

Interim evaluation: Progress on the RSA Networks project

This is a short interim report prepared for Nesta, to outline the early lessons learnt about supporting innovation through the RSA networks project. We have prepared an accompanying set of slides, and have worked closely with Ellie Ford to align a set of short video clips to illustrate some of the key points made here.

Vision and context for the RSA networks project

The RSA is a 250 year old organisation which has always held a passionate commitment to positive social change and progressive thinking. Despite this consistency, the relationship between the core organisation and the ever-growing Fellowship has ebbed and flowed. In recent years, it has been the case that Fellows have been treated with some distance, as audiences and recipients, rather than as activists and creators. Our ambition is to change this and put the Fellows back at the heart of the organisation, reconnecting to the original aims and ambition of the RSA.

So the mission of the RSA networks project is to find new ways of supporting its Fellows as a network of civic innovators: whereby the organisation is not simply offering services and products to those Fellows, but actively supporting them in their goals to bring about positive social change. The ambition is to do this through creating a rich and stimulating ‘market place’ for fresh thinking, and to strengthen the connections between Fellows, facilitating new collaborations that are able to lead to innovation and action.

This level of ambition is huge. It is nearly one hundred years since Schumpeter wrote of firms as the primary agents of production and economic progress, and many of our business models and value systems continue to be governed by his worldview. And yet, new technologies are creating opportunities for collective action that have never before been imagined. Notions of membership, identity and belonging are changing dramatically, with people increasingly reporting a search for authenticity amid a world of brands, competing messages and demands. In Ulrich Beck’s words, ‘people demand the right to develop their own perspective on life and to be able to act upon it’.

We need to understand much, much more about what this ‘new collectivism’ might mean for organisations of the future. The mediating role that they have played in our lives is looking increasingly redundant as each of us as individuals find tools to work together in new ways. Current business models, governance, and patterns of organisation will be challenged by these developments in a way that has not been seen since the emergence of the mass production model at the start of the 20th century.

How organisations respond to these shifting patterns of allegiance, underlined by new modes of connection and engagement, remains an uncertain question. In this context, the RSA’s desire to remodel itself to be fit for purpose for the 21st century should be celebrated; and the RSA networks project should offer a rich seam of learning to the many other organisations that are beginning to wake up to the need to reflect new realities in the ways that they operate, and the ways that they engage people.

The RSA networks project was conceived of as the engine of change for the whole organisation. Our ambition was that through the learning of the project, we would have a clear sense of how to make the RSA a modern, exciting and dynamic catalyst for civic innovation – and to be some way down the road in reaching that destination.

The focus of the RSA/Nesta partnership

The partnership with Nesta Connect is focused on the insights we hope to gain from attempting to model and take to scale a networked, collaborative and Fellows-led approach to social and civic innovation.

The goal is to ensure that the lessons learnt from our work at the RSA can be distilled and shared with other organisations seeking to support collaborative, bottom up innovation in pursuit of social change.

Specific questions raised at the start of the project included:

- What is the role of online tools and support in developing networks for civic innovation? And what is the relationship between online and offline activity?
- What needs to be done to connect grassroots innovation with system change? How can the RSA work with other organisations to make this happen whilst retaining the coherence and purpose of its own mission?

Along the way we have learnt much about both of these that we hope is of value to Nesta and other interested organisations.

At this stage, it is clear that the RSA networks project will be able to offer insights into two key issues:

- What constitutes an effective model of collaborative, networked innovation
- The building blocks of change needed to move from a hierarchical to a networked organisation

This interim report does not attempt to explicitly address these, instead focusing on describing the process and learning so far, and reflecting on how these lessons need to shape the next steps in the work.

About this document

This document is an interim report on progress, preceding a final evaluation of the RSA networks project in late April/early May. It is organised into the following sections:

Section 1: description of activity

- Project start-up
- Online tools
- Facilitation models
- Network formation
- Organisational change

Section 2: analysis and lessons learnt

- The principle of co-creation
- Networking and collaboration
- Systemic change

Section 3: looking forward and next steps

- Priorities
- Challenges and remaining questions

Section 1: description of activities

A tremendous amount of work has gone into the RSA networks project since it was originally conceived of in early summer 2007. All of this activity has been governed by three simple principles, drawn from good practice in design and innovation management.

First, given the nature of our ambition, we sought to use an ‘open innovation’ model based on the lessons from experts such as von Hippel. This has not always been easy, as discussed in section 2; however it has remained a core part of our thinking that the best ideas do not always come from within, and therefore creating opportunities for others to contribute their thinking and ideas is an essential part of getting the new model of the RSA right.

Second, we have focused on prototyping elements of a whole model, rather than ‘piloting’ a single, fully formed model at small scale. This is an important distinction: it has enabled us to reflect on manageable chunks of change, and only then ask how best to knit them all together. Pilots require someone to design a complete model and then learn how to implement it.

Third and related was our commitment to continuous reflection, learning and iteration. Whilst our ambition has stayed constant, the activities and change required to achieve that ambition have developed over the course of the project and we have refined and redefined our work as we have learnt more. We believe this approach is essential in projects where there is no blueprint, but it is also a difficult mindset to maintain in the light of pressures to ‘get things right’.

1.1 Project start up (phase 1, early summer to November 22nd)

At the earliest stage of the project, we had little more than our ambition to go on. There were no Fellows networks to speak of, and no formal infrastructure to support any Fellows-led activity. Therefore our priorities in the early months lay in beginning to prototype essential dimensions of support for networks, and to provide Fellows with the opportunities to formulate networks.

The central objective as originally agreed was to make the RSA ‘a catalyst for social innovation; empowering staff and Fellows to create powerful new networks, promoting and delivering real social change.’ We proposed to do this by:

- Creating a new internal culture – supporting staff and Fellows to collaborate on delivering social change.
- Connecting Fellows – both face-to-face and online to form networks for solving problems they cared about.
- Testing our approach - evaluating refining and gradually scaling up.

These early stages were shaped by a series of conversations with Fellows about what they would like to do through the RSA, why they valued their membership, and how we could help make the RSA a more hospitable place for incubating ideas and growing them into more active projects.

A clear theme emerged from these conversations about the value Fellows placed on the Fellowship itself. People joined because they liked the prospect of meeting others who shared a mindset but perhaps came from a different background; the diversity, breadth and sheer experience of the Fellowship was more valuable than anything offered by the organisation itself. This was a powerful reminder of why the RSA networks project is not only an interesting experiment, but an essential response to the need to create more opportunities for the Fellows to enjoy the Fellowship as part of their membership.

Furthermore this insight helped the team to focus primarily on creating two opportunities – one online and one offline – for Fellows to meet and talk to one another, as the first step in the project.

1.2 Development of social media to facilitate new connections

At a very early stage of the project the importance of social media to support networking activity became apparent. An OpenRSA Facebook group appeared, alongside a wikispace and Google group.

An initial scoping phase was focused on identifying existing social media platforms that could support the RSA networks project. The conclusion of this work was that it would be better to start from scratch and build our own platform.

This provided an invaluable opportunity to model the new kinds of interactions we were looking for between Fellows and the organisation in the process of the site development itself. We asked our external developers to adopt our principles of open-ness and prototyping in the way they approached the brief, which was to work with interested staff *and* Fellows to develop a strategy and over-arching specification for the interactive elements of the website, drawing on the best and most exciting social media developments. At the time we let the contract, a number of ideas were already being imagined, including:

- A directory of online tools that could support network activities (e.g. Basecamp, LinkedIn, etc)
- A brokerage service where Fellows can ask the RSA to contact other Fellows on their behalf
- A ‘craigslist’ for civic innovation – where Fellows can post issues they want to work on, types of people they need help from and so on
- Pledgebank for Fellows
- A ‘wisdom’ or mentoring service enabling our older Fellows to meet and support younger Fellows

Following conversations with two potential developers, we asked them if they would be willing to work together with us, and in doing so, not only produce the brief but also build the site in beta form, to enable staff and Fellows to actually prototype an online platform for collaboration.

The developers conducted a series of interviews and workshops with staff and Fellows, including a mix of advanced technology users and technophobes. This led to the first beta version of the platform being launched on 22nd November. Integral to the site was a feedback function, enabling users to provide feedback in ‘real time’ as they were using the site. These, plus a further two workshops, mean that we are now launching the third iteration of the site, incorporating improvements and adding functionality each time.

As usage has gone up, we have learnt more and more about what Fellows want and need to turn ideas into action. As a result, key features of the site now include:

- Search by interests/skills
- Connect others to your projects
- Comment on other posts
- Rate other people’s projects
- Write or comment on the overall project blog as an integral part of the platform
- Find other fellows by place, interest, or skill

Lessons learnt (each of these can be developed further for final evaluation)

The strength of an open process

What people need to turn talk into action - functionality
The need to link online work to wider cultural change
The need for a single place to go to online
The importance of activity from within the organisation to encourage an online community to develop

1.3 Development of models of network support

At the start of the project, our hunch was that whilst many Fellows would be excited by the new mood in the air at John Adam Street, they would also lack the time and know-how to kickstart new networks focused on civic innovation, even with the provision of more online tools.

Furthermore, lessons learnt about fostering innovation networks elsewhere – in the worlds of technology, manufacturing, education and health – indicated the importance of facilitation and support. Networks rarely simply emerge: they need important resources, including leadership, brokerage, money and time. It is only these things that differentiate networks from the activity of networking – and it seems they are essential to galvanising any real, purposive work.

So, over the course of October, 12 staff were trained by a network expert in facilitation skills. The idea was that these staff would ‘shadow’ emerging Fellows’ networks, combining entrepreneurialism, brokerage, challenge and support to encourage activity to flourish.

Key topics covered in 3 day long sessions included:

- Features of effective networks
- Core facilitation skills
- The meaning of action
- Effective behaviours in networks

Whilst the participants were broadly positive about the role, and very satisfied with the training, success in developing the staff facilitator role since has been mixed. Facilitators have expressed concerns about time, their own legitimacy in the role, and freedom to operate. Section 2 offers some insights into our lessons about getting this role right. Feedback from Fellows, and the presence of good facilitation in all the most successful networks suggests it is of critical importance.

Lessons learnt (each of these can be developed further for final evaluation)

Facilitators need dedicated time to fulfil the tasks of the role as part of their day jobs

Facilitators need to be given legitimacy and license to operate relatively autonomously – meaning there needs to be clarity about the rules of engagement

It is a role that is ‘little and often’

Facilitators need to be skilled users of a range of communication channels, online and offline, formal and informal

1.4 Providing opportunities for networks to grow

Given there were no networks to speak of at the start of the project, an early priority was to provide a focused opportunity to Fellows interested in particular issues to come together and think through what they would like to do. A key milestone in the project, and an endpoint of the first phase of the work, was a major event held at John Adam Street on 22nd November, which brought together just under 1% of the Fellowship.

The day was designed using Open Space Technology, in keeping with the principles and values of the RSA Networks project. The question used was “*What might new RSA networks do, and how might they deliver?*” This question itself was shaped by early conversations with Fellows about the potential scope of the project. From these conversations it was clear that many Fellows were as interested in the ‘how’ as the ‘what’ dimension and so it was essential to incorporate this into the day.

In the lead up to the day, Fellows were told about a blog that the RSA had commissioned from renowned blogger Mick Fealty, which was intended as a stimulus to get people thinking about what ‘civic innovation’ meant to them, and what issues they were interested in. A week before the event, all participants were sent a short paper outlining early thinking about the project, as well as some examples of potential networks.

On the day itself, all staff facilitators were on hand, and participating in all discussions to ensure that Fellows saw visible commitments and engagement from within the organisation. The first session was designed to inspire Fellows through reflections on civic innovation from the perspective of three different Fellows, all of whom had led action that created positive social change.

The rest of the day was structured around the ideas and themes that participants themselves had proposed. Time was also created in the afternoon for groups to work together on project plans, as part of our desire to encourage people to move beyond talking and into action.

We also used the 22nd November to launch the first version of the online platform. Fellows were free to attend a rolling training session where they were introduced to how the platform worked.

Staff then worked overnight to ensure that all the project plans produced on the day were loaded on to the website by the following day. Our aim was that over the course of the subsequent two weeks, all Fellows who had been a project lead were contacted and encouraged to take these project plans and propose projects on the basis of them on the online platform. In most cases, this happened, and this follow-up contact appeared to play an important role in persuading Fellows to post.

A week after the event we invited Fellows to provide us with feedback on the day. The result was overwhelmingly positive. More mixed results on the success or otherwise of the afternoon session whereby networks were encouraged to plan their project reflect a broader innovation challenge: how to turn divergent thinking and ideas generation into a more convergent and focused phase of planning and action.

In addition to running this major event, the RSA networks project also began to expand its own core capacity in anticipation of a rise in demand following the event. A full-time networks co-ordinator was hired. Laura Bunt’s key role in the early stages of the project was to act as a first point of contact for Fellows – and indeed staff – interested in getting involved in the project. In addition to Laura, Rosie Anderson and Rowland Manthorpe were also moved for 2 days a week each on to the project to look after and develop some of the most promising early networks.

Over the course of November and December, these roles evolved in response to Fellow activity. Core dimensions of the roles now include:

- Regular participation in online discussions
- Brokerage and connecting between Fellows
- Signposting Fellows to other related projects and organisations
- Identifying network needs (e.g. resources, meeting rooms, ideas)

- Meeting Fellows to develop thinking – either one-to-one or through arranging brainstorms
- Background research and project development

The relative balance of each of these activities varies across the emerging networks; staff in these roles need to be motivated, entrepreneurial and flexible to manage a fairly fluid and dynamic workload.

1.5 Opening up conversations about wider implications of a networked model

At the early stages of the project, the main focus was kickstarting some network activity, in order to understand more about what was needed to support this new model, the kinds of barriers we might encounter and so on.

However from the outset, we wanted to maintain a clear focus within the RSA on seeing the work as the engine of change for the whole organisation, rather than a separate or isolated project. That meant finding multiple opportunities to signify the wider implications of RSA networks: a whole new way of organising the RSA's work, and a new relationship between the Programme on the one hand and the Fellowship on the other.

These messages were conveyed through a variety of communication channels, from the Journal, to Matthew's blog, to the full staff meetings. The core team used a 'tiered' model to describe different network layers, each layer increasingly asking questions of the fit between Fellows' networks and the existing infrastructure and operations of the RSA:

- Self-organising networks

Many RSA Fellows are already civic innovators in their own right; the role of the organisation in supporting such people was to make the Fellowship more 'searchable', and to provide them with tools to connect with one another in order to exchange ideas and opportunities.

- Supported networks

Network theory underlines the importance of the resources to which a network has access to turn talking into action. These resources can take many forms – from money, to space, to tools, to facilitation. We knew that in order to achieve our aspiration we would need to develop the thinking around what resources the RSA could offer to support networks of Fellows in their activity.

- Transformational networks

To underline the RSA's commitment to putting the Fellows at the heart of the organisation, we also created a tier of activity focused on thinking more about how Fellows' networks might relate to broader, funded RSA programme projects. At the early stages of the RSA networks project, it was more important to pose the question, and use it as a means of starting conversations across the organisation, rather than seek to find answers straight away.

1.6 Results of phase 1

15-20 networks in operation

350 people signed up to the online platform (with variable patterns of usage and engagement)

Lessons from the development site beginning to be incorporated into new main site

12 staff trained as facilitators

Dedicated team of 6 FTE to support the work

New RSA networks pages within the Journal

Section 2: analysis and lessons learnt

2.1 The principle of co-creation

Since the RSA networks project began, there has been a consistent message about the ambition to make Fellows active participants, rather than passive recipients, in the RSA's work and organisation. For almost as long, there has been a question about whether such participation is about co-creation or consultation, and views have been mixed about where the project is positioned on this spectrum.

Consultation suggests a model whereby staff work on ideas and then allow Fellows to comment, or choose to get involved. Co-creation implies rather more than this: Fellows themselves might develop ideas; furthermore, Fellows would also have an opportunity to shape the direction of the Networks project itself – determining the parameters as well as the things going on within those parameters.

It has been a fascinating lesson to realise how hard it is to shift from a more traditional worldview of the fixed line between organisation and Fellowship, and this has almost certainly been compounded by a legacy at the RSA that drew a very firm boundary between the two. We have learnt more about the meaning of co-creation, as well as getting more confident about the effectiveness of it as a model for change, as the work has unfolded. Three key areas highlight some of the issues and lessons the project has generated in this area.

Online presence

An excellent example of this learning can be seen in the planning for online spaces. Early on in the project, as part of the build up to November 22nd, the team commissioned Mick Fealty to write a blog for Fellows to stimulate thinking and discussion. Fellows could comment but were not able to author posts – much to the frustration of some of the more active online Fellows.

This approach is in stark contrast to the subsequent approach taken to the development of the RSA networks platform. From the outset, even before it existed as a site, the team have relied on a 'developer group' – open to everyone across the staff and Fellowship – who have convened 3 times in 4 months. Furthermore the easy feedback function on the site makes it possible for those Fellows unable to attend the face to face events to comment and feed in frustrations and ideas.

Not only was the process of developing the platform very different to the process by which we decided to work with Mick, but also the nature of the site contrasted. All Fellows are authors, and access is determined by the privacy settings that individuals set for themselves.

Offline opportunities

Early thinking about the 22nd November event conceptualised it as a structured workshop designed to draw civic innovation projects out of Fellows. Through an extended, reflective planning process, this thinking altered dramatically, and as a result, the event was designed around the principle of co-creation instead.

Although the day began with a series of speakers addressing the gathered audience, the messages were heavily focused on personal agency, on working together and aiming to change the world. The rest of the day was run using Open Space techniques. We felt this was essential in order to communicate our commitment to co-creation to Fellows through actions as well as words.

Careful thought also went into the question used. By including the second part of it – ‘and *how* might RSA networks deliver?’ – we opened up the chance for Fellows to influence the parameters of the RSA networks project through developing thinking about the organisational dimensions of the shift the project is trying to achieve.

As a result, a number of networks on the 22nd planned projects focused on aspects of the RSA itself that would need to change to empower Fellows and strengthen the connections between them. These projects – those which were posted on to the platform – have generated some of the most extended discussions online, and since November, meetings have been held to explore, for example, opportunities in relation to events, meetings and offline sessions; to think about how the RSA uses and supports spaces for Fellows to meet one another around the country.

Much of the confidence gained in opening up what are often private questions for senior management teams to address to ‘developer groups’ involving Fellows as well as a wider range of staff than usual, came from the success of this open model in relation to the development of the online platform.

Organisational attitudes

One of the key issues that has dogged the RSA networks project is a powerful legacy of scepticism about the value of Fellow involvement that has clearly been part of the culture of the organisation in the past, in particular amongst programme staff.

In many ways, this attitude is self-perpetuating: the higher the wall put up around the RSA, the harder it is for ‘average’ Fellows to get over that wall; and as a result the few that succeed either manage because they are sufficiently well-known or because they are unusually keen to engage. This is compounded by some views that Fellows equal money and therefore the relationship is a purely transactional one.

As a result, many staff continue to be wary of Fellow engagement, fearful that once the door is opened, they will be inundated with demands from Fellows. This has been reinforced by previous attempts to engage Fellows. Unsurprisingly, unstructured open invitations for comment have led to people’s fears being confirmed, as individual Fellows lobby for personal projects at a level that is hard to manage. This situation has been compounded by heavy workloads, and a staff incentive structure that has rewarded project delivery over and above Fellowship engagement.

A major priority for the RSA networks project as it unfolds is to build the capacity, incentives and confidence of all staff across the organisation in how it interacts with Fellows on an everyday basis, as a means of getting the job done, rather than such engagement being treated as an additional thing to do.

But insights gathered throughout the facilitator training indicate that this is a significant task. Staff need to learn how to engage Fellows meaningfully, in dialogue where the rules of engagement are clear for both. If the next phase of the project does not focus on this, such attitudes constitute a significant risk in terms of the commitment to move towards a culture whereby co-creation is way things get done.

2.2. Networking and collaboration

At an individual level, it is possible to identify what makes an effective network. It would have low ‘transaction costs’ (i.e. the investment of time, money and thinking is less than the returns). It would be sustainable and robust, with a clear focus that enabled the network members to come together and work collaboratively. An effective network would be one

where all members were able to participate; this would require an openness of channels of communication, as well as what is being communicated (i.e. open processes and open content). Networks rarely survive unsupported: they need resources such as time, leadership, facilitation and money to make them effective.

With the support of Nesta, the RSA has been able to prototype an infrastructure of support for effective networks that blends online and offline activity. Whilst at times it has been challenging to develop these strands simultaneously, ultimately the project has benefited from this holistic approach to the development of tools and support.

Online and offline activity need to fit together seamlessly. At this point in the project's evolution, much of the effort is going into mirroring activity in the real world and virtually. So for example, the format of the online platform is derived from observations and interviews about how people work together offline. Equally, the new formats for meetings and get-togethers that are being prototyped in spring and early summer will be based on what has worked on the online platform.

Much of the debate about online and offline formats and activity have focused on the *activity* of networking, rather than the *structures* of a networked organisation. However, as the project has unfolded, it has also thrown up some intriguing questions about the future shape of the organisation if increased levels of networking were to lead to action. These questions can be grouped around two themes.

Facilitation

Networking rarely takes place – or at least it rarely becomes anything more than a talking shop – without some form of facilitation, regardless of the medium for networking. The RSA networks project has generated many insights about the challenges of creating an effective facilitation model, as well as reinforcing the importance of it in sustaining meaningful, action-oriented networks.

To date, the project has tried to integrate online and offline facilitation, on the basis that particularly for younger people, the distinction between them are so much more blurred. Given the ages of the staff involved as facilitators we formed the view that our preferred model would shape a facilitator role that encompassed online and offline work.

However, lessons from other online communities suggest that this may not be the most effective approach to the work. For people to stay engaged in online communities, they need to feel their contributions have been acknowledged, read, digested and commented upon; in these terms, the more active the community, the more important dedicated capacity to facilitation is.

Having created the online platform as the primary form of interaction for the RSA networks project, a problem has arisen in the imbalance between contributions from Fellows and contributions from staff. A small handful of staff have contributed more than once; the majority have either not joined, or have joined but not commented or posted. The risk of this is that Fellows conclude that the RSA networks project is little more than a marketing exercise, and that spending time and energy posting is wasted as no one within the organisation is listening anyway.

That said, it is clear that for many of the facilitators there remain significant barriers to their participation online. Issues raised by them include:

- Legitimacy: will Fellows take me seriously?
- Permissions: is this a valid use of my time that will be recognised as such by my manager?
- Confidence: do I know enough to pass comment or participate?

- Voice: am I speaking as me, or as the RSA?
- Time: with so many other competing pressures, how can I make the time for this?
- Know-how: how do I engage with the platform, and where is the content on there that I could contribute to?

The interaction between facilitator and network needs to be dialogic and interactive rather than sporadic and formal. Given the cultural challenges outlined in the previous section, this has not been an easy dynamic to create and in many ways the difficulties in developing a clear facilitation model has been one of the key weaknesses of the RSA networks project so far.

Over the course of February, work has gone into responding the weaknesses of the facilitation model attempted in the first phase of the project. Rather than asking relatively junior staff around the organisation to contribute in this way, the team has been planning its growth based on the principle that every role within the networks team has facilitation at its heart. An expansion of the team in coming months will lead to four people (as opposed to one) who take responsibility for this task.

In addition, thinking has begun to turn to the role of regions in relation to facilitation. The RSA already has a well-defined role for its regions. In the past, this role has been based on a model of a hierarchy, with elected committees, boards and terms of reference. As the RSA networks model develops, the work of the regions is being ‘seen’ by the centre in a new way. The local relationships, existing partnerships, and groups already in existence around particular local issues are all features the regional RSA infrastructure, but have often gone unrecognised in the past – or at the very least treated as divorced and distinct from the ‘thinktank’ work of the RSA programme.

In response to this, the RSA made a decision in February to boost its regional support team, refocusing one role, and adding two further roles, whose primary focus will be on facilitation, and building the capacity of existing regional committees in the context of the new emphasis of the organisation.

The next phase of the project should yield interesting lessons about the effectiveness of this less distributed, more clearly defined role of network facilitation. A question remains about the extent to which facilitation should be more widely distributed as a responsibility across the organisation. A similar question remains about whether online and offline work should be integrated or kept separate.

Open-ness and closed-ness

One of the major areas of discussion throughout the first phase of the work is whether or not the online platform should be open (to foster a network of civic innovators, some of whom are Fellows) or closed (to foster a stronger, private network of the Fellowship, with a focus on civic innovation). Some of the more active fellows are arguing passionately that this is a vital policy decision rather than a technical one, as discussed here:

<http://networks.thersa.org/event/rsa-networks-action-and-openness>

If open, the RSA would be embarking on a path towards open source or user driven innovation. This is not a decision to be taken lightly: as organisations like Lego, P&G and Pfizer know, these kinds of models are extremely challenging to traditional business models in terms of creating value, managing risk and protecting IP. They demand new forms of leadership, revised governance structures and partnerships. Much more serious work would need to be done on revenue generation and business models if this route were taken.

If closed, the RSA would almost certainly be following the preferences of the silent majority of the fellows - that to some extent paying the membership fee gives them privileged access. In this context the RSA networks project should be focusing on how to create a rich

environment for strengthening fellow-to-fellow connections – through the online platform, but also through events, lectures, journal and all the other ‘touchpoints’ we have.

As the project enters its next phase, the senior team have taken a decision to make the RSA networks a closed initiative in the sense that it will only be available as a platform to Fellows or people invited to join the platform and participate by existing Fellows. This decision was informed by four core principles:

- With limited resources, the focus should be on mobilising more Fellows specifically – the current pilot has engaged approximately 2% and we are aiming for 25% by 2011.
- Fellows themselves – with a few vociferous exceptions – have expressed a preference for a network that is about connecting Fellows to one another
- The option for Fellows to invite non-Fellows on to the platform means that the system is not entirely closed
- The new website, which will host the RSA networks platform from April, is sufficiently flexible to move the network from closed to open in the future, if that is seen as appropriate.

2.3 Systemic change

Many of the Fellows and staff most engaged in the RSA work see it as a key driver of organisational and cultural change, rather than simply being an additional project that operates alongside the Programme and the Fellowship teams. However this perspective is not universally shared, and there remain some significant challenges in terms of internal communication, clarity of purpose and the ‘fit’ between the networks team and others.

Internal communication

The RSA networks team have been very focused on the Fellows, working to engage them and bring them on to the platform, and this has sometimes been at the expense of communicating with others within the RSA about the work and what it means. Contributions to regular full team meetings have formed a primary means of sharing information with everyone but these have been too irregular to be really useful.

Various combinations of staff across RSA networks, Fellowship and Programme have convened to steer the project at different stages, until the current configuration of meetings was found in January, mixing an RSA network presence at Executive Team Meetings once a month with regular trouble-shooting/strategy sessions with Matthew, Steve and Susan.

However significant issues remain. In February the team have uncovered worrying gaps in knowledge in areas of the organisation – for example with some staff proposing ‘a Facebook for Fellows’, completely unaware of the work and time that has gone into developing the RSA networks platform. As part of the next phase of the project this internal communication needs to be addressed more systematically.

Clarity of leadership

In part, internal communications have been stymied by mixed engagement of senior staff in the RSA networks project. The key senior team member responsible for the project has remained Susan Butler, head of marketing and communications. She has played a critical role in keeping the project going – particularly in the early days of the work. However she has done this alongside her day job. Similarly, the time Matthew has been able to give to the project has been constrained due to competing demands on his time.

These issues, combined with the loss of the key project manager early on in the project, has led to an occasional lack of clarity about who is setting the agenda, maintaining the pace, planning the overall process and taking responsibility for delivering on project commitments. It is in this context that the two core team members – myself, for 2 days a week, and Laura Bunt, fulltime, have been working.

This issue around the lack of clear senior leadership have been apparent to Fellows as well, who have commented on feeling confused about how decisions are made and by whom.

These issues should be addressed in the following phase of the project. First, the core team itself is set to expand, which will create a bigger, clearer presence of the work both within the organisation and across the network. Objectives for each member of the team now include both requirements around facilitation and stimulation of Fellows' networks, and working with teams within the RSA to build their capacity to work with these Fellows networks, and to support and facilitate them themselves as part of their core jobs.

Second, the decision to move the RSA networks initiatives out of marketing and communications and into the Fellowship team under a new Director of Fellowship should provide the clear leadership that is needed at this next stage of the project. Housing the work within the Fellowship team will enable connections to be made more fully between supporting networks of Fellows, and the Fellows' experience. This in turn will help the organisation to close any remaining gaps between what it says and what people experience – essential if people are to believe that the RSA's desire to create a network for civic innovation is authentic, rather than being a marketing ploy.

Fit between the networks and the programme

One way of understanding the new form of interaction that the RSA is modelling is to see it as a way of expanding the 'pipeline' of ideas into the organisation. Through creating an online marketplace for ideas, through increasing dialogue and interaction across the Fellowship, the possibilities of great ideas for new projects being generated by Fellows for the RSA surely rise.

Furthermore, finding new ways of engaging Fellows through existing projects is a way of building a really distinctive space for the RSA, whereby its projects that challenge conventional wisdom can simultaneously galvanise practical action on the ground through networks of civic activists.

However, these possibilities are only very recently being seen as such by the programme, after a very resistant start and a desire to keep a clear boundary between programme work and networks project. Remaining pressures about budget control, and the need to deliver high quality research on time have been prioritised by the Programme over Fellowship engagement, and it remains to be seen whether all these things can be achieved simultaneously.

The challenge is to 'design in' Fellowship engagement to all stages of project development and delivery. The current review and attempt to codify a project process is an excellent opportunity for doing so. Similarly, the performance management framework for staff needs to include an expectation for Fellowship engagement. These issues need addressing in the next phase of the work.

Section 3: looking forward and next steps

The priority for the next phase of the project will rest upon successfully creating and supporting some Fellows networks that are doing interesting, challenging and intellectually rigorous work. On both our online offer and the wider aspects of the RSA networks projects, there remains more work to be done to reach the project's original vision of creating a rich environment for ideas and networks to grow into real action and innovation.

This will involve the team leading a series of further 'controlled experiments' – identifying and then working with a manageable number of Fellows to stimulate action, alongside reflecting on how to embed such activity into the RSA's ways of working.

Our plan is to work with the 'early adopters' – those groups of Fellows who are already showing signs of interest in the new vision. These groupings will involve at a minimum two regions, some of the Fellows engaged in the Coffeehouse Challenge, and of course any new Fellows who join the Society from early 2008.

Above and beyond putting more time, energy and resource into facilitating networks amongst these new groups, the core networks team will also take a more explicit focus on building partnerships, and finding new ways of connecting grass-roots, local ideas to national and international initiatives. So for example, many of the Fellows are interested in the use and design of public space. The RSA should not necessarily respond to this through building up a programme or offering direct support: instead it could operate as a broker with other organisations active in this area such as RIBA, RICS, and CABE.

As well as this work on network development and stimulation, the next phase of the project needs a clearer and more structured programme of organisational change and internal communications. Priorities here will include:

- *The Fellows' journey* – thinking about recruitment, materials and experiences from the point of being asked, to the end of the first year of membership
- *Making events more interactive* – pilot events including new lecture, remodelled new fellows' evening, and a monthly RSA networks get-together
- *Working with the Programme* to develop manageable ways of engaging Fellows in meaningful ways
- *Governance in a networked organisation* – exploring the role of regional chairs, the council and the Trustees in an organisation focused on Fellowship activity as well as a full and active research programme

Outstanding questions to be resolved

Alongside the learning that will grow out of ongoing network stimulation and support, the second phase of the RSA networks project will provide further insights on the following issues:

- *What is the role of judgement in an open, co-created system?*

Our ambition is to create a sufficiently strong, engaged community of Fellows that it effectively becomes self-policing, with the 'wisdom of crowds' being the organisation's primary means of determining which networks get the most profile and support. And yet all open source systems, including Linux and Wikipedia, have a strong leader who exerts some form of judgement at various stages in disagreements or process. More needs to be done to understand when judgement might be needed for RSA networks, and who is making those judgements, for what purpose.

- *How can networks maximise their impact?*

Part of the RSA's appeal is its huge membership, spread not only across the UK but across the world. If groups of Fellows in Glasgow want to work on the same set of issues as a group of Fellows in Taunton, can the RSA make the sum add up to more than the parts. The role of toolkits, partnerships and media, and how these things fit with network development, all need further exploration.

- *To what extent do Fellows' networks drive the organisation's research agenda?*

Currently there is no transparent or codified process by which Fellows network ideas can turn into Programme projects. Nor is there a universal expectation that all Programme projects explicitly create a plan for Fellowship engagement (although this is changing fairly rapidly). The organisation needs to do more to clarify the extent to which it sees Fellows networks as a legitimate source of ideas for the Programme, and how those networks relate to other channels by which projects are identified and developed.

In short, as the RSA gets more confident about the potential of the model being tested by the RSA networks team, it needs to work more to clarify exactly what is on offer to its Fellows, and refine the key messages and plan of action accordingly.

It is hardly surprising that 6 months into the RSA networks project, the challenges that remain are significant. The RSA is attempting to remodel itself in the light of massive social change that is rendering the traditional role of membership organisations obsolete. If it can overcome the difficulties of escaping today's worldview, in order to define its role for the future we are creating, then the rewards will be rich. But the journey to get there will not be easy, or fast. There are few routemaps out there currently, and that is why the emphasis on learning and reflection is so crucial. If, through this process, the RSA can uncover a role for organisations in an era of new collectivism, not only will it be successful in renewing itself, but it will also show the way to other organisations beginning to grapple with the same set of issues.

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