



New ways of giving time: opportunities and challenges in micro-volunteering

A literature review

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1 Introduction

This report concludes the first stage of an evidence review that the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) are carrying out as part of the Nesta-funded project 'New ways of giving time: opportunities and challenges in micro-volunteering'. The initial aim of this component of the project was to review research and evaluations undertaken into micro-volunteering, covering academic literature, as well as practice documents published by policy-makers and volunteer-involving organisations. However, while micro-volunteering has received a great deal of attention from politicians and commentators in recent years, the literature search identified very few research publications. It was therefore decided to broaden the scope of the review in two ways: first, to analyse the media coverage of micro-volunteering, focusing particularly on web articles and blogs; and second, to review research relating to emerging trends in volunteering that may be indicative of micro-volunteering's recent development. By taking this approach, it was felt the review would help to situate the project within current policy and practice debates as well as identify and present the key issues that surround micro-volunteering.

The report firstly introduces the term micro-volunteering, briefly outlining how it has been applied and defined. This is followed by a discussion of the different perceptions of micro-volunteering held by commentators and practitioners. The next section moves on to a review of existing research on micro-volunteering and other volunteering trends, including reflexive volunteering, episodic volunteering and online volunteering. The report concludes by summarising the key themes to emerge from the review that will inform the following stages of the project.

2 Definitions

The use of the term micro-volunteering can arguably be traced back to the Spanish organisation Microvoluntarios¹, who in 2008 set up an online platform that enables charities to post requests for help with small tasks that volunteers can complete. As similar schemes have been set up, particularly in Western Europe and Northern America, and the use of the term has spread more widely, the definition of micro-volunteering has taken on new accents and meanings, and is indeed difficult to pin down. Despite the fluid and contested nature of the term, most would agree that micro-volunteering refers to volunteering actions that can be completed in short, discrete periods of time.

Central to the complexity that characterises the meaning of micro-volunteering is the issue of whether micro-volunteering can exist on a face-to-face basis or solely in the virtual sphere. The possibilities offered by new internet-based technologies, such as tablets, computers and smartphones, in enabling remote, flexible and convenient forms of participation have meant that much of the recent development of micro-volunteering has been based on such devices. Subsequently, micro-volunteering is often defined, either implicitly or explicitly, as existing exclusively through internet-connected devices and/or as a new form of volunteering that is distinct from 'traditional' types. At the same time, however, there is recognition that micro-volunteering can exist on a face-to-face basis and, in this way, is not a new phenomenon in itself. Here it has been noted how episodic volunteering, such as helping with a beach clean-up (Cravens, 2011), along with informal volunteering, such as 'helping an old lady cross the street' (Help from Home, 2010) can be defined under the umbrella of micro-volunteering.

¹ www.microvoluntarios.org

3 Perceptions of micro-volunteering: a solution to a problem?

3.1 Proposed powers and benefits

In May 2011 the government launched the Giving White Paper, outlining its strategy to make it easier and more attractive to give time and money to good causes. The proposals were made in light of findings which showed levels of volunteering and charitable giving had flatlined in recent years and that such engagement is accounted for by a relatively small subsection of society (often referred to as the ‘civic core’, see Mohan, 2012). The government further makes the case for increasing levels of giving by arguing that people want to give more but are held back by time constraints, lack of money and/or bureaucratic obstacles. Central to the government’s proposals for overcoming such barriers to the gift of time are both micro-volunteering and technology: together they are viewed as offering convenient and flexible volunteering opportunities that fit easily into everyday life.

Such sentiments are not limited to the government. Indeed, since the late 2000s there has been a number of blogs and web articles discussing micro-volunteering’s emergence and potential benefits. While micro-volunteering has caught the attention of different fields, particularly social media organisations, which have been crucial to its recent development, much of the coverage comes from practitioners and commentators concerned with the voluntary and community sector. Although many point out that micro-volunteering can exist on a face-to-face basis, the coverage has predominantly focused on online micro-volunteering – a reflection of the central role that new technology has played in its recent development.

The commentary is generally positive and promotional in tone, often framing micro-volunteering as a way to help create the step change in giving that the government seeks and for charities to overcome difficulties in recruiting volunteers and, by extension, enhance their capacity and impact on society. Indicative of such assertions, the language used in parts of the coverage, particularly by social media organisations and charities aiming to promote micro-volunteering opportunities, presents micro-volunteering as a new form of engagement that possesses great transformative powers. One web article, for instance, promoting the launch of Orange’s micro-volunteering initiative Do Some Good, suggests that it will ‘revolutionise doing good’ (ivo, 2011), while an article by the micro-volunteering platform Help from Home (Help from Home, 2010) is titled ‘Micro-volunteering – Changing the World in Just Your Pyjamas!’.

Underpinning such claims and much of the media coverage lay three proposed advantages of micro-volunteering opportunities, which largely echo the government’s proposals. The first and most widely pronounced is their convenient and flexible nature. Here, proponents are quick to point to certain benefits of micro-volunteering actions, many of which are supposedly less evident in more ‘traditional’ volunteering. Namely, that they are quick to complete; require little on-going commitment; can often be

conducted remotely; require minimal screening, training and on-going support; and, ultimately, can fit into people's busy lifestyles.

The second supposed advantage, often coupled with the first, is their potential to engage a larger number and wider range of people. Hugh Flouch (2010), for example, the founder of the social media and community development consultancy Networked Neighbours, views micro-volunteering opportunities as a way to reach those outside the 'civic core' who are not interested in more formal, structured participation. Others have pointed to the potential of online micro-volunteering initiatives to involve those who are elderly, have disabilities or may feel uncomfortable in social settings (Dennard, 2012; Bright, 2011). Notably, micro-volunteering has also received attention from employers and HR professionals (Meyer, 2012), who assert that such flexible engagement enables professionals and employees who are constrained by time to contribute their skills.

The second advantage is closely intertwined with the third: the potential of micro-volunteering opportunities to provide a gateway to more sustained and long-term volunteering. Such suppositions, for example, are pronounced by Emma Thomas, the chief executive of YouthNet, who is quoted as saying, in reference to the launch of Sony's micro-volunteering smartphone app, that 'being able to try short-term or one-off opportunities can be the first step in to undertaking more regular volunteering activity' (Laughlin, 2012). This is a point echoed by Mark Bright (Bright, 2011), who suggests that participating in a micro-volunteering initiative will increase the likelihood of the volunteer committing more time to the cause in the future.

While the three central advantages are generally asserted in relation to the outcomes for organisations, recipients or society at large, it is worth noting that some parts of the media coverage have focused on how micro-volunteers themselves benefit from their participation (Bright, 2012; Kaza, 2012). The projected individual benefits largely reflect those commonly recognised in relation to volunteering more widely, such as gaining a sense of satisfaction and positive outlook, developing skills and gaining work experience. More specific to micro-volunteering, one commentator (Dennard, 2012) suggests that micro-volunteering via computers can be a way for older people to develop new computer skills and become more digitally aware.

3.2 Responding sceptics and critics

While much of the commentary surrounding micro-volunteering has been positive, parts of the coverage have been less optimistic and favouring. Such views come from a range of practitioners and commentators, some sceptical of its promises, and others more dismissive and critical of its development altogether.

Sceptics have challenged some of the core claims that have underpinned the recent interest in micro-volunteering. Tackling the notion that micro-volunteering opportunities overcome the time barrier and make it easier for a wider range of people to volunteer, some have argued that such interventions don't fully address the causes of people's

disengagement. Writing in the Guardian Voluntary Sector Network blog, Ellie Brodie (Brodie, 2011), for instance, suggests that the multiple responsibilities and stresses facing some people constrain their ability to volunteer to such an extent that micro-volunteering initiatives alone can't break down such barriers. Somewhat conversely, the volunteering consultant Rob Jackson (2011) argues that people don't volunteer because they *think* they don't have the time, and thus micro-volunteering doesn't resolve people's disengagement because it doesn't tackle the reasons for the perception of time poverty.

Jackson moves on to challenge the central claim that micro-volunteering provides a gateway to more regular, sustained volunteering, claiming that there is no supporting evidence. Furthermore, while he notes that there is information on the outputs of micro-volunteering initiatives, he argues there is very little data in terms of the difference made. Echoing Jackson's concerns, commentators are sceptical of the impact micro-volunteering can have, with some questioning whether micro-volunteer actions add up to the systematic change that is needed to combat the issues that they seek to address (Fine, 2009).

In a similar vein, critics have argued that the recent emergence of micro-volunteering further signifies – and, in turn, potentially reproduces – the civic disengagement shown by some in contemporary society. Leonie Shanks (Shanks, 2011) from the social enterprise Innovation Unit, for instance, asks whether micro-volunteering is fast food for the 'big society', arguing how the recent trend is representative of a shift in the volunteering field towards individualism and consumerism – a move away, she feels, from the spirit and generosity that is at the heart of volunteering and is crucial for driving positive social change. David Anderson (Anderson, 2009), an American social sector consultant, goes even further, describing micro-volunteering as 'stupid' and stating that it creates an illusion of social engagement that threatens the work of people who engage with social issues 'in a serious way'.

Less contesting, commentators and practitioners, some of whom are proponents of micro-volunteering, have highlighted a number of challenges in its development and management. Concerns have particularly been raised in relation to online micro-volunteering and the remote position of the volunteer. Mark Bright (Bright, 2011), for instance, suggests that the sense of satisfaction, often crucial to the retention of volunteers, can be less apparent due to two interrelated points: first, the limited contact between the micro-volunteer and the recipient of the support; second, the fact that micro-volunteers don't directly 'see' the impact of their actions. Similarly, he notes that the limited direct contact with other volunteers potentially results in the micro-volunteer not gaining a sense of belonging, which can be a key benefit of volunteering. It has also been suggested that the micro-volunteer's remote position means that organisations have less control over and interaction with volunteers and, subsequently, may need to put extra measures in place to motivate and encourage people to participate (Meyer, 2012, Bright, 2011).

In recognising such challenges in the development and implementation of micro-volunteering opportunities, Sam Sparrow (2011) argues that micro-volunteering is not

necessarily suitable for all organisational contexts and volunteering activity. Some volunteering, she suggests, has to be formal, long term and face-to-face, and the relationship between the volunteer and the organisation is central to the volunteering experience. She therefore states that micro-volunteering should not be viewed as 'a catch all silver bullet to save every volunteer program' – a view which resonates with those sceptical of the central suppositions that have underpinned much of the recent media coverage.

4 Existing research on micro-volunteering

A search for relevant literature indicates a lack of thorough and robust research examining in any great depth how micro-volunteering works, who micro-volunteers and why, and what sort of impact it has on individuals (the beneficiaries as well as the volunteers themselves), communities and organisations. In most cases, the references that were identified only mentioned micro-volunteering very briefly and in reference to other topics, for example social media and innovation. Only a very small number of studies focusing on micro-volunteering were found.

IVR carried out a research project in 2011 into micro-volunteering. However, it focused on a very specific example – the Do Some Good app provided by Orange (Paylor, 2012). Paylor concluded that while the app was successful in engaging some people (especially younger people) who did not regularly volunteer, most survey participants were already engaged and active prior to using the app. The survey also indicated that participants were likely to continue micro-volunteering in the future, but there was no suggestion that this would happen to the detriment of other forms of volunteering and engagement.

Research into micro-activism conducted in the Netherlands looked at the emancipatory/exploitative tension of Web 2.0 platforms, and what it meant for micro-volunteering site Sparked.com and micro-financing site Kiva.org, which both promote bitesize social change (Dos Santo, 2012). The research is more an analysis of the medium by which micro-activism opportunities are communicated and promoted rather than the actual opportunities, but raises some interesting questions about the user–supplier dynamic. Dos Santos highlights that while these sites may encourage social change through collaborative action, they can in some cases be manipulative.

Also of value is the impact report produced by Help from Home (Help from Home, 2012). Although the report is not based on systematic research or a rigorous evaluation framework, it provides the most detailed mapping of micro-volunteering opportunities in the United Kingdom to date.

5 Evidence on other volunteering trends that can help us understand micro-volunteering

The nature of volunteering – the way people choose to give their time and the way organisations are structuring opportunities – has evolved over time and this process of change is on-going. The volunteering literature suggests that volunteering is shaped by a range of contextual factors and influences that impact on the individuals who volunteer and the organisations providing volunteering opportunities. The literature identifies a number of key trends impacting on the landscape of volunteering that can help us improve our understanding of micro-volunteering.

Public debates on volunteering often highlight a major shift between ‘traditional’ forms of volunteering that are typically described as long-term and highly committed, to ‘new’ forms of volunteering that are seen as being individualised and episodic (Hustinx and Meijs, 2011). In reality, the opposition between ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ is not clear cut and ingredients of both often co-exist within an individual’s own experience of volunteering (Hustinx and Lammerty, 2003).

5.1 Reflexive volunteering

Reflexive volunteering is seen as one of the main features of the changing landscape of volunteering. It places the individual at the centre of the volunteering experience – both the decision to volunteer and the choice of activity are highly dependent on personality traits and individual circumstances. Self-realisation is considered the driving force behind the involvement of reflexive volunteers, who are often described as being motivated primarily by self-interest.

Reflexive volunteering is often contrasted to collective volunteering, which is rooted in a sense of duty or responsibility towards a collective entity (a community or an organisation, for instance). With collective volunteering, people’s experiences of volunteering are based on group-based identities, and personal goals are subordinated to collective goals (Hustinx and Lammerty, 2003).

Leading increasingly complex lives, people are frequently pulled in a multitude of directions; their volunteering varies depending on life circumstances and tends to reflect personal preferences and needs at a given moment. Reflexive volunteers will more easily change activity or organisational affiliation, and are said to prefer being involved on an ad-hoc basis or for specific projects (Hustinx and Lammerty, 2003).

5.2 Episodic volunteering

There is also much talk about episodic volunteering – volunteering that is limited in time – and its development is often associated with the development of reflexive volunteering.

Episodic volunteering, also frequently called short-term volunteering, is not new in itself. The term itself was first used by Madoff more than twenty years ago (Handy and Cnaan, 2006), but episodic volunteering has been part of the volunteering scene for much longer, as many examples of long-established voluntary activities that are time-specific and self-contained indicate – for instance, helping out at a village fete or at a school day trip.

Episodic volunteering is often opposed to on-going and long-term volunteering. However, the distinction between the two is not always obvious. Some episodic volunteering may be a one-off event (i.e. ad-hoc volunteers for a specific project) but, in some cases, it can be repeated (e.g. volunteering every year at a festival). Rather than opposing the two, thinking about the frequency of volunteering as a continuum is considered more helpful, with, at one end, involvement in one-time acts of volunteering and, at the other, on-going volunteering (Cnaan and Amerofell in Handy and Cnaan, 2005).

Macduff's classification of the different types of volunteers shows the importance of having a more nuanced approach to episodic volunteering (Rochester, 2006). The three categories of her classification indicate that episodic volunteering is not necessarily opposed to regular volunteering:

- **Temporary episodic volunteers**, who are involved on a one-off basis for a few hours or, at most, a day.
- **Interim volunteers**, who are involved on a regular basis but for a limited period of time.
- **Occasional episodic volunteers**, who are involved at regular intervals for short periods of time.

The classification used in Handy and Cnaan's Canadian study on volunteering at summer festivals (Handy and Cnaan, 2006) distinguishes three different groups of volunteers and also highlights the blurred boundary between episodic and long-term volunteers:

- **Genuine episodic volunteers**, who volunteer 'for two or fewer volunteer episodes a year'.
- **Habitual episodic volunteers**, who volunteer 'for multiple episodic opportunities throughout the year'.
- **Long-term committed volunteers**, who 'in addition to the episodic volunteering they do at the festivals are also engaged in long-term, regular, committed volunteering'.

The study challenges the common view that episodic volunteers pick and choose tasks to their liking and not necessarily based on organisational goals. It finds that episodic volunteers show commitment to providing a quality service and can be directed and relied upon. Different types of episodic volunteers require different forms of support, and

organisations need to take into account this diversity to recruit and retain volunteers. According to the study, whether genuine episodic volunteers become habitual episodic volunteers largely depends on the organisations' capacity to build a 'sense of community'.

An Australian study (Bryen and Madden, 2006) found that episodic volunteers 'oscillate' between short-term and long-term volunteering, just as they oscillate between collective and reflexive types of volunteering. In the study, episodic volunteers are motivated by a mix of altruistic and self-interested reasons. They are more likely to re-engage in volunteering if their motivations are satisfied and their involvement has had an impact. They show a preference to working on their own and are less sensitive to recognition and appreciation than 'traditional' volunteers.

The existing evidence base provides useful insight into episodic volunteering and what the implications are for organisations. Studies on episodic volunteering often relate to specific organisations, activities or sectors (e.g. events or tourism sector). Claims that episodic volunteering is on the rise are difficult to substantiate. Statistics for the US and Australia indicate that more volunteers are giving less time (Bryen and Madden, 2006). However, statistics for the UK on formal volunteering, whether regular (at least once a month) or occasional (at least once a year) have remained relatively static over the last ten years (DCLG, 2010).

5.3 Online volunteering and other forms of online engagement

Micro-volunteering is often confused with online volunteering, or what is sometimes called virtual volunteering – i.e. volunteering that is via a computer or through the internet. Online volunteering began in the seventies but mostly developed from the nineties onwards (Cravens, 2006). Initially it was thought that online volunteering would appeal more specifically to young people, people with a disability or those with home-based commitments and carer responsibilities.

A literature review on practices and research in volunteering conducted for the Australian Department for Communities, Children Safety and Disability Services highlights that this is no longer the case (M&P Henderson Associates, 2012). Online volunteering is now more widespread, and considered increasingly 'as a standard avenue for engagement that offers the flexibility needed to overcome barriers to volunteering common across all volunteers', such as time availability. The report notes that in practice, online volunteering isn't developed and supported in a way that significantly differentiates it from more traditional forms of volunteering. However, it appears to be particularly adapted to short-term and ad-hoc involvement.

Online volunteering is often seen as a means to promoting volunteering beyond geographical boundaries and to people who are not already engaged in volunteering. Yet, research has showed that the majority of online volunteers support local organisations and volunteer onsite in addition to volunteering online (Cravens, 2000).

The link between online and offline has been explored beyond the field of volunteering in studies looking at activism and political participation. A study in the US found that people who engage in political participation online do not differ from those who engage offline, and are namely the better educated and the more affluent (Nam, 2011). The study finds that the internet has a dual effect: it mobilises people not normally politically engaged, given the general increase in internet usage, and reinforces existing offline political participation.

Earl and Kimport identify two opposing camps with regards to the role of the internet and other information and communication technologies (ICT) in encouraging political participation and activism. While the 'supersize' camp contends that the use of ICT 'primarily increases the size, speed, and reach' but has little impact 'on the processes underlying activism', the 'theory 2.0' camp argues that ICT has a transformative effect (Earl and Kimport, 2011). The authors reviewed the evidence from a range of studies and conclude that both camps are not mutually exclusive with findings largely dependent on context.

Some critics have objected that online activism only engages people superficially and weakens more traditional forms of engagement. Terms such as 'clicktivism' and 'slacktivism' have been used in an increasingly pejorative way 'to belittle activities that do not express a full-blown political commitment' (Christensen, 2011). Christensen finds no evidence that online activism is damaging political engagement or replacing other forms of political participation.

6 Conclusions and next steps

Our review of the media coverage of micro-volunteering shows that micro-volunteering is, in most cases, painted in a positive light, despite some commentators outlining its potential drawbacks. We found that these views, whether positive or negative, are rarely substantiated by evidence, highlighting a real gap in research and areas that deserve to be further investigated. The exploration of existing research on other recent trends in volunteering brings to the fore additional lines of inquiry.

From this review, we draw out a number of key conclusions, outlined below.

- The term micro-volunteering has been used in many ways to refer to a diverse range of volunteering activities. The lack of a clear definition highlights the need for research that clarifies our understanding of what micro-volunteering encompasses. While this involves drawing boundaries between different activities, we need to recognise that micro-volunteering is not a singular and fixed entity. Rather than defining it in black and white binary terms, as an activity opposed to something else (i.e. short-term or long-term, one-off or repeated), it may be more useful to explore the characteristics of micro-volunteering as a spectrum.
- Micro-volunteering is often compared to ‘traditional’ volunteering. However, opposing micro-volunteering to other forms of volunteering is not necessarily helpful as it fails to capture the diversity and fluidity of people’s experiences of volunteering. The blurred boundaries between episodic volunteering and regular volunteering indicate that an individual can volunteer in more than one way, and that different types of volunteering are not mutually exclusive.
- While micro-volunteering is often conflated with online volunteering, the two are not synonymous. Technology has often dominated the debate about micro-volunteering, but there are plenty of micro-volunteering opportunities that do not require the use of technology. Micro-volunteering – volunteering in small increments of time – is not new in itself. However, the use of technology to engage with people and as a facilitator is driving it in new ways and generating new interest.
- Whether micro-volunteering can be impactful or not has attracted both interest and criticism. The question of impact remains largely open and is likely to have more than one answer, depending on the activity involved and whether we are looking at the impact of an isolated micro-volunteering activity or the cumulative impact of many. In addition to the impact of micro-volunteering on beneficiaries and communities, we also need to consider how micro-volunteering impacts on the volunteers themselves.

- Micro-volunteering is seen by some organisations and policy-makers as a way of increasing numbers of volunteers. The focus is often on getting more people to start volunteering. However, in order to encourage people to continue volunteering, we also need to look at how organisations can engage with their motivations and provide quality volunteering experiences that suit their aspirations and lifestyles.

These conclusions will inform and shape the next stages of the project, which will explore micro-volunteering from the perspective of the individual and volunteer-involving organisations. The project will be conducting a series of focus groups with non-volunteers, a foresight workshop and several organisational case studies in the coming months. The project findings will be presented in a final report due to be published in the summer of 2013.

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