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The Future of Unemployment

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THE SITUATION

What do you do when you find yourself with a lot more time and a lot less money on your hands than you're used to? That may be the most important question of 2009.¹

Start with the numbers: worldwide, the UN estimates as many as 51 million people could become unemployed this year.² Here in Britain, if the analysts are right, one million people who currently have jobs won't do in twelve months' time.³ What happens next for those people will shape the kind of society we live in, over the next decade and beyond.

¹ A version of this article was first published on Agit8, a short-lived online magazine founded and edited by Alfie Dennen of Moblog.

² Reuters, 'World economy may lose 51 million jobs: UN agency', 28 January 2009 – <http://reut.rs/jbkn44>

³ The Guardian, 'Unemployment figures: What the analysts say', 21 January 2009 – <http://bit.ly/uDvpXr>

I want to think about some of the ways this situation could play out. In particular, I'm interested in whether the things we've learned from social media over the last few years can play a role in lessening the hardship of this recession and shaping the world which comes out the other side.

Why come at the situation from this angle? First, because one of the biggest changes in a country like the UK since the last recession is that most people are networked by the internet and have experienced its potential for self-organising. Whether finding partners through online dating sites, organising birthday parties over Facebook, or Freecycleing the contents of the garage – in all kinds of ways, people are using these technologies to connect with others and make things happen, both in the virtual and in the physical space.

Secondly, because a major crisis can create the conditions in which tools and approaches move quickly from the margins to the centre. The London tube bombings turned cameraphones from a teenage fad to a key part of the BBC's newsgathering process. As Clay Shirky put it last week in his lecture at the LSE: when none of the old tools work, new ones get adopted fast.

My other reason for thinking about the recession from a social media perspective is that I've spent the last two years working on a web startup that's building tools for organising your own education. More generally – from MySociety, to Social Innovation Camp, to funders like 4iP – what's distinctive about the UK startup scene is the number of people focused on applying self-organising methods to public

services and major social issues of one kind or another.⁴ If the internet does have an important role to play in finding our way through this global crisis, there are a lot of people here who have been thinking about questions like this for years.

THINKING ABOUT NEEDS

Behind the statistics, every story of unemployment will be different; yet there are likely to be common themes. For most people, losing a job will trigger at least three sets of problems:

PRACTICAL & FINANCIAL – e.g. how do I pay the rent? how do I provide for my family on a much tighter budget? how can I renegotiate my debts? how can I avoid my house being repossessed - or, if I can't, then what do I do next?

EMOTIONAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL – e.g. how do I face my friends? where do I get my sense of identity from, now I don't have a job?

DIRECTIONAL – e.g. how do I find work – and what do I do with my time and energy, if I can't?

These are acute versions of some fairly universal needs: for material security, personal wellbeing and meaningful activity. In other words, the needs of the unemployed aren't so different, fundamentally, from those of the wider population. Indeed, during a recession, many of

⁴ An argument made by Paul Miller, co-founder of School of Everything and Social Innovation Camp, in 'Why London will never be (and should never try to be) like Silicon Valley - <http://www.paulmiller.org/?p=310>

those who remain in work face urgent concerns on one or more of these fronts.

HOW THINGS COULD PLAY OUT: THE DANGERS

With a huge wave of unemployment breaking on it, the welfare system is likely to be overwhelmed - at just the moment when it needs to be more responsive than under normal economic circumstances:

*The newly unemployed are not usually a focus of government policy because most will find work quickly. This is not true in a recession, when whole sectors slump and there is little call for previously valuable skills. Decisive government action now will prevent a temporary slide in employment becoming a permanent slump.*⁵

Charles Leadbeater & others, 'Attacking the Recession', NESTA

In the early 1980s, millions of people who lost their jobs - or who left education and went straight on the dole - became stuck in long-term unemployment. A quarter of a century later, when official jobless figures had fallen to around a million, researchers estimated that another million people had passed from long-term unemployment on to Incapacity Benefit without working again.⁶ (This is not to assume

⁵ Charles Leadbeater & others, 'Attacking the Recession', NESTA Discussion Paper, December 2008 – <http://bit.ly/uHEPRT>

⁶ Christina Beatty & others, 'The Real Level of Unemployment 2007', CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University, May 2007 – <http://bit.ly/v1VGTp>

that their benefit claims were not genuine, since long-term unemployment is associated with increased risk of various health problems.)

The nightmare for today's politicians and policy-makers is that the recession we are living through ends up creating a new tranche of long-term unemployed, locked out of society for a generation. Whether or not that happens will largely be determined in the weeks and months ahead.

HOW THINGS COULD PLAY OUT: THE POSSIBILITIES

If the aim is to avoid unemployment hardening into social exclusion, perhaps part of the answer is a softening of the distinction between employment and unemployment? Or, to put it another way, does the fact that fewer of us will have "jobs" in future mean that more of us have to be "unemployed", in the sense of having nothing to do and being unable to support ourselves?

One of the most striking tendencies of the internet has been just such a softening of previously hard distinctions. At its best, the result has been to open up a large and fruitful space in between the traditional roles. What eBay did for the space between the garage sale and the retail outlet, YouTube did for the home movie and the TV station. Which was more unthinkable, even a decade ago: that video shot by amateurs on mobile phones would lead TV news bulletins, or that an encyclopedia which anyone could edit would turn out to be anything other than a disaster?

If the idea of applying such blurring of distinctions to something as bread-and-butter as earning a living sounds like a technophile fantasy, consider one of the programmes that got the United States through the Great Depression. The Works Progress Administration took on millions of Americans between 1935 and 1943, with the aim of ensuring that heads of household who received relief money from the government also had something to do. It left an impressive legacy, from road networks and bridges, to its list of literary and artistic alumni (among them Saul Bellow, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock). All the same, it is questionable how far WPA employment resembled job creation in the normal sense. "How many people does it take to do one WPA job?" ran the joke. "Three. One on his way to the bathroom, one on his way back from the bathroom, and one leaning on the shovel pretending to work."

Where the aim of employment under normal circumstances is economic production, the main objective of the WPA was to take millions of men and women out of the soul-destroying situation of endless unemployment – whether their activities were particularly productive was a secondary concern. In other words, the programme blurred the line between employment and unemployment, and did so effectively enough that it is currently being suggested as a model for the British government to imitate.⁷

The question is whether there are other ways, besides the creation of such quasi-jobs, that a space can be opened up between employment

⁷ Will Hutton, 'We can replicate the beauty that came from the Depression', The Observer, 8 February 2009 - <http://bit.ly/3t3F>

and unemployment – and whether social media, directly or indirectly, can contribute to this?

SOME IDEAS FOR A WAY FORWARD

What follows is not a road-map for how social media and collaborative culture can be applied to the recession, but a collection of ideas which have come out of conversations over the past few weeks.

(1) TOOLS FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE UNEMPLOYED

This is really a design principle, rather than a specific idea. If, as I have suggested, the needs of the unemployed tend to be acute versions of needs that apply to a broader range of people, it should be possible to design tools and services which are open to all, but have particular value to those with more time and less money. If, on the other hand, these are walled off as exclusively for the unemployed, this will reinforce social exclusion. Worse, it will stifle creativity by artificially limiting the range of possible interactions and connections.

The value of this approach towards open access is something I learned first-hand over several years hanging out at Access Space in Sheffield, the UK's longest-running internet learning centre.⁸ Everyone who uses the space is there because they walked in off the street, and as a (then) BBC journalist, I found myself learning to

⁸ <http://access-space.org/>

build my own website alongside guys who in some cases had been on the dole for much of their adult lives, and for whom the space offered a route to starting a business, getting a skilled job, or getting funding for their creative activities.

(2) USER-GENERATED RESOURCE MAPS

At the level of practical and financial needs, being unemployed means losing access to the market as a source of resources. Freecycle and LiftShare have shown how useful the internet can be for connecting people to free resources – and creating social interactions in the real world along the way. An online platform for sharing information about all kinds of free or cheap resources could give people a way to help each other and themselves – and would be useful to anyone looking to reduce their cost of living.

(3) FREE INTERNET ACCESS FOR THE UNEMPLOYED?

The government is already preparing a national programme of free computers and broadband access for low income families with school-age children.⁹ This recognition of internet access as an essential service for learners should be extended to those who are out of work. Shouldn't the government pick up the bill for your internet connection while you're on the dole, to avoid pushing you over the digital divide?

⁹ BECTA's Home Access programme

(4) COLLABORATIVE SPACES IN THE REAL WORLD

If we want to soften the distinction between employment and unemployment, one of the most effective means would be the spread of real world spaces which reflect the collaborative values of social media. What I have in mind are places where learning, making, collaborating, hanging out and starting new projects happen alongside one another. Examples already exist:

- Media labs on the model of Access Space or the Brazilian Pontos de Cultura programme, which has applied this approach on a national scale;
- Coworking spaces and social media cafes (such as London's Tuttle Club);
- Fab Labs for manufacturing, as already exist from Iceland to Afghanistan;
- studio spaces such as TenantSpin, the micro-TV station in Liverpool based in a flat in a tower block – and like many other examples in the world of Community Media.

Again, if these spaces are to work, access to them should be open, not restricted to the unemployed. (If, as some are predicting, we see the return of the three day week, the value of spaces like this open to all becomes even more obvious.¹⁰) In order for this to work, such spaces

¹⁰ See 'Britain is facing return of three-day week', *The Independent*, 25 January 2009 – <http://ind.pn/CF8P> – and Pat Kane, 'The Three Day Week: more rest, less work, more play... and better?', 26 January 2009 – <http://bit.ly/rFqsuy>

would need to be organised with the understanding that hanging out can be as valuable as more visibly productive activities – both because of the resilience that comes from building social connections, and because of the potential for information sharing and the sparking of new projects. There would also be a need for incubator spaces for projects that emerge from these spaces and are ready to move to the next level.

There is a rich – if unexpected – source of inspiration for this kind of collaborative space in the history of the 19th century mutual improvement societies, reading clubs and other self-organised, working class institutions.¹¹ For example, the church halls and upstairs rooms of pubs where many of them met are still common enough – and would be worth exploring as possible venues for a group trying to set up such a space today.

WHAT'S NEXT?

This has been a sketch of some ideas and some ways of thinking about how social media could engage with the recession. What is needed is both a broader conversation and the kind of rapid experiments at putting ideas into practice which the start-up world is good at. The good news is that this is already starting to happen, with events such as the 'Hacking the Recession' day which Mamading Ceesay is organising in London this Friday (13/2/09).

¹¹ See Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (Yale, 2001)