration for conference from 12.30 for 1300 start)

**Venue: The Circle.
33, Rockingham Lane, Sheffield,
S1 4FW
(Tel: 0114 253 6600)**

Keynote Speaker:

Carolyn Kagan Manchester
Metropolitan University

ARVAC Chair: John Diamond

Workshops: will include
community projects linking
research & action.

The ARVAC AGM will take
place from 1100-1200.

Registration is free and
open to all, but places
are limited.

Light refreshments are
available on arrival from
12.30.

Delegates will be invited
to make a voluntary
donation towards costs.

Book now:

<http://arvactalkingoutofturn14.eventbrite.co.uk>

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ARVAC Annual Lecture 2014

This year's ARVAC Annual Lecture, held at the RIBA in London, was well attended by ARVAC members. The main speaker was Professor Jenny Pearce, from Bradford University, with Nick Ockenden from NCVO as discussant. There was lively debate following both speakers contributions, ranging from the potential of community organising as a vehicle for positive change in communities to the importance of the keep volunteering voluntary campaign to the sector. Both speakers have been kind enough to provide us with a summary of their talks for this issue of the newsletter. Below Jenny Pearce considers the underlying themes which inform the approach from both right and left of the political spectrum to strengthening communities and in particular community organising. She asks if any of this has the potential to challenge the power of both state and market in a progressive way. On

page 6 Nick Ockenden considers the key issues and trends for volunteering in the current climate.

ORGANISING IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE POTENTIAL AND AMBIGUITIES OF NEW FORMS OF COMMUNITY ACTIVISM.

Professor Jenny Pearce

There is no issue in British politics today as pressing as the disengagement and cynicism amongst a large swathe of the population towards politics, or rather politicians and party politics. It is as if representative democracy has lost its way to such a degree that for many it is not even worth exercising the right to vote, itself an outcome of a long struggle by working people. Or, there is an attraction to the gut politics of a libertarian populist such as Nigel Farage, who encourages people to substitute an analysis of power in society with a focus on social categories to 'blame' for frustrated hopes and needs.

We have not reached this point overnight. Since the end of the Cold War and the acceleration of the (neo) liberalisation and globalisation of markets, we have seen a reconfiguration of state and society, in which the former has increasingly withdrawn from intervening in the latter (except, notably, in the sphere of surveillance). Zygmunt Bauman (1) has aptly termed this: the 'Times of Disengagement', contrasting it with centuries of state action to subject individuals to government. In these Times of Disengag-

ment, 'civil society' and 'community' take on a renewed resonance, as they are potential forms in which individuals can find new bonds outside the state, which reconcile the individual pursuit of self interest in the market with shared social goals. This holds society together as market forces rather than the state drive economies forward.

There are opportunities here for progressives and conservatives. But how do we distinguish between them? Recent years have seen varied efforts to strengthen communities from left and right. On the right, the withdrawal of the state and the gradual erosion of the welfare state encouraged the 'Big Society' vision of David Cameron, of which less and less was heard after his first year or so in office. In practice, however, the Conservative Government has continued to support community organising, though those implementing the Community Organising Programme do not see it at all as a party political experiment or implementation of Cameron's vision. The Labour Party has also looked at community organising, through the Movement for Change initiative and the role of Arne Graf, the well

respected community organiser from Chicago who has been advising the Party on how to reconnect with its grass roots. Trade Unions have also become acutely aware of the importance building links outside the workplace, to strengthen support for labour struggles but also to recognise the importance of other forms of struggle. Many now have community organising programmes. Pioneers in the UK in this work, have been London Citizens, now Citizens UK, who started in 1996 to bring Alinsky style organising into the fight for a living wage in London and who are now extending this work to other UK cities.

What are the varied logics, instruments and values behind the different forms of community organising, and what potential do they have for generating new forms of political re-engagement, capable of challenging state and market power? This was the theme of my ARVAC lecture in May 2014. New forms of neighbourhood organising might be about replacing or improving public services, improving streets and local amenities, claiming rights, holding representatives more to account, re-engaging people with political life and/or struggles for a sustainable and equitable economy. It potentially repre-

sents an important shift in relationships between state and society and in the role of political parties. Experience of self-organising for change has deep impacts on individuals and their relationship to each other and to structures of power.

This has been apparent to me through work in Latin America with various social movements and grass roots organisations, influenced by the popular educationalist, Paulo Freire. And again it was brought home in a trip to Lawndale, Chicago just before delivering the lecture. Here, I met people influenced by Saul Alinsky, who had fought against the racist housing policy in the city, which had meant that the black population migrating from the American South in the 1960s, were refused mortgages and became dependent on loan companies charging exorbitant interest. The Contract Buyers' League fought an heroic battle against the companies, part of a powerful tradition of community organising in Chicago, which remains vibrant still today.

The new forms of neighbourhood organising in the UK draw on these traditions as well as our own labour history. They bring new tools for building relationships and connections capable of enabling

people to find the confidence to act on the world around them and in ways which more top down organisational forms of the past were unable to achieve. For instance, listening skills are highly valued, and one to one meetings where people's stories are heard and valued. The aim is not to do things for people, but to encourage people to act for themselves. Numbers matter as one goal is to enable the powerless to take on the powerful and win battles. There are nevertheless tensions and differences in approach. Freire was more focused on processes of what he called conscientization, capacity to analyse power structures in the world in order to change them. Alinsky style approaches are much more focused on tapping into individual self interest which can be joined with that of others to further collective goals and win particular battles.

There is a lot to learn about how and whether these new forms of organising can reactivate the UK citizen and in what direction. Activism per se, is only one part of the picture. In the UK, the most active social movement in recent history has been the English Defence League, a movement fuelled by hatreds and fear rather than the search for a new set of values capable of democra-

tising our society. At the very least, new forms of organising in the community could contribute to greater sense of belonging to place and more intra and inter neighbourhood relationships, capable of giving voice to local needs. However, In a country where Oxfam have calculated that the five richest families are wealthier than the 12.6 million in the bottom 20% of the population, there is an urgent need for more fundamental critique and action from the poor themselves to address such extraordinary unfairness. The debate on what is a just society is long overdue, and requires a politicised and engaged population. It also requires a resistant citizenship, capable of standing its ground and realising the democratic potential of citizenship, in a political and economic system which serves the interests of the few and leads the majority to increasingly lose faith in participation, Citizens today are offered the role of consumers, little else. A resistant citizenship must challenge this logic, and build connections between neighbours and neighbourhoods strong enough to see the value of participation in public debate and action as well as in improving localities.

1. Baumann Z. (2000) Community Cambridge: Polity

Opportunities and challenges for volunteering in a changing world

Nick Ockenden Head of Research, NCVO

On the 29th May I spoke at the ARVAC annual lecture, highlighting some of the major trends and issues facing volunteering at the moment. In this short article I've attempted to summarise the main points I discussed, drawing on research we've undertaken at the Institute for Volunteering Research as well as the work of others.

Perhaps the most obvious place to start is by reiterating that volunteering does not exist in a bubble. It is affected by – and responds to – a variety of external pressures, and I focused on four of these:

1. Technology – it's changing the way people engage in volunteering, for example, through smartphones by volunteering on the move for as little as five minutes through dedicated Apps. We recently did some work on [micro-volunteering](#) which explored this issue.

2. An ageing society – many organisations rely on older, retired people for the bulk of their volunteers, but how will increasing retirement and pension ages affect people's availability, and are organisations ready for this?

3. Public service reform – this is one of the biggest challenges facing society today, which I'll discuss in more detail later on.

4. The recession and economic downturn – while things are recovering in many areas, many volunteer-involving organisations are facing the twin challenges of declining income while the need for their services is greater than ever.

But before we go any further it's useful to remind ourselves what volunteering is. The widely accepted definition from the 2005 Volunteering Compact Code of Good Practice describes it as 'an activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than (or in addition to) close relatives'. While this may seem quite straightforward, the range of volunteering opportunities available and the rapidly changing environment within which they exist means that the boundaries of what is volunteering are often stretched. For example, volunteering must be freely given; individuals cannot receive a salary. But some volunteers (or more technically 'voluntary workers') can receive a regular allowance as part of certain programmes.

Some legitimate forms of reward provided to volunteers may have financial value. And people can be allowed paid time off from work in which to volunteer, thereby effectively receiving their usual salary during their volunteering. This may also be the case with the freewill principle of volunteering. We've heard from Volunteer Centres that they can have people coming to them who have been *told* to volunteer, in order to comply with their Job Seekers or Work Programme agreements. Some education courses have volunteering elements to them, which the student is required to complete before graduation; thereby making the 'volunteering' compulsory. And some employers can risk creating a culture in which their employees are expected to volunteer, threatening the element of choice. Volunteering will, and should, change and we should adapt to that. But we also need to be careful that volunteering opportunities are just that, and that they continue to genuinely meet the definition and principles of volunteering.

We have a very high rate of volunteering in this country. The most recent results from the [Community Life](#) survey show that 41% of people said they volunteered at least once in the past year, and 27% of people did so at least once a month. While this figure has declined from the previous

year, I argued in the presentation and in my recent [blog post](#) that the bigger picture is one of remarkable stability of volunteering rates for the past 13 years. During this time, we've only seen a variation of five percentage points between the record highest and lowest years. This is not to suggest that we should take volunteering for granted and it will always be there, but just to recognise that it is pretty resilient.

But as well as looking at the overall rate of volunteering, it is useful to explore who actually volunteers, and what this tells us about diversity. Researchers at the University of Birmingham (then at Southampton) undertook detailed analysis of the Citizenship Survey (the forerunner of the Community Life survey) and identified what they called a '[civic core](#)'; a comparatively small group of people who are responsible for most of the volunteering. In fact, they found that one-third of the population undertakes 90% of the total volunteering hours, and is responsible for 80% of the money given to charity. We've always known that some volunteers do a great deal and have multiple roles, but these figures raise questions about who the remaining two-thirds are and why they're not getting involved to the same extent. It also begs the question who makes up the

highly engaged one-third. Here, the researchers' analysis showed, somewhat worryingly, that it was not exactly diverse. The civic core is drawn mainly from more prosperous people, more middle-aged, more highly educated, and those least likely to live in the most deprived parts of the country.

As I suggested earlier, one of the most important issues facing volunteering, and the voluntary sector more widely, is its contribution to the delivery of public services. Volunteers have long been critical to the running of our schools, hospitals and many other public services, so on one hand it's not new. But it is changing rapidly. Driven by continued cuts in funding on one side (particularly to local authorities) and calls for citizens to become more involved (through policy areas such as localism and co-production), volunteers are taking on new and important roles in services such as libraries, museums, public parks, heritage assets and other leisure facilities. This creates huge opportunities, for more democratic, accountable and responsive services. But it could also be interpreted as a way of the state absolving its responsibilities. Equally, we may ask whether this is genuine, bottom-up community empowerment, or a top-down agenda imposed on local areas? Are volunteers adding value, or are they replacing paid jobs? And do volunteers welcome more added responsibility or see it as an unnecessary burden?

I ended my presentation with four key issues that volunteering will continue to wrestle with in the future. Firstly, more and more is likely to be asked of volunteers. Volunteering is a huge force for good and makes an enormous positive difference to our communities. As public services change, volunteers will play an increasingly important role, but we need to ask whether there is a limit to what they can and should do, and to be clear of where this line is. Secondly, new policies, socio-economic developments and volunteering programmes will continue to test the boundaries of volunteering itself, perhaps through programmes that incentivise participation to the point of payment. We of course shouldn't be resistant to all change, but equally we need to protect the underpinning principles of volunteering. Thirdly, the challenging financial environment is not going away any time soon. Volunteering needs to be properly resourced in order to be effective, and we need to be clear how to put into practice the principle of 'freely given but not cost free'. And finally, there will continue to be interest in increasing overall rates of volunteering. While more people volunteering is a good thing, we need to make sure that sufficient attention is being paid to who is getting involved and how accessible volunteering is, and crucially that quality is just as important as quantity

Over to You: Learning to present voluntary sector and volunteering research.

24th April 2014 @ Armstrong House, Manchester

The event was set up as a partnership between VSSN, ARVAC and GMCVO and aimed at New Researchers in order to allow sharing of ideas and support new researchers to develop their research profiles. There was a mix of University based researchers and VCS based researchers. Katy Goldstraw summarises the key points below.

The event started with participants sharing research projects. Examples of research projects included, VCS evaluation research, Islamic Women's project, LGF Community engagement, health and social care research and sustainable food production research.

ARVAC Chair, John Diamond welcomed the group with an introductory lecture. He summarised the key themes within the room: policy, experience, learning and organisational development. John introduced key ethical & methodological research questions such as; the extent to which we disclose our research interests. Other questions were introduced, asking what our roles in research are? and how do we establish a relationship with peo-

ple? What boundary conflicts exist? John reminded the group to be aware of language and translation – we may speak the same language but do we share the same meanings? John drew out the key themes of research: engagement, relevance, learning, application

ENGAGEMENT – engage the audience. Capture what it is that you are going to do and why. What are you saying to the audience? Don't let detail obscure the key questions – focus on the SPINE of the argument.

RELEVANCE Why is what you are saying relevant to the audience. Why does the research matter and why is it important? Locate what you are doing in the wider context of literature – contextualise.

LEARNING Obligation and sense of obligation to share your learning, other than academia. Disseminate in other areas than academic journals.

APPLICATION what next, another piece of work? Will you write a paper? Engage in joint collaboration or enquiry? What will you do with the research?

The groups then split into two workshop spaces; one discussing volunteer's research and the second VCS organisational research. Mike Aiken, from the Open University offered the closing plenary entitled 'Demystifying Dissemination'. Mike discussed triangulation of research and the importance of feedback to your research. Mike suggested a variety of ways to disseminate your research:

Reflective e mail summarises factual points

Learning workshop

Joint presentation @ conference

Draft ideas to board

Magazine article for Org newsletter

Make the debate part of your research

Share the research with the community engagement team at your unit

Mike concluded by discussing being published. He recommended contacting the editor of the journal to discuss content and submitting an abstract in advance of writing the paper. He also reminded participants that the Voluntary Sector Review Practice allow short pieces of 2-

3500 words to be submitted for one section of their journal.

The event ended positively and participants gave good feedback. It was generally felt to be a positive day, with participants looking forward to the early careers research event at the VSSN Conference in September.

Reviews: Colin Rochester on Duncan Scott's review of his book 'rediscovering Voluntary Action' which appeared our April Edition.

I should like to thank my old friend and sparring partner, Duncan Scott, for his typically thoughtful, stimulating and generous review of my book, *Rediscovering Voluntary Action*, in the last issue of the ARVAC Newsletter. And I am also grateful to the Newsletter's editor for giving me space to respond to some of the important points raised by Duncan in his review.

In the first place, while I agree with Duncan that academics can be too easily satisfied with solving problems at a theoretical level and thus changing nothing in the real world, I hope we can still recognise the importance of relevant and useful theory. It does have a role and an influence; would the new liberal ideology of the superiority of unregulated markets have done so much damage in the UK and elsewhere without the intellectual ammunition provided by Milton Friedman and his colleagues? We may need to focus on changing the world rather than simply understanding it but our chances of success are much greater if we have the right kind of theoretical tools.

Secondly, I agree with Duncan that the early chapters of the book tend to overstate our ignorance of vast swathes of voluntary and community action rather than accept that 'we haven't learnt how to research and write about it as much as the more accessible formal organisations'. And the practical utility of the book would have been enhanced by the kind of guidance he has provided about how to approach the task of researching informal action. This is the way in which we

can produce material that will provide a counter-balance to the 'groaning shelves research text books'.

Third, I completely agree with him that all is not sweetness and light in informal non-bureaucratic organisations. I do not believe that they are somehow superior to more formal organisational types but was trying to argue that they are fundamentally different ways of getting things done. My critique of what has happened to the sector is not based on a feeling that bureaucracy is in itself a bad thing but that the hegemony of the bureaucratic approach has undermined and obliterated informal ways of getting things done that have served voluntary organisations so well in the past and helped to define their distinctive character.

Finally, I confess that the absence of the word 'hegemony' from the index accurately reflects the fact that I have not used or discussed the concept at all and means that there is a hole in my argument that I will hope to fill some time in the future. For that point in particular and for the review as a whole, thank you, Duncan.

ABOUT ARVAC

ARVAC – the Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector - is a membership organisation which was founded in 1978 to provide a focal point for the handful of people engaged in the emerging field of voluntary sector research. In more recent years it has concentrated its work on the community sector and community research.

We believe that

- healthy, diverse and inclusive communities make a fundamental contribution to people's quality of life and living conditions;
- healthy communities are created and sustained by the activities of effective local organisations and groups;
- research has a major role to play in promoting supporting, and developing the work of local organisations and groups; and
- participation in the research process and access to its products should be freely and widely available.

We aim to

- act as a resource to people interested in research in or on community organisations;
- promote and help develop effective and appropriate forms of research in or on community organisations;
- encourage and facilitate networking and collaboration between people undertaking work in this field;
- ensure that the findings of research in and on community organisations are made available to policy-makers at all levels; and
- play a role in identifying gaps in knowledge of the community sector and the need for further research.



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Promoting effective community action
through research

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- Comments or opinion pieces you would like to share with other ARVAC members

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