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Transition Network: Exploring Intersections Between Culture, the Climate Crisis, and a Digital Network in a Community - Driven Global Social Movement

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TRANSITION NETWORK: EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN CULTURE, THE CLIMATE CRISIS, AND A DIGITAL NETWORK IN A COMMUNITY-DRIVEN GLOBAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT

A Dissertation Presented

By

EMILY POLK

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Communication
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ABSTRACT

TRANSITION NETWORK:

EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN CULTURE, THE CLIMATE CRISIS, AND A DIGITAL NETWORK IN A COMMUNITY-DRIVEN GLOBAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT

SEPTEMBER 2013

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The core aim of this research is to explore the communication processes of the Transition movement, a community-led global social movement as it adapted in a local context. The Transition movement facilitates community-led responses to the current global financial and climate crisis via the Transition Network, an online network that began in 2006, and is comprised of more than 2000 initiatives in 35 countries that have used the Transition model to start projects that use small-scale solutions to achieve greater sustainability. This research uses qualitative ethnographic methods and a theoretical framework based on actor network theory to better understand how the movement’s grand narratives of “climate change” and “peak oil” are communicated into local community-based stories, responses, and actions toward sustainability, and secondly, to analyze the multilayered communication processes that facilitate these actions toward sustainable social change. Transition projects address a wide range of issues, including reducing dependency on peak-oil, creating community-based-local
economies, supporting sustainable food production and consumption, building efficient transportation, housing, and more diverse and inclusive education. The Transition model provides a participatory communication framework laid out in specific stages for communities to begin this process. The popularity of the model coincides with an increase in the interest in and use of the term “sustainability” by media, academics and policymakers around the world, and an increase in the global use of digital technology as a resource for information gathering and sharing. Thus this study situates itself at the intersections of a global environmental and economic crisis, the popularization of the term “sustainability,” and an increasingly digitized and networked global society in order to better understand how social change is contextualized and facilitated in a local community via a global network. From the findings, I argue that although the model’s rapid growth can be attributed, in part, to an appealing narrative that reframes more traditional environmental movement discourse into solutions-based community-focused actions, the movement would do well to develop more organized communication processes around connecting with and recognizing other people and groups who share similar values and goals, and around defining and creating the space for consistent and efficient leaders. This study also reveals that members of Transition Amherst had mixed feelings about the group’s success and this was attributed to a wide range of interpretations of the model and the purpose it serves, particularly in towns where the ideology of Transition has already, to some extent, been adopted.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Research summary

This study engaged with the Transition movement in two parts: The first part was a participatory ethnography of the researcher’s local Transition Town initiative in Amherst, Massachusetts. I actively took part in the Transition Amherst initiative as both a member of the group and a field researcher. The ethnography took place between September 2011 and January of 2013 and consisted of attending twice monthly meetings, Transition-sponsored events, participant observation, interviews with members, and textual analysis of hundreds of Transition-related documents and media. The purpose of the ethnography was to examine the social and cultural ways in which the model is specifically modified to meet a local community’s needs and concerns, and explore the internal and external communication processes of the initiative including the ways in which members communicate with each other and with local organizations and businesses. It also explored the roles that culture, class and race played for the participants in terms of the design and goals of the initiative, and regarding who participated and who did not, and who thought the initiative’s efforts were successful (or not). Finally, the research explored the Transition model in the larger social and cultural context of social movements and the ways in which the communication of movements toward environmental and social change are coordinated on and offline. The entire project sought to examine the structural capacities that make the Transition movement possible, and the conditions in a particular society that enable the movement to grow.
Defining Key Terms

Transition: n. 1. Passage from one form, state, style or place to another. 2. A period of transformation. (The Transition Companion 2011)

Sustainability: As this term grows in popularity in popular discourse, its meaning is evolving. Although there is no one definition, the term is most commonly used to refer to ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’ (Brundtland Report 1987)

Resilience: “The capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change, so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks.” (Walker, B. et. al, 2004)

Climate Change: Refers to any distinct change in measures of climate lasting for a long period of time. This includes major changes in temperature, rainfall, snow, or wind patterns lasting for decades or longer. Climate change may result from: changes in the sun’s energy or slow changes in the Earth’s orbit around the Sun; natural processes within the climate system and human activities such as burning fossil fuels and deforestation. (EPA 2009)

Peak oil: The idea that that any finite resource, (including oil), will have a beginning, middle, and an end of production, and at some point it will reach a level of maximum output. Peak oil refers specifically to that point in time when the maximum output is reached, after which there is only a decline. (peakoil.com)

Transition network (small n): Refers to the broad international community of individuals and groups basing their work on the Transition model (Also referred to as “the Transition Movement.”)
Transition Network, Ltd.: Refers to the legally constituted body currently called Transition Network. Its role is to continually review and collaboratively refine what Transition means, as well as enabling the maximum amount of networking between the various hubs, initiatives, and interest groups. They do this through Transition Trainings, consultations, and by supporting research and evaluations through partnerships with universities, as well as hosting events.

Energy Descent Plan or EDP: Refers to one of the main projects that a Transition initiative sets out to achieve, the creation of a 20-year ‘Plan B’ for their community, looking at how it might transition away from its current oil dependency and towards a low, carbon, resilient way of working.

**Significance of Research**

This research is located within the wider scope of communication for sustainable social change. According to the United Nations Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability (2012), inequality between the world’s rich and poor is growing, and more than a billion people still live in poverty. By 2030, the world will need at least 50 per cent more food, 45 per cent more energy and 30 per cent more water, all at the same time that the negative impacts of climate change and increasing civil unrest due to a global financial crisis are occurring all over the world. As high level reports continue to signal the oncoming of crisis and the instability and unsustainability of global markets and resources, a micro analysis that examines *how* communities are responding including the networks that are facilitating the necessary shifts toward greater resiliency is urgently necessary.
Castells (cited in Juris, 2005) notes that the information age has allowed for the emergence of “powerful communal resistance identities that have arisen in opposition to economic globalization, capitalist restructuring, and the disruption caused by global financial and cultural flows...from this resistance the seeds of a proactive project identity might emerge, capable of producing alternative cultural codes and sowing the seeds for a global civil society.” (Juris: 341) The Transition Movement—in volume, scale and reach—is a global initiative that reflects this idea(l) in a local capacity and which necessitates further research, both as a local communicative response to the current global crises, and as a way to explore how digital media funnels the movement of these larger global narratives into local grassroots actions toward sustainable social change.

Although the Transition model certainly builds on the environmental movement, the rapid growth and popularity of Transition towns around the world suggests that its focus on local community resiliency has achieved a broader appeal than previous environmental campaigns that were focused on general causes like saving the polar bears, for example, or stopping the clear cutting of forests.

While there has been significant research that has examined the influence and role of digital media in mobilizing both protest and social change on local and global scales, there is a gap in research that explores the relationship between local, interpersonal face-to-face grassroots groups on the ground, and global scale social movements mobilized online. While the phrase “Think Globally, Act Locally” (1972) is nearly half a century old, research is needed to further analyze the extent to which digital communication facilitates this process on and offline, including the populations who are participating and the various ways in which culture and class shape the movement. Research that explores
the communication structures and impacts of such movements is an opportunity to explore potential solutions to current crises and to ascertain processes of global and local social change mobilized by digital networks.

As the world is confronted with a barrage of global crises, including an economic depression, deforestation, global warming, species extinction, and desertification, and civic unrest, social movements mobilized in part as a result of information and communication technologies have connected the world in new and profound ways. Juris (2005) notes “Using the Internet as technological infrastructure, such movements are increasingly “glocal,” operating at both local and global levels, while seamlessly integrating both online and off-line political activity.” The communication processes of this integration call for further analysis.

**Economic Crises and Social Movements**

Much of the world is in or recovering from a financial crisis as a result of years of deregulation, the collapse of large financial institutions, bank bailouts by national governments, downturns in stock markets, a faltering housing market, and lack of employment opportunities. The lack of financial opportunities and frustration has resulted in grassroots social movements mobilized in part via social media to protest the current conditions. In December of 2010, a series of demonstrations resulted in revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, civil uprisings in Bahrain, Syria, Yemen and Libya, culminating in the resignation of the former prime minister and the fall of the latter’s government. Nearly a year later, in September of 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement began in Liberty Square in Manhattan’s Financial District, and has spread to over 100 cities in the United States and actions in over 1,500 cities globally. ([http://occupywallst.org/about/](http://occupywallst.org/about/)).
Inspired by the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, the “people-powered movement aims to fight back against the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future.”

Both the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street have been mobilized in part with the use of social media and other forms of online communication resulting in a body of research that builds upon analysis of the relationship between ICTs and global social movements. As theorists work to understand the possibilities and limitations of such communication tools for social change in a global capacity, there has been a renewed focus on understanding, redefining and theorizing the relationship between the global and the local. This study shares a similar focus with an emphasis on a more culture-oriented place-based globalism as the site for sustained social change. (Osterweil 2004).

**Environmental Movements and Diversity**

It is not enough, however, to simply look “locally.” Each locale contains a complex mix of people informed by a diverse range of socio-economic, racial and cultural experiences. This research seeks to fill a gap in the literature by exploring how such models for social change communicate (or don’t communicate with) diverse parts of a community, including processes for outreach and leadership structures within the movement and the impacts such structures have on the movement’s capacity to engage with members of the community. The analysis is both tactical and strategic—tactical in its micro-examination of Transition Amherst’s member’s participation, activities relative to the larger community, and strategic in its macro analysis of the Network as a global social movement. (How does the Network structure the discourse in ways that support diversity in initiatives around the world?)
The dominant narrative of the traditional environmental movement has been historically led by educated and white males, as have the subsequent movements that build upon it. (Pike, et. al, 2008) Slocum notes, for example, that “Those involved in alternative food tend to be economically and/or socially middle class. They have the wealth to buy organic, the inherited or schooled knowledge about nutrition or the environment and they are politically liberal to left.” (p 525)

Taylor (2002) argues that to understand the position of workers of color and the likelihood that they would adopt pro-environmental positions, one has to recognize the existence of split and dual labor markets and understand the role of race, class, and gender in structuring and perpetuating oppressive work environments.

“When people of color were introduced into the workforce, regardless of their social class or ethnic or racial background, they were subject to harsher forms of discrimination…marked by extreme forms of oppression such as enslavement, internment, and deportations, and dispossession and denial of land. Throughout the 20th century the oppression continued in the form of rigid occupational, educational, and residential segregation... ( p 36 )

In the early 1980s an environmental justice movement began to take shape with campaigns opposing the landfills sites and the discovery of DDT contamination in African American communities in Alabama. According to Taylor, it gained momentum with the publication of a 1983 U.S. Government Accounting Office and a 1987 United Church of Christ (UCC) Commission for Racial Justice study that linked race and class with the increased likelihood of living close to toxic waste sites (UCC 1987, U.S. Government Accounting Office 1983). The widely-publicized UCC study claimed that race was the most reliable predictor of residence near hazardous waste sites in the United States (UCC 1987) and was significant because it was the first study to
effectively bridge race relations and environmental discourse. (Taylor p 37)

Today environmental justice organizations continue to redefine “environmental issues” so that the dominant wilderness and natural resource focus now includes urban disinvestment, racism, homes, jobs, neighborhoods, and communities. (Agyeman 2005)

I suggest that the Transition movement, while building on traditional environmental discourses has the potential to align itself with the environmental justice movement, as it makes its central focus building community resiliency, as opposed to conducting, for example, singularly focused campaigns to protect and preserve wilderness.

Scott-Cato and Hillier (2010) note that the social issues that emerge as fuel prices rise and economic growth is constrained include the following: “the need to maintain social justice and protect the vulnerable; making use of opportunities for creating fulfilling livelihoods within local economies; the role of culture and the ‘creative classes’ as the new drivers for growth…While a pressing concern for economists working with the reality of a low-carbon, or post-carbon, world is the need to maintain social justice, climate change might also offer us the possibility of asking deeper questions about ‘social exclusion,” first and foremost in some attempt to determine what sort of society and economy we might wish to be included in.” (p 874) While the Transition movement certainly builds upon environmental justice discourses, each Transition Town is responsible for deciding how much of its efforts will be directed toward social justice initiatives whose aim is to engage with and support the more vulnerable community members. According to the model such decisions are supposed to be made by consensus, and are meant to reflect the interests and desires of the participants.
Climate Change

Global warming, as a result of greenhouse gases caused by deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels to power cars, factories, power plants, homes, offices, and schools, has been raising the Earth’s temperature for the last two hundred years, the most rapid of which has occurred in recent decades, and will likely have the greatest negative impact on the most vulnerable populations. Impacts include increased flooding in storm-affected areas and increased droughts in drier areas. An increase in temperature increases the risk for famine, water shortages, heat-related deaths, and the spread of infectious diseases. Rapid climate change makes adapting to change more difficult and costly. This is especially true for the poor, the very young and older adults. (EPA 2009)

Recent research from the Pew Research Center indicates that the percentage of Americans acknowledging that there is solid evidence of global warming has steadily increased over the past few years. Currently, 67% say there is solid evidence that the earth’s average temperature has been getting warmer over the past few decades, up four points since last year and 10 points since 2009.

Resources Running Out

Economic development, industrialization, and neoliberal policies have always been closely linked to the control and production of materials. The demand for fossil fuels, metals and minerals, and biomass continues to increase. Global resource extraction has grown over the past 25 years, from 40 billion tons in 1980 to 58 billion tons in 2005, representing an aggregated growth rate of 45%. (worldresourcesforum.org/) The result is the unsustainable production of finite resources resulting in environmental damages and potential catastrophes when they do in fact run out.
**Why Transition Network**

In lieu of these crises, it is imperative to research models for positive social change that are focused on building community resiliency and sustainability. The Transition Network represents a distinct and important site of study for several reasons. First, Transition’s rapid growth suggests that its appeal is reaching a demographic that is going beyond the audience of a more traditional environmental campaign; hitting a global nerve, if you will. The notion of a “Transition Town,” a place on the map where people are transitioning away from their dependency on peak oil and toward community resiliency holds great promise, informed perhaps by a romantic sense of utopian possibility. (The subhead for Transition founder Rob Hopkin’s blog reads: “How might our response to peak oil and climate change look more like a party than a protest march?” (TransitionCulture.org).) The words capture the imagination at a time when the general population is acknowledging, if not directly experiencing the effects of global warming, with recent research indicating a growing global cynicism about the government’s capacity to effect meaningful change. (Muller 2012, berkeleyearth.org)

The Transition Town model locates itself as meaningful, sustainable, community-led response to climate change. Indeed it insists that it is participatory, grassroots and staunchly apolitical and thus capable of holding all of the dreams of those who seek to remediate the negative effects of climate change and to build a better way of life. The specific definitions of “better” are to be defined by each community, as are the processes of attaining that goal.

Secondly, Transition is an important model to consider because it is the only model that builds upon the environmental movement and uses permaculture as its central
premise. Permaculture is a set of principles and practices used to design sustainable human settlements. (Hemenway, 2009) It integrates design with ecology by promoting sustainable land use strategy, systems for healthy food production with the potential for surplus, restoration of degraded landscapes that results in the conservation of rare and endangered species, integration and harmony of all living things, and minimal consumption of energy. (Mars, 2005)

Finally, as the world’s communication is increasingly digitized, and our geographically bounded notions of community are disrupted by virtual networks and online opportunities for connecting across time and space, the popularity of a global movement focused on the local sense of place and on cultivating personal face-to-face connections in the name of community resiliency, suggest that perhaps our online communities have not in fact replaced our physically situated ones, but rather might be used to support our desires for a deeper connection to an embodied locale, to the material sense of a “home.”
CHAPTER 2
BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This study builds on previous research in several areas: The creation and mobilization of community in a networked society (Castells 2007), (and here I refer primarily to “community” in the traditional geographically-located sense and the ways in which it is shaped and reflected in the digital arena) and the relationship between community, and social and environmental movements. Thus the purpose of this study is twofold: The first is to gain an increased understanding of the factors—structural and conjectural—that have allowed the Transition Network to grow as a global social movement devoted to building community resiliency and environmental sustainability. The second aim is to understand the effects and impacts of the movement via an ethnography of a local Transition town.

Decades before the Transition model was developed, the environmental movement was promoting the conservation of resources and recycling of waste and popularizing adages such as “reduce, reuse and recycle.” Rootes (2007) notes that the development of the modern environmental movement was influenced by the ideas and campaigns of the 1960s New Leftism and the critique of capitalism’s assault on the environment (p 614). The movement “developed new approaches to teaching about ecology; involved children and adults in monitoring water quality in lakes and rivers; helped to persuade government, foundations, and private firms to institutionalize new approaches; pushed industries to use less-polluting and more-resource-efficient technologies; and pushed government to legislate environmental protection.” (Rojas and
Heaney 2008) According to Rootes (2007) although issues of equity in the distribution of environmental burdens informed the early stages of the environmental movement, “environmental justice” (as a critique of structures of social organization that cause environmental degradation and a call for local community empowerment) emerged only as a prominent discourse in the 1980s.

This study is an opportunity to explore the ways in which the Transition Network builds upon and diverges from the environmental movement while analyzing the communication practices behind the construction of an alternative model that uses climate change and peak oil as the starting point for a re-construction of a sustainable community. It is significant not just for its rapid global growth, but also for the ways in which it is able to take the grand narratives of “climate change” and localize them in a way that is meaningful enough to prompt action.

**The Transition Model**

The Transition model was developed by permaculture professor Rob Hopkins in 2005 in Kinsale, Ireland as a model for communities to respond to the challenges of peak oil and climate change. The model has been communicated globally online via the Transition Network, the movement’s books “The Transition Handbook: from oil dependency to local resilience” (Hopkins 2008) and “The Transition Companion: Making your community more resilient in uncertain times” (Hopkins 2011), two movies “In Transition 1.0” and “In Transition 2.0,” and through digital and face-to-face communication. There are now over 2000 Transition towns in 35 countries. (Transition Network).
Communities have used the Transition model to start projects to increase sustainability in the areas of food, transport, energy, education, housing, and waste. The model’s communication processes are three-fold: 1) It provides a communication framework for participants to respond collectively to the challenges their communities face as a result of economic hardship, climate change, and shrinking supplies of cheap energy. 2) It provides numerous resources for participants to raise awareness of the problems caused by the latter as well as solutions proposed by community members. 3) It functions as a public collective body of experience with numerous opportunities for communities to learn from each other all over the world via its central online hub: The Transition Network.

Principles of the Transition Model

The model includes a set of seven principles and six guidelines that may be adapted to each community. The seven principles include: 1: Positive visioning. The first principle is one of the defining characteristics of the movement, and arguably one that separates it from many other efforts to ameliorate the negative consequences of climate change. It insists on the necessity to reframe the climate change crisis in a positive light. Participants are urged not to negatively focus on a community’s dependency on fossil fuels but rather focus on a positive re-imagination of ‘possibilities and opportunities.” (Hopkins and Lipman 2009) The first principle works on creating a cultural shift through the re-telling of collective stories. 2. Help people access good information and trust them to make good decisions. Participants in the transition movement are encouraged to take responsibility for raising awareness of peak oil and climate change and the consequence of unlimited economic growth. They are encouraged to present this
information in ways that are accessible, engaging and culturally appropriate so that people feel respected, “enthused and empowered rather than powerless” (Hopkins and Lipman 2009) 3. *Inclusion and Openness*. The movement encourages broad participation from a wide range of members in the community, including engaging the local business community, community groups, and local authorities. 4. *Enable sharing and networking*. Participants are encouraged to communicate their successes, failures, insights and connections within the larger network. 5. *Build resilience*. Transition initiatives dedicate themselves to building resilience in the areas of food, energy, economics, as is appropriate and relevant to each community. 6. *Inner and Outer Transition*. This principle, similar to the first, addresses the need to change worldviews and belief systems. It encourages participants to do what they are passionate about. 7. *Subsidiarity*: *self-organization and decision-making at the appropriate level*. This principle addresses the systemic structure of the movement. It suggests that the intention of the Transition model is not to centralize or control decision-making, but rather it is to be adapted by each community in such a way that it replicates the ability of natural systems to self-organize. (Hopkins and Lipman 2009)

**Guidelines of the Transition Model**

It is important to note that the model makes it clear on various documents that it is as much in “transition” as the environmental, social and cultural shifts it proposes. Therefore identifying specific guidelines becomes difficult when, for example, the Transition Network website proposes four “ingredients,” the Transition Primer proposes 12 general steps and the “Who We Are and What We Do” document proposes seven
guidelines. For the purposes of this study, I have selected the latter guidelines because they most closely match the guidelines that Transition Amherst uses.

Although the guidelines are intended to be flexible, a central aim of this study is to better understand how and in what ways the local Transition town is using these guidelines. Are they in fact helpful? Are they useful? Are they communicated in a way that is accessible to a community of people who are attempting to create a Transition town for the first time? Finally, is the group taking the time to follow and prioritize these guidelines? These questions will be explored in depth in the following chapters.

The first guideline is that participants share an agreement with the purpose of the Transition movement and the formerly mentioned principles, with the assumption that the group will contribute to the ongoing development of them. The second guideline, “Don’t Reinvent the Wheel,” encourages members to research and learn from other initiatives, as well as ensure that there is at least one member of the initiative who has been embedded in the larger community for a long period of time. The third guideline, “The Initiating Group Designs Its Demise” suggests that the initial meeting group will eventually dissolve into different “working” groups as the initiative evolves and more people become involved. The fourth guideline, “Interdependence” encourages the initiative to work with and support other Transition-aligned initiatives, emphasizing the importance of communication with regard to encouraging one another through the process. The fifth guideline, “Openness to Feedback and Learning” focuses on the inevitability that participants will be challenged along the way and it is indeed through their challenges that they and the initiative will grow. The sixth guideline, “Start in your own back yard” encourages participants to work at the scale at which they can have the most influence
and emphasizes the importance of any members who may become involved at regional or national levels to continue to work within his or her local initiative to maintain a connection to the challenges and practicalities of his/her own group’s work.

**The Stages of Transition**

There are five stages of becoming a Transition Town, which are now referred to as “ingredients” on the Transition Network website. These “ingredients” were organized with the input of many people who have been involved in their transition initiatives since the model’s inception. It is important to note that there is no timeline for each stage, nor are members expected to follow each stage exactly as it is laid out. Each community has different needs and different communication processes. During the first stage interested members of a community come together as a group. The following are emphasized as key characteristics for the first stage: Inclusion and diversity, respectful communication, building partnerships, raising awareness, positive visioning, reskilling (defining the skills that each member has to share with the community), conducting practical activities while attending to the well-being of the group, defining the scale and scope of the initiative, determining the best way to measure impact, emphasizing the value of arts and creativity, establishing working groups based on the skills of the members, developing the capacity for project support including administrative support, publicity and fundraising, backcasting—envisioning a desirable future and then work backwards from there, and finally work to create a space for “inner transition,” (Transition Network).

The second stage, referred to as “Deepening” addresses the tools needed to make
the Transition initiative sustainable once the group has been formed. The tools include ensuring that there are practical activities that raise awareness, and that these activities have good promotion, reskilling workshops in the form of events, sustainability-focused courses that are run independently or with local educational institutions, a consistent mindfulness of language use and the need to appeal to a wide range of people, continued celebration of failures and successes, consistent reflection and evaluation on the progress and impact of the initiative that includes an effort to sustain momentum through seeking new members, and promoting new involvement and events, (and a sensitivity to burnout and the importance of personal care), a focus on local food initiatives, land access, and finally, building partnerships with local schools and universities.

The third stage, referred to as “Connecting” explores how Transition initiatives can connect to a wider audience. The tools for this stage include forming wider networks of transition initiatives that allow the sharing of local experience, representation at a wider political level, more visibility and the hosting of larger events that may involve the council or authority. During this stage the Transition model suggests that groups might expand their work with local businesses, work on creating oral histories of elders in the community, engage young people, and ensure that storytelling has a strong role in the initiative, including the production of films, music, newspaper articles, and cartoons. The final part of this stage is a collective pause for reflection.

The fourth stage, referred to as “Building” focuses on the ability of a Transition initiative to localize their economy. During this stage, participants ideally grow their small community projects to successful social enterprises, becoming sustainable developers, alternative banks, energy companies, etc. The tools for this stage include
developing an Energy Descent Action Plan. A seminal part of the Transition movement, this plan is a research-based community process for creating “a powerful, practical story of a lower-energy future.” (Transition Network) During this stage, the initiative scales up by developing strategic local infrastructure and technology that supports a locally based economy and community ownership of assets.

The final stage, referred to as “Daring to Dream,” imagines the Transition movement on the national stage – including sustainable food networks, energy companies, and a new culture of social enterprise. This stage involves advocating legislature and policies that work on behalf of Transition-aligned initiatives, participating in the larger network of collective and individual Transition experiences, and finally, where possible investing financially in Transition.

**Initial, Mulling, Formal Transition Initiatives**

There are three formalized stages of recognition that Transition Network has created for all of its initiatives. The first is the “Initial Stage” and refers to the initial gathering of the community members to discuss the Transition concept and process. The second stage is the “Mulling Stage.” During this time, the group contacts the Transition Network, Ltd. and enters itself into the Googlemap of Transition initiatives. It lets the Transition Network, Ltd. know its ‘mulling’ status. The third stage is the “Formal stage” and occurs after the group fills out an application, which includes a declaration of intention that lists the guidelines as well as information about the initiative. Currently applications for “Formal status” are managed by the Transition Network, Ltd.
**Transition Amherst**

The ethnographic portion of this project has been primarily focused on Transition Amherst, the Transition town that is located in the closest proximity to my home. Since the purpose of the movement is to build local community resiliency by focusing on the place where one lives, Transition Amherst is a participatory research site that allowed me to “test” the model over an extended period of time with active membership and sustained involvement. As it is also the town where I spend most of my time as a doctoral candidate and instructor at the University of Massachusetts, I have a vested interest in understanding the successes and failures of applied models for social change within my community. There has already been (and continues to be) a significant amount of research regarding the theories behind the Transition movement. However, there has yet to be a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which the theories are actually applied over an extended period of time in practice, on the ground in a Transition town.

**The History of Sustainability in Amherst**

**Demographics of Amherst**

Amherst, Massachusetts was incorporated in 1759 and as of 2010 had 37,819 residents, 9,174 households, and 4,550 families, and more than 26,000 student residents (amherstma.gov). The town constitutes 27.7 square miles with a 138.2 road miles in a region known as the Pioneer Valley or the Connecticut River Valley. The University of Massachusetts, Hampshire College and Amherst College are all located in Amherst. The University of Massachusetts, the Amherst School District and Amherst College are the largest employers in the town. As of 2000, 79.3 percent of the town identified as White, 9.1 percent as Asian and Pacific Islander, 5.1 percent as Black, 3.3 percent as two or
more races, 2.9 percent as Other and 0.2 percent as American Indian/Alaskan native, making the subtotal minority population 20.7 percent. (US Census 2010). The median family income is $61,237. (US Census 2010) There are currently no statistics available for the demographics of American Transition Towns.

As with any place, a town’s history (and the way it is officially communicated) shapes its landscapes, buildings, roadways, economy, and culture. According to historical documents, in 1698, John Pynchon, a settler from Springfield “purchased” Amherst from three native inhabitants. Amherst was named after General Jeffrey Amherst, a British military commander during the French and Indian War. In 1786, full township status was granted by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In the 18th century Amherst was a community of farms and small mills, in the 19th century a farming and industrial town with two small institutions of higher learning, and from the 20th century to the present day it has been an educational center. The following excerpt from Amherst’s preservation plan provides a useful visual narrative of the intersection between the town’s topography and its history:

“To the north and south respectively stand the Sugarloaf and Holyoke Ranges, and to the east, the Pelham Hills. The Town of Hadley and Connecticut River stretch from Amherst to the west. The topography cradles the Town on three sides, but leaves it open to the vast Hadley floodplain. Within the town, the land rolls across grassy hills, farm and pasture lands, and forested wetland. Many fallow agricultural fields have succeeded to forest, resulting in large expanses of young woodlands...

From its earliest days of European settlement, Amherst took the form of a town with several villages, separated by open farms and forests, and this pattern has endured. The largest village – Downtown Amherst – lies at the center of the town, and smaller clusters stand to the east (East Village), south (South Amherst), north (North Amherst and Cushman Villages), and west (West End). Downtown holds the greatest concentration of commercial activity, with smaller centers in some of the villages. “Strip” development has grown up along Routes 9 (College Avenue and Northampton Streets), and 116 (in North Amherst and at the intersection with Pomeroy Lane)...The downtown, along with several outlying village clusters, helps to define its historic pattern
by clustering new housing in and around the villages and preserving much of the farmland and conservation lands that lie between them.

Educational institutions now dominate the Amherst landscape, covering 18% of the town’s acreage. The University of Massachusetts, Amherst College, and Hampshire College extend from the northern end of the Town (UMass.), through the center (Amherst College), and reach the southern edge (Hampshire College). The town’s economy revolves around these institutions as does a significant portion of its housing. In the past 20 years, Amherst has also become a magnet for retirees, and residential compounds and medical facilities have emerged as a result. Since 1950, the Town has more than tripled in population (11,000 to 35,000) as well as density (400 persons per square mile to 1,260), causing a significant growth in housing and need for public services.” (2007)

Amherst Sustainability Plans

From 1969 to 2005, 27 planning documents have been prepared by the town. They included growth, economic development, affordable housing, sustainable development and design. Of these 27 planning documents, only two have been approved, the Climate Action Plan and the Affordable Housing Plan. According to the heritage planning doc, “The lack of formal adoption may mean that plans are being implemented in a piecemeal manner, if at all…Many of the plans and studies do not enjoy broad ownership in the community. While most of the plans included some form of public input, they did not succeed in building sufficient ownership and support.” The adoption of the Climate Action Plan, which included strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions for Amherst as a whole by 35% below 1997 levels “in the areas of energy use and facilities, transportation, waste management, land use and planning, community education and resources, and the Affordable Housing Plan, however, may suggest that the community is aware of and prioritizing a response to the changes wrought by climate change and the economic crisis. The town also recently hired a sustainability coordinator and developed a website to help raise awareness of Amherst’s sustainability efforts and provide resources for homes, businesses and schools as well as to promote community
events focused on sustainability.

In addition to the town government, there are a plethora of environmentally focused organizations and nonprofits that are based in Amherst. The Transition Amherst blog (transitionamherst.org) links to over half a dozen farms that have community supported agriculture (CSA) shares; nearly a dozen cooperatives, including a Co-op Power, a renewable energy company cooperative, Collective Copies, Food For Thought book collective, two community-owned grocery stores, and Valley Free Radio, a locally-owned community run radio station. Sustainability-focused organizations include CISA (Community Involved in Supporting Agriculture, Grow Food Amherst, and Pioneer Valley Local First, a founding network of BALLE, Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, which encourages and supports companies to be socially, locally and environmentally responsible; four conservation trusts; several alternative and/or “new” economy-focused organizations, including Common Capital, Common Good Finance and Valley Time Trade; and dozens of other groups focused on energy, the environment, education, equality and bicycling. (It should be noted that the bicycling category on the Transition Amherst website contains the most organizations, however, this may be more a reflection of the webmaster’s enthusiasm for and expertise in building bicycles, than the general population of Amherst.)

The University of Massachusetts has a campus sustainability initiative that includes green energy construction, energy conservation plans, a student farmer’s market and award-winning permaculture gardens, recycling and waste reduction, (including composting for on-campus residents), solar and wind energy projects, and bike and car sharing programs. According to the University of Massachusetts, undergraduates can
choose from more than 20 sustainability-related undergraduate majors. They may also apply to become an “eco-rep.” Eco-Reps build a foundational knowledge surrounding issues of sustainability and explore how best to raise awareness about these issues amongst their peers. “Focusing on the role and impact of the individual, Eco-Reps work to promote environmentally responsible behavior in the campus community.”

(umass.edu/livesustainably/groups/eco-rep-program). Amherst College has similarly-focused “green” programs, including converting all of its heavy trucks to fuel-efficient diesel vehicles, renewable energy projects, and sustainability-focused courses.

Hampshire College has a long tradition with sustainability initiatives. The college has its own farm and CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program which provides organic local food to students, faculty, and staff, as well as to the campus dining services. Hampshire is in fact the first university in the United States to work on becoming a “Transition University” with courses focused on the Transition movement, including a summer abroad program in England titled: Transition Connections: Exploring Totnes and Cornwall Transition Initiatives and a dedicated Transition-themed “mod,” an apartment-style house on campus.

The tradition of sustainability activities in Amherst gives rise to several important questions that are explored more deeply in this study: What role does a Transition Town initiative have in a town already promoting the concepts and ideas behind Transition? How, when and in what ways does a Transition initiative communicate with the other initiatives? In what ways does it learn from and engage with these other initiatives?
Transition Amherst

Transition Amherst began in March of 2010. Sarah Lyme, a local activist and community organizer had been hired by Transition US, the Transition hub in the United States, to conduct Transition trainings for communities around the country who wanted to learn more about the theories and practices behind the model. There are currently dozens of Transition trainers delivering courses in Ireland, Italy, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, China, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Brazil, Holland, and the US. (transitionnetwork.org/training/trainers) Sarah gave a talk at the Hitchcock center, a local environmental learning center in Amherst. After the talk, a few people decided to get together to begin to form a Transition initiative. Several people attended a formal training. The group met every other week at various people’s houses. In the early stages, a book group was formed to discuss the Transition Handbook. A few months later the group hosted a film series on Transition-themed films. The first event the group co-sponsored was an “Awakening the Dream” seminar, a workshop involving Central American Shamanic traditions at Arcadia Wildlife which, according to one of the founding members Kat Boggs, officially began the initiative’s treasury with $50. Soon after Hector Lasix, one of the members, started hosting skill-sharing workshops at his home including food preservation and bicycle repair workshops.

During the time this ethnography began, in early September of 2011, the Transition Amherst group had about a dozen active members who attended meetings every other Thursday evening at the farmhouse of Jarod and Jasmine Paul, two biologists, in downtown Amherst. The decision was made to regularly host the meetings there rather than rotate to each member’s home so that Jarod and Jasmine’s children could also
attend. During the fall months the meetings were preceded by a potluck dinner and book discussion about *The Transition Companion*, the sequel to the *Transition Handbook*, which had just been released. Members of the group took turns facilitating the meeting, which was approximately two hours long, not including the potluck beforehand. The initiative moved from the Mulling stage to the Official stage in September of 2011, coincidentally, on the day of the first meeting I attended.

Since the group’s inception, it had initiated a book club that had read the Transition Handbooks as well as Carolyn Baker’s book “Navigating the Coming Chaos: A handbook for inner transition.” (2011) It had conducted a series of reskilling workshops, including how to make cider from locally procured apples, safety bicycling in the winter, and a peace and conflict resolution workshop. It had sponsored a film series at a community center and designed a website. During the spring of 2012, the group decided to direct their attention to organizing the planning of the town’s “Great Unleashing”—a simultaneous community celebration, call to action, and opportunity for the Transition Town initiating committee to raise awareness about its role in the community. According to the Transition model, the original “initiating” Transition group is supposed to disband after this event. Transition Amherst’s “Great Unleashing” event occurred on October 13, 2012, after which Transition Amherst initiating group stopped meeting and members began holding meetings for the working groups that formed at the Great Unleashing. This research does not cover those meetings.

During the course of this research, members of Transition Amherst did develop a relationship with the town of Amherst’s sustainability coordinator and with professors at Amherst College School of Community Engagement. Transition Amherst’s mission
statement currently reads: “Our purpose is to foster vibrant and resilient community—in the face of rising energy-prices, climate change, and economic instability—by empowering one another to share our skills and gifts, and create a better life for all.”

(transitionamherst.org/blog/)

**Critiques of the Transition Movement**

The Transition Movement has been the subject of many thoughtful critiques mainly from participants, but also from academics as well. I note some of them here and will build upon them in later chapters, because they provide a useful lens through which one may begin to analyze the structure, functions and impacts of the movement. It is important to note that many of the critiques are centered on the tensions between the ways in which the model communicates its messages (i.e.: how it brands itself) and the ways in which it actually functions. It is the intention of this project to provide useful ways of negotiating that gap in order to help the initiative sustain themselves while also creating sustainable social change within its community.

**Is the need to protect the “Transition” brand overriding bottom-up approaches?**

**Negotiating tensions between a local approach and a global voice**

Although the movement claims a horizontal structure with decisions reached by consensus, and insists that it is not prescriptive, it has been increasingly criticized for its top-down approaches, “an inherently undemocratic management structure (as a movement with an anointed ‘founder’ and arguably a prescriptive manifesto) (Connors and McDonald 2010). The movement is largely associated with a single, iconic figure: Its founder Rob Hopkins. As the founder, Hopkins has developed the movement’s main ideas as well as the “brand.” Although each community is still encouraged to define its
own “Transition” process, Scott-Cato and Hillier, (2010) note that hierarchical tendencies have emerged in an attempt to protect the larger “brand.” (p 876) Towns and other communities are no longer able to self-enroll on the Transition website for example, but are added to the ‘mulling’ category until they have fulfilled the required criteria. The official joining criteria require four to five people to start an initiating group who will step into leadership roles; two to attend the official Transition Network training course; a commitment to network and work with others, including the local council, other Transition initiatives and the Transition Network, all of which formalizes the group, with an official status (branding it) as part of the Transition Network. (Smith 2011)

Some have suggested that the movement “is something of a cult with the need to join and be trained in the ways of the Network.” (Smith 2011) I share the suggestion that some of the writing gives the impression of a “cult” and explore instances where the tensions between the top-down and bottom up approaches within the movement constrain and in other ways actually enable its ability to function and/or make lasting positive change in a community.

The Movement Colonizes Existing Sustainability Networks

Connors and McDonald, (2010) note that the Transition Movement has been critiqued for building its reputation by colonizing existing networks. While the Transition Network is still in its infancy, there are many active community groups that have been working on environmental issues for decades. They argue that currently there is not enough attention around communication processes for Transition members to recognize and value the sustainability work that has already been done in the community and to encourage those groups to continue to participate in Transition. Even with this
recognition, little research has been done to determine if and how members of these community organizations work with the Transition model. Connors and McDonald (2010) note, for example, that while members of a Landcare group in rural Western Australia might be touched to be recognized, it does not necessarily follow that they will be willing to subordinate some of their activities to a structure established and mandated by a group emanating from Totnes England. “What will it take for them to see the point in their locality becoming an ‘official’ TT? And what will it take for a community in Thailand or Bangladesh or France?” (p 570) Does the cultural blindness required for mass “inclusivity” ultimately render the movement irrelevant to the mass support that it requires for it to be truly inclusive?

Can a movement sustain relevance when it remains apolitical?

The Transition movement veers from many other social movements, by cautioning against taking a strong political stand on specific issues, leaving it (partly) up to individual TTs to decide what kind of stand(s) they want to take. A generally apolitical approach leaves open the potential for building diverse coalitions across political, cultural, economic, social and other points of difference by accommodating a range of points of view. The downside however, is that no action is taken in communities that are ideologically and politically split. Connors and MacDonald (2010) note, for example, that in Australia, there are communities split down the middle by the forestry industry, by wind-farming, by genetically modified agriculture, by mining projects, carbon-trading proposals, sustainable fishing, disputes over Aboriginal sovereignty, heritage issues and bypass roads. “All these issues impact on the resilience of any community and all involve winners and losers at the local level. They also involve the efforts of powerful corporate
interests to defend or expand their profitability and market share, and of State and Federal government to appease or mediate between those corporate interests.” (p 566) If no “side” is ever taken, what does progress toward resiliency look like and how can the movement continue to sustain itself?

“Climate crisis” as grand narrative does not serve the majority of people

Some have argued that the ‘financial crisis’ has greater relevance to more people and may serve as a more mobilizing narrative to galvanize people to become a part of the Transition movement and the Transition movement’s failure to place the crisis center stage, thus far, has hampered its progress. “Asking individuals to consider a post-peak oil society is complex; asking them to engage with the notion of ‘living on half your current income’ (in a resource-scarce landscape) is perhaps more immediate, thought provoking and likely to bring about engagement in the movement.” (Connors and McDonald 2010)

This critique raises particularly interesting questions around how a movement attracts and sustains its members, and how it stays relevant to a diverse range of people.

The question of diversity

The question of how to engage with diverse populations is not a new question for the environmental movement, however, it is interesting to note how the Transition Network is handling it, especially as research continues to demonstrate that the populations most immediately affected by climate change are the most vulnerable. (Poor, elderly, youth, less educated.) This gap—between the impact of climate change on a population and said population’s involvement in movements to mitigate it, is as important to acknowledge as it is to understand, since the process of building truly resilient communities will impact those who are not involved with the initiative. Preliminary
findings from a recent survey conducted in Europe run by the Transition Network suggest that 95% of the respondents described themselves as white European, and 86% were educated to post-graduate degree level. (Connors and McDonald 2010) Indeed, many participants in Transition communities have noted that vulnerable populations are very much under-represented. (Cohen 2010)

**Defining Community**

Finally, the Transition Movement leaves the definition of “community” up to each initiative, however, this has created challenges for several projects, particularly urban ones, (Smith 2011) since there are many “communities” within one setting. What are the boundaries an initiative should use to organize and work? And what are the positives and negatives from defining these boundaries? This project seeks to explore this further via interviews with participants in Transition Amherst, whose process of defining “community” is complicated by the flux of more than 40,000 temporary students.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed in order to better understand the communication processes of the Transition Network and the ways in which the model is adapted to local communities in order to determine the role(s) it may play on micro and macro levels toward contributing to community resiliency. They were also designed to address some of the critiques.

**Glocal Narrative(s) and their Appeal**

- Why has the Transition movement spread so rapidly? What structural and organizational elements contribute to its appeal and its adaptability and flexibility? How has the Transition Network been able to translate grand narratives like “climate change”
in locally-specific ways that are able to prompt action toward social change in Transition Amherst?

**Impacts**

- How do members of Transition Amherst understand and communicate the impacts of the initiative on creating community resiliency. How are they defining success? How are they defining failure?

**Culture**

- What is the relationship between culture and action in Transition Amherst? For example, does a community’s culture change or evolve because of the movement or do participants already live the ideals of the movement and work to change the “outer” culture? How do the individual cultures of group member’s impact the initiative? What is the relationship between Transition Amherst and local officials, civic organizations, nonprofits, businesses, etc. in a town with a culture that already promotes transition-themed actions and activities?

**Sustainability of a Transition town**

- What factors have sustained participation in Transition Amherst? What factors sustain the movement? What role did leadership play in the effectiveness, productivity and sustainability of Transition Amherst? What was the group’s processes for determining and defining leadership? How did these processes impact the short and long-term activities of the initiative?

**Diversity**

- Does the initiative dialogue with and/or address issues that vulnerable populations face? (Poor, elderly, youth, less educated). Why or why not and in what
ways? Is there a common demographic of participants in Transition Towns? What is the connection between participation and class, race and age?

**Technology and Transition**

- What is the role(s) of the digital network in supporting and sustaining a global movement? In what ways do members of Transition Amherst use digital technology? How do people interact in the digital and public spheres? Are communicative actions made possible in the digital sphere that are not possible in person? How does the Transition Network in general and Transition Amherst in particular use technology to create sustainable social change? What is the connections and (dis)connections, for example, between Occupy Wall Street, and the Arab Spring?
CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into three interrelated but distinct sections that inform the foundation of this research. 1) The cultural and political history of the concept of and discourse around “sustainability;” 2) The evolution of Development communication; and 3) Digital communication, social movements, and concepts of community.

**Sustainability**

The term “sustainability” has grown increasingly popular in various political and social and economic discourses, mainly as a call to action to raise awareness around the current depletion of finite natural resources. The word is most often associated with being able to meet the needs of the present (socially, economically, environmentally), without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. (Brundtland Report 1987) Although the term originated in primarily Western discourses, this review will discuss the theoretical and practical definitions as they relate to nature, culture, and place.

Clarkson and Morissette (1992), two indigenous people from Winnipeg, Manitoba presented their vision of sustainable development through the eyes and experience of Indigenous people for the International Institute for Sustainable Development. They note that teachings passed down from ancestors created a culture of responsibility and a relationship to the earth that arose out of the “original law.” (p 12) “It is said that we are placed on the earth (our Mother) to be the caretakers of all that is here. We are instructed to deal with the plants, animals, minerals, human beings and all life, as if they were a part
of ourselves… The way in which we interact with the earth, how we utilize the plants, animals and the mineral gifts, should be carried out with the seventh generation in mind. We cannot simply think of ourselves and our survival; each generation has a responsibility to “ensure the survival for the seventh generation.” (p 13)

Before contact with Europeans, the authors note that concepts of “sustainability” were already part of indigenous culture, and the development of social institutions and mechanisms of social control were premised upon the same understanding. “If they failed to consider what the environment had to offer, how much it could give, and at what times it was prepared to do this—they would simply die. This basic law held for every living thing on the earth. All living creatures had to be cognizant of the structure of the day, the cycle of the seasons and their effects on all other living matter… If the people were to deplete the animal or plant resources of their immediate environment, pain and suffering could be expected. This understanding gave rise to a relationship that is intimately connected to the sustainability of the earth and its resources.” (p 13)

According to the authors, five major (interrelated) perceptions speak to the difference between indigenous and Western views with regard to sustainability. These are: the nature of humanity’s relationship to the planet; the place of self and community in the actualization of that relationship; the conception of the organic matter of the planet; the reasons for utilizing the organic matter of the planet, and the vision for our existence as it relates to sustainability. (p 20)

The three approaches that critical geographers and political ecologists use to discuss the environment and nature is a useful framework to discuss sustainability. The first and arguably most limited approach is a people and the environment approach,
which equates nature as an environmental problem that needs to be managed. Its emphasis on science leaves out the socioeconomic levels that need also to be considered both intellectually and practically in the field and focuses only on ameliorating immediate problems without addressing the cause. The second approach to nature is an eco-centric approach which views nature as something that is being used and destroyed purely for human benefit. This approach grew out of the “green movement” and continues to thrive in various current discourses through a critique and dismantling of systems of production and consumption that are not sustainable. The third approach is the social approach (Castree and Braun 2001) which sees nature as defined and contextualized within each culture and community (place and space). The meaning of nature is reconstituted to serve specific and often dominant social interests. The social and the natural are intertwined in ways that make their separation (theoretically and practically) impossible. From a sustainability perspective, the latter two approaches seek to redefine and question taken-for-granted assumptions about the relationships between nature, policy makers, businesses and citizens. The Transition Network draws from eco-centric and social approaches.

**Nature from a Western Perspective**

Nature, in western discourses has been perceived as both a concept and all those physical things to which the concept refers. Castree and Braun (2001) note that discourse around sustainability has historically reflected three normative and related ideas about nature: 1) External Nature is objective and can be “known.” It is autonomous, god-given, nonsocial and nonhuman. 2) Intrinsic Nature assumes there is an inherent nature to people, an essential fixed quality that is definable by an attribute. Legacies of racism have
been enabled with this model. 3) Universal nature sees the general and not the particular. Ecocentrics may adopt this view: Humans are part of the universal nature, and they are also the ones who are causing all of the harm, and the earth in universal, generalized terms will exact revenge on humanity for it. Although all three approaches are different they all share a general idea that nature can be known. With regard to sustainability, once we have the objective facts, we can work toward fixing what we have messed up. The fourth approach, the social approach understands nature as socially constructed and argues that in order to work towards sustainable development, one must first understand how cultures, communities, governments, and businesses understand their relationship to nature. For example, major western aid organizations have designed campaigns for developing countries to curb population growth and resource use, despite the fact that there are more than enough resources to feed the world and improve standards of living. The issue is that these resources are used disproportionately and controlled by Western nations. (Bryant 2001) Calls for population control diverts attention away from the real problem, uneven economic development and the drain of resources from south to north, making communities more vulnerable to environmental crisis like floods and droughts. Another example might analyze how gender relations are connected to environmental degradation. Feminist political ecologists argue that women’s fights for equality, privileging their knowledge, and giving them power are directly tied to sustainability. A social approach addresses the roots and the connections. The opportunities and constraints with which nature presents societies are defined relative to the economies, politics, technical relations and capacities of each society.
History of “Sustainable Development”

Sustainable Development has experienced several different trajectories as its discourse has made its way into the mainstream. The concept of sustainable development (SD) from a western perspective first gained popularity in the late 1970s in response to a growing realization of the need to balance economic and social progress with concern for the environment and the stewardship of natural resources. It has since assumed two basic approaches: first, as a way of achieving a balance or reconciliation of traditional economic growth with ecological and environmental conditionings, and second, as a philosophy or ideology that conceptualizes civilization in a holistic manner. (Skowrownki 2008)

The phrase gained momentum at the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) or the so-called Brundtland Commission at the United Nations in 1983. The 1987 report by the Brundtland Commission, Our Common Future, was one of the first cohesive reports to consider economic and social development in terms of sustainability. The core issues and necessary conditions for sustainable development as identified by the WCED were: population; food security; species and ecosystems; energy; industry; and the urban challenge. Nearly a decade later, in 1992, Agenda 21, a plan of action to produce international and national sustainable development strategies, was adopted by more than 178 Governments at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. One of the most well-known projects discussed at the conference was the Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Project. The project aimed to protect the Pacific Coast of Colombia’s biodiversity. Funded by the World Bank, it focused on four key aspects: 1) To know
(local knowledge-gathering on biodiversity), 2) to valorize (to create ecologically appropriate economic uses of biodiversity), 3) to mobilize (help to organize and empower local peoples), 4) to formulate and implement (modify existing local/national institutions to support local decision making.) Although the project shed light on potential opportunities offered by the term “sustainable development,” it remained controversial because the project was not run by people indigenous to the area, and the language (“biodiversity,” etc.) was not used locally. (Escobar 2008)

In September 2000, at the United Nations Millennium Summit, the 191 member countries in the United Nations agreed to a set of eight Millennium Development Goals for the world’s poor nations. These goals, including reducing poverty, increasing primary education and health care, promoting gender equality, and ensuring sustainable development are targeted for fulfillment by 2015, and have since become the fulcrum for public policy discussions and actions concerning economic and social development. (MDG Report 2009) The goals have been criticized for being too vague, lacking cultural context (for example one of the goals is gender equality, and yet the role of gender in other cultures is not addressed,) and finally for not originating from the South itself. (Amin 2006) Rather, they were developed primarily by the United States, Europe, and Japan, and were co-sponsored by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. According to the most recent MDG outcome document (2010), progress has been made in combating extreme poverty, improving school enrollment and child health, reducing child deaths, expanding access to clean water, improving prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, expanding access to HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care, and controlling malaria,
tuberculosis and neglected tropical diseases. However, hunger and malnutrition rose from 2007 through 2009, partially reversing prior gains. There has been slow progress in reaching full and productive employment and decent work for all, advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women, achieving environmental sustainability and providing basic sanitation, and new HIV infections still outpace the number of people starting treatment. In particular, slow progress has been made on reducing maternal mortality and improving maternal and reproductive health.

In 2002, the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development was convened to assess the effectiveness of Agenda 21. Despite a lot of talk, Shah (2005) notes that since the commitments were first made in 1992, little has changed in terms of global poverty. The rising popularity of the term “sustainability” through conferences, protocols, and agreements has ironically blurred the definition of sustainability and made the understanding of it vague (Hull 2008).

Still, others continue to define and promote it. Wilson (2007) suggests that there are four key elements that promote sustainable development; “Equitable and inclusive political processes, national and international governance processes that are effective, responsive, and accountable, supporting engaged citizens and dynamic civil society, and generating inclusive economic growth, sustainable livelihoods and transparent, efficient markets.”

Chen (2001) and Tremblay (2007) indicate that the goal of sustainable development is to pursue “regional balanced-development” suggesting that a large challenge is to strike harmony between the environment and the expansion of science and technology. The goal of sustainability should not be to substitute man-made or artificial
capital by natural resources but to have each complement the other. This is what is known as *strong sustainability*. (Horbach 2005).

Skowrownski (2008) calls for “environmentally friendly socio-economic development that takes account of the finite nature of environmental resources and possibilities.” (p 119) This approach brings attention to the economic interests of the state or industries that have the most power. Historically, nature has been viewed by state and industry as an entity which must be civilized and tamed through modernizing initiatives, with profit as the first priority. The common seizing of land for agriculture, ranching and commercial forestry that was once done by the colonial powers is now conducted by international institutions and corporations in negotiation with the independent state. (Castree 2001) Gawor (2008) offers a counter to this perspective and suggests that sustainable development should be understood as an alternative to “development megatrends of the present, including globalization processes denoting the need to change the previous values, which contributed to the rise of Euro-American industrial-technological civilization” (p 131).

Sustainable development as an applied concept is more likely to combine many different models of development. Blaikie (2001) argues that development projects currently experience an uneasy combination of participatory models that combine local ways of farming, agriculture and herding strategies with quantitative ecological and economic modeling while also interacting with international financial institutions, individual scientists and activists, conservation groups, NGOs, politicians, and consumers.

Mannberg & Wihlborg (2008) acknowledge, however, that global and local visions
of sustainability are often unaligned. They suggest that the root of sustainable development is in fact in local, well functioning planning processes that are decentralized, and grassroots. They used the concept of communicative planning to suggest that a socially sustainable society is one where participation is part of planning processes. It is participation that allows sustainability at the local level, where locals are part of the process of defining what is sustainable for them.

Gibson Graham (2008) echo a similar sentiment. Although they don’t use the term “sustainability,” they advocate a local community economy that: marshals local financing and its recycling within the community; increases harmony with nature, and tolerates economic difference within a range of community enterprises, locally owned businesses, nonprofits, cooperatives, community-development corporations, and employee-owned businesses. The authors outline several essentials for promoting an ethical praxis of sustainability that includes the capacity to collectively engage with the following questions: 1) What is necessary to personal and social survival within the community? How might development projects seek to build upon the assets already present in the community? 2) How is the economic surplus produced and consumed, appropriated and distributed in the community? 3) How are the commons produced and sustained? (p 80)

The commons refers to resources that are collectively owned or shared between or among populations. These resources can include natural resources, land, and software. The commons traditionally referred to forests, rivers, fisheries or grazing land, that are shared, used and enjoyed by all in a community, but today they are also understood as
occupying a cultural and digital sphere, and may refer to public education, water and electricity delivery systems, and even Wikipedia. (Bollier and Clippinger 2005)

Agyeman (2005) offers a way to conceptualize sustainability from a social justice lens with what he terms as “Just Sustainability.” He argues that there is a necessity to expand the sustainability discourse to consistently include human rights issues such as inequities that include placing polluting waste facilities in poorer areas; lead contamination; pesticides; water and air pollution; workplace safety; and public transportation. (2005). Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus (cited in Agyeman 2005) address the disconnect in the environmental movement: “Why...is a human-made phenomenon like global warming—which may kill hundreds of millions of human beings over the next century—considered ‘environmental’? Why are poverty and war not considered environmental problems while global warming is? What are the implications of framing global warming as an environmental problem—and handing off the responsibility for dealing with it to “environmentalists?”

I participated in a long-term project with several colleagues from around world, aimed at developing sustainability indicators for specific communication for social change projects. (Servaes, Polk, Shi, Reilly, Yakupitijage, 2012) The concept behind the framework is a working model that allows for a flexible interpretation of sustainability and the components supporting it. Based on the available literature, four sectors of development were selected: Health, Education, Environment and Governance and eight indicators were analyzed for each of the sectors: actors (the people involved in the project, which may include opinion leaders, community activists, tribal elders, youth, etc.), factors (structural and conjectural), level (local, state, regional, national),
development communication approach (behavioral change, mass communication, advocacy, participatory communication or communication for sustainable social change—likely a mix of all of the above, channels (radio, ICT, TV, print, etc.), message (the content of the project, campaign), process (diffusion-centered, one-way, information-persuasion strategies, or interactive and dialogical) and method (quantitative, qualitative, participatory or a combination.)

For each indicator we developed a set of questions designed to specifically measure the sustainability of the project and tested them on two development projects. We defined “sustainability” by analyzing whether the channels were compatible with both the capacity of the actors and the structural and conjectural factors? If they were, our research indicated that the project would have a higher likelihood of being sustainable. We asked to what extent the process was participatory and consistent with the cultural values of the community. Was the message developed by local actors and how was it understood? Our research showed that the more local and interactive the participation in communication approaches, channels, processes and methods—the more sustainable the project would be.

Recently, the term “resiliency” has been used by a wide variety of researchers, policy makers, and community organizers as a more relevant supplant to the term “sustainability” in the context of development, and indeed the Transition Network uses the term in its motto: “Transition Network supports community-led responses to climate change and shrinking supplies of cheap energy, building resilience and happiness.” Zolli, in his defining book “Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back” (2012) defines resilience as “the capacity of a system, enterprise, or a person to maintain its core
purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances.” (p 7) Resilience strategies almost always employ feedback mechanisms to determine when a disruption is nearing. According to Zolli, a “truly resilient system is able to ensure continuity by dynamically reorganizing both the way it serves its purpose and the scale at which it operates.” (p 10) Thus strategies of resilience might be developed for economic, social, and ecologic systems.

**Communicating a culture-centered perspective**

The previous descriptions originate from Western-dominated theories. Patra (2009) suggests that supporters of sustainable development might look towards local, non-Western concepts of development that integrate self sufficiency, ecological balance, and culture. This requires shifting away from an overemphasis on technological solutions in order to integrate a multidisciplinary more human development-focused approach to the social, cultural and local. Open, inclusive, and participatory communication and information processes are fundamentals for successful, sustainable development. (Wilson 2007). “When communities articulate their own agendas, they are more likely to achieve positive changes in attitudes, behaviors, and access to opportunities.” (Reardon 2003).

From a Buddhist perspective, *sustainability concerns evolvability—the ability to become a less selfish person.* (Servaes 2008) The main core of sustainable development from this perspective is to encourage and convince human beings to live in harmony with their environment, not to control or destroy it. This holistic approach of human relates to cultural development in three dimensions: Behaviors and lifestyles which do not harm nature; Minds in line with (Eastern) ethics, stability of mind and motivation to see other creatures as companions; Wisdom includes knowledge and understanding, with attitudes
and values that live in harmony with nature.

The central idea in a more culturally-oriented version of sustainable development is that there is no universal development model which leads to sustainability at all levels of society and the world, that development is an integral, multidimensional, and dialectic process that can differ from society to society, community to community, context to context (Servaes 1999). Each society and community must attempt to delineate its own strategy to sustainable development. The scope and degree of interdependency must be studied in relationship to the specific local and culturally based content of the concept of development.

**Development Communication**

The Transition Network offers an alternative concept of development and its communication framework draws heavily from the more recent, participatory discourses on development communication, which will be discussed later in this section.

**Origins of the term**

The history of Development communication and theory is a complicated one. It involves the introduction of science and technology and the management of the changes that arise from science and technology. (Pieterse 2004) It ranges from infrastructure works (new roads, buildings, dams, canals, ports) to new economic policies. Its definition as a modernizing paradigm defined only in Western terms is also an oversimplification of a complex and increasingly globalized process. Development communication has gone through many paradigmatic shifts over the last 60 years. Nora C. Quebral, the first person to coin the phrase in 1971, called it “the science and art to change society in a planned way.” She since updated it to “the science and art of human communication
linked to transform society from a state of poverty to one of socio-economic growth that makes for greater equity.” (2005) Servaes (2009) defines it as a social process that involves the sharing of knowledge aimed at reaching a consensus for action that takes into account the interest, needs and capacities of all concerned. Pieterse defines it as the organized intervention in collective affairs according to a standard of improvement. That standard is determined by the class, culture, historical relationships and relations of power in the communities. (2004) He notes that the shift in the meaning of development must be contextualized with the changes in economic and social capacities, priorities, and choices and relations of power within the community.

From the modernization paradigm and diffusion theories which grew out of colonial empires to the dependency approach that originated in Latin America in response to modernization, to the multiplicity and participatory approaches and later to postdevelopment theories that focus on globalization processes, new communication for development discourses are now being characterized with a greater focus on “glocality” (focusing on the impacts and consequences of globalization, free markets and private enterprise while recognizing the local economies and cultural roots of a community) and the rights for communities to modernize on their own terms according to their own needs.

**Sender to Receiver models and the modernization paradigm**

Development communication parallels the historical trajectory of communication theory. Traditionally the communication process was seen as a one-way transmission from sender to receiver and the modernization paradigm reflects that as well. Beginning the 1950s, early approaches assumed a singular and one-way progression from an agricultural to an industrial society, from the premodern to the modern, and from the
nondemocratic to the democratic. Mass media was the channel through which these “modern” ideas were transmitted, and the success of their “transmission” was measured in economic terms. Many theorists (Schramm 1964, Lerner 1958, Rogers 1962) conducted government and military funded studies that measured the effects of mass media on communities with regard to modernization. It was largely believed that sending out the right messages to the largest amount of people would result in effective social change.

Although the modernization paradigm received the most support during the 1950s, many who are invested in alternative models of sustainability argue that the paradigm is still alive and well today, just disguised in participatory rhetoric. “Growth” continues to be measured as a centralized, unilinear, and homogenizing process that lessens the gap between the rich and poor and traditional and modern societies.

**Diffusion Approach**

Diffusion theory suggests that development starts with the diffusion and adoption of certain ideas, motivations, attitudes or behaviors. Communication stimulates and diffuses values and institutions that are favorable to achievement, or what it means to “become modern.” Lerner (1958) investigated the socio-psychological characteristics necessary for a transition to modernity, and determined that empathetic people or people who could see themselves in somebody else’s situation were more open to mobility, had a higher capacity for change and were more future-oriented than “traditional” people. The process relied on the transmission model of communication: the more people were exposed to new ideas via the mass media, the more empathetic they would become. Schramm (1964) analyzed connections between mass communication and modernizing practices and institutions and argued that mass media was the conduit for the transfer of
information for the purposes of directed modern development. He suggested that the
mass media performed three functions: They served as watchdogs, policy makers and
teachers for change. Rogers (1971) developed his Diffusion of Innovation theory which
noted “lack of innovativeness, fatalism, limited aspiration, a limited view of the world,
and low empathy” as obstacles that needed to be overcome in order to achieve modernity.
He proposed that there are four connected elements that influence the spread of a new
idea: The innovation, the channels through which the innovation is communicated, and
the time it takes to move through the social system. Individuals achieve progress (process
of adoption) through five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and
confirmation. If the innovation is adopted, it spreads via various communication
channels. Rogers found that early adopters were younger, had a higher social status, more
exposure to mass media and were in a better financial situation.

**Mass media/Social Marketing/edutainment**

During this time, the majority of the goals of social change efforts were behavior
change. Communication campaigns designed to change behaviors were coordinated by
the mass media using social marketing techniques. Similar to the public relations
business today, researchers conducted studies to find out what had the best appeal to
people for moving away from a less developed life to a modern life. It wasn’t until many
years later that theorists began to understand the significant role that interpersonal
communication played in social change. (Morris 2003) More recently, the concept of
Edutainment—A media message designed to both entertain and educate locals in order to
increase audience knowledge about an issue and change behavior, has been critiqued for
having a similar approach. Edutainment formats are often in the form of a soap opera via
television, radio and musical performances and are acted by locals from the community.

**Dependency Theory**

First developed by Latin American social scientists as a challenge to modernization theories, the dependency paradigm thrived from the late 1960s to the 1980s. It was originally part of the movement to form the non-aligned nations which defined development as a political and economic struggle for self-reliance. Economic self-determination was the key to independency from the superpowers. (Servaes 1999) It argued that people who subscribed to the modernization paradigm would see resources flow from periphery (poor) states to core (rich) states benefiting only the rich. Dependency theory criticized the modernization paradigm for denying the role of imperial exploitation in Eurocentric modernization. Dependency theorists argued that if the role of the state was to facilitate world markets, how could the needs of the indigenous ever come before the bourgeoisie? (Amin 1976) Dependency theory became more difficult to support, however, as growing nations became inevitably more interdependent upon other nations as a result of globalized markets and communication.

**Multiplicity and Cultural Identity**

The multiplicity framework emerged as a response to the failures of modernism and dependency theory. Africa did not develop into the shining beacon of Western modernity. Nonwestern value systems as alternatives to development especially in Asia, challenged theoretical assumptions and practical achievements of the modernization paradigm. A new concept of development emphasized multiplicity and plurality and dialogue along and in between all levels of society. (Servaes 1999) The framework emphasized that there is indeed no universal path or standard to development but rather
each culture and community must decide what is best for them. This theory advocates: a
grassroots, bottom up approach; self development of local communities; that neither the
core or periphery exists as an island, but must be studied separately and in relation to
each other; change must occur at many different levels and across many different lines
and is always contingent on the culture of a place. The Transition Network says that it
models this approach.

**Participatory approach to development**

Participatory theory is a dialogic approach that grew out of the multiplicity
framework in the 1980s. Brazilian author, activist and teacher Paulo Friere is one of the
major contributors around the discourse of participation. He argued that dialogic
communication is essential for conscientization—the autonomy of each individual to
realize his own self worth. (Freire 1970) Conscientization leads to emancipatory social
change. His participatory, dialogic approach included three steps. First: Everybody is
treated as an equal and a colearner. Secondly: A community must dialogue at all levels,
then issues-based questions are raised and thirdly, suggestions for action are given by
members of the community. His model is based on an inherent respect for the autonomy
of each human being, and an individual’s capacity for self-reflection, and decision-
making.

A participatory approach to development communication recognizes that the point
of departure must be the community. The view-points of local groups must be considered
before resources for projects are allocated and distributed. Secondly, social equity and a
democratic process is best fostered through a horizontal process of information exchange
and interaction since the purpose of development is for people to have greater control over their lives.

**Complications and Critiques**

Waisbord (2008) notes that institutional dynamics undercut potential contributions of participatory communication in three ways. 1) Bureaucratic models favor the use of informational models over participatory approaches. Development agencies, donors, and governments perpetuate understanding and uses of communication as technical skills to disseminate messages. 2) The weak status of communication inside these agencies prevent change from moving from informational to participatory. Technical experts still expect communication to be the “art of messaging” and communication staff lacks autonomy to make decisions that incorporate participatory approaches. 3) Prioritization of technical/top down perspectives limits use of participatory thinking and removes it from local processes of participation and knowledge.

Some argue that the language of “participation” has, in fact, been co-opted and used in the rhetoric of bureaucratic aid organizations who continue to operate under the top-down modernization paradigm. Another critique of the participatory approach is that while the theory takes a cultural-specific approach, it cannot, in practice account for the ways that different cultures structure their hierarchies of power and gender differences, since the theory advocates equality and horizontal processes of communication.

**Current status: A combination of everything?**

Despite the critiques, Morris (2003) argues that development projects today employ a largely immeasurable amount of diffusion and participatory approaches.
Participatory methodology, she argues, is not about completely “abandoning the expert,” but rather, in part, developing a process to figure out how and when the expert’s information is used.

Communication strategies for development and social change can be divided into five categories but will probably combine all of them if they are going to be sustainable (Servaes 2009) 1) Mass communication (community media, 2) Behavior change Interpersonal communication, 3) Advocacy communication (interpersonal and mass communication, 4) Participatory communication and 5) Communication for structural and sustainable social change.

**Globalization and Localization: Glocalization?**

A globalization paradigm (Sparks 2007) places emphasis on linking the global with the local by interrogating previously accepted notions about development: For example, are developed countries really “developed” when the core and periphery exist within each location? Sparks (2007) identifies ten defining features that characterize the globalization paradigm including entrepreneurs as the preferred change agent as opposed to policy expert or progressive intellectuals; The centrality of media and communication technologies in every day life; The rise of supranational organizations; increased tensions between the local and global; and an absence of centralized controlling powers with multiple production centers and regional markets.

Escobar (2008) echoes Dirlik (1999) when he questions whether globalization is the last stage of capitalist modernity (ordering the world according to masculine-rational Eurocentric principles of individualism) or is it representative of a new transition? He posits a new development framework that moves from the colonial difference (between
the west and subaltern knowledges) and engages with modernism by focusing on how it is appropriated, re-embedded, and produced in local life worlds resulting in multiple local modernities. “Such continuous processing is no longer a hybridization of distinct cultural strands but a series of self-organizing mutations driven by internal dynamics, even when propelled by outside interventions.” (p 174)

He argues that social movements, policy makers and academics must hold in tension three coexisting and related processes and political projects: 1) An alternative development that is focused on food security, the satisfaction of basic needs, and the well-being of the population. This mode, informed by rational ideas of progress, fights for development on local’s terms but does not necessarily question the underlying premise. 2) Alternative modernities, build on the countertendencies effected on development interventions by local groups and toward the contestation of global designs. It is a more radical version of alternative development that does not separate itself entirely from big development projects, but views what is “non-western” as also part of modernity, and perhaps most radically, 3) Alternatives to modernity is a visionary project of redefining and reconstructing local and regional worlds from the perspective of practices of cultural, economic and ecological difference. This alternative represents the weakening of the strong structures of modernity—universality, scientific totality and rationality. It is a vision and a dream of revolution, and less practical, perhaps than the former options, although I would argue that the Transition movement, in both its discursive framing and its structural approaches, most aligns itself with this latter approach.
Post Development

Although arguably, not theoretically developed as a paradigm, post-development theorists largely reject the term “development” on many of the same grounds as the rejection of modernity—with claims that it either doesn’t work or it that it will always signify cultural westernization and homogenization. (Pieterse 2004)

Development theory needs to be rethought not just in terms of its relationship to market forces or the nation state, but through the lens of a critical globalism that works to understand the relationships between all of the forces in a culture including not just the community and a project, but governments, NGOs, and market forces as well. (Pieterse 2004).

Digital Communication, Social Movements, and Concepts of Community

Although it may be argued that the popularization of the Transition model and its spread as a global social movement might not have occurred were it not for the current financial and economic crises, it might also be argued that the rapid speed with which it has grown and evolved would not have been possible without the Internet.

The communication system of the industrial society was centered around the mass media, characterized by the mass distribution of a one-way message from one to many. The communication foundation of the “network society,” (Castells 2007) however, is a global web of horizontal communication networks. Blogs, social media websites, and a range of other kinds of user-created media sites, increasingly connected to mobile telephony, have changed the way the Internet is used and who uses it. It is mass communication, according to Castells, because of its potential to reach a global audience, self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception. “We
are indeed in a new communication realm, and ultimately in a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive, making possible the unlimited diversity and the largely autonomous origin of most of the communication flows that construct, and reconstruct the global and local production of meaning in the public mind.” (Castells 2007: 238)

The ongoing transformation of communication technology in the digital age continues to extend the reach of communication media to all domains of social life in simultaneously global and local networks. As a result, power relations and the processes that challenge them are increasingly shaped and decided in the communication field. (Castells 2007)

This dissertation aims, in part, to research the effects and impacts of these simultaneously local and global communication flows, as they relate specifically to responses to global crises, and as a tool for communities around the world to participate in localized models for sustainable social change.

It is important to note, however, that this dissertation project builds upon research that has long acknowledged that humans have always been connected via various constructed, material and immaterial networks. Thus it will analyze digital networks, not in terms of it being “new” per se, but rather with attention to the ways it facilitates, coordinates and mobilizes communication that leads to social change action; taking into account who has the power and knowledge to shape the communication and in what context, to what end.

Latour (2011) notes that in spite of the lack of any success in conceptualizing a
politics (democratic or otherwise) that could unite peoples across so many diverse
cultures, the fact is that “those makeshift assemblages we call markets, technologies,
science, ecological crises, wars and terrorist networks,” we are already “connected…it’s
simply that our usual definitions of politics have not caught up yet with the masses of
linkages already established.”

From a more historical perspective, Volkmer (2003) argues that the concept of a
transborder information flow is not a phenomenon of the 21st century. Her review of the
history of international political communication revealed that a continuous ‘transborder’
communication and distribution of political news had already been established in
mediaeval Europe. During this time, professional couriers and messengers distributed
correspondence, (newsletters and political messages,) on clearly defined routes to
mercantile, courtly and monastic elites in Europe and indeed created, in modern
terminology, a ‘transnational’ news community. The difference, however, was that these
“transborder communication flows” were designed to improve military communication
and communication with governments of colonized countries.

Nearly half a century ago, Marshall McCluhan researched the impact of
technology on creating what he termed, a “global village.” (1967) Referring to the ‘live’
video footage sent to news pools across oceans and vast land masses via the first
satellites, McCluhan argued that gaps between cultures and societies could be bridged
based on the same visual image. In McLuhan’s ‘the medium is the message’ formula, this
link inspired the vision of a ‘global village’, just by being exposed to the same sights and
sounds, which transformed, i.e. homogenized, cultural habits. It also created a new global
political space in which politically relevant events, (although interpreted differently in
various countries,) created a ‘sameness’ and ‘uniformity’ (Volkmer 2003) of visual images and a somewhat common political context: the moon landing, President Kennedy’s assassination, student protests, Vietnam, Woodstock, etc. McLuhan’s metaphor of ‘sameness’ and a homogeneous ‘global village’ has provoked criticism of ‘imperialism’, ‘dominance’, and economical elitism. (Volkmer 2003)

Social Movement Activism and the Internet

While much of this horizontal network communication is apolitical, it is also clearly linked to an increase in the number, range of types, and global reach of social movement activism. Activists have used the Internet to directly challenge corporate power via “culture jamming … a strategy that turns corporate power against itself by co-opting, hacking, mocking, and re-contextualizing meanings” by creating and circulating negative, often humorous messages or images about corporate brands (Bennett 2003). Militant groups, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, have also used the Internet to create global support networks on behalf of battles against both national governments and (less effectively) global economic and political institutions (Castells 2004).

Oliver and Marwell (1992) refer to knowledge about collective action as “action technologies”—noting that the term technology is used to simultaneously connote knowledge that may not be readily available to everyone but which is not held exclusively by experts. They divide up the term into two parts: Production technologies and mobilization technologies—production refers to sets of knowledge about ways of achieving goals (lobbying, demonstrations, strikes, attending public hearings) (p 255). Mobilization technologies are sets of knowledge about ways of accumulating the resources (time, money, Internet access) necessary for production technologies.
Juris (2005) coined the term “cultural logic of networking” as a way to understand how global justice movements create concrete networking practices. The social and cultural characteristics of this logic include: (1) building horizontal ties and connections among diverse, autonomous elements; (2) the free and open circulation of information; (3) collaboration through decentralized coordination and directly democratic decision-making; and (4) self-directed or self-managed networking which are rooted in the values of free information, decentralized coordination, collaborative learning, peer recognition, and social service. (p. 341).

This dissertation project builds upon the three modes of analysis through which he examines networks and global justice movements. First networks are: a computer-supported infrastructure (technology); as organizational structure (form); and as a political model (norm). Global justice movements are global, (as a result of transnational communication networks, and the perception shared among activists who link their local actions to diverse struggles in other parts of the world), informational, (producing highly circulated images and messages) and finally, they are organized around flexible, decentralized Networks.

It is important to note however, the global justice movement takes its cultural shape from its internal tensions and struggles as much as it does from its globality. “Cultural struggles surrounding ideology (anti-globalization versus anti-capitalism), strategies (summit hopping versus sustained organizing), tactics (violence versus non-violence), as well as organizational form and decision-making (structure versus non-structure, consensus versus voting)…have become enduring features of the global justice landscape.” (Juris: 347)
Digital communication practices have a variety of political effects on the growth and forms of global activism from organizational dynamics to strategic political relations between activists, opponents and publics to individual participation which, aided by hyperlinked communication networks, enable individuals to find multiple points of entry into varieties of political action. (Bennett 2003)

Today “global activist networks have many centres or hubs, but unlike their predecessors, those hubs are less likely to be defined around prominent leaders…the primary basis of movement integration and growth has shifted from ideology to more personal and fluid forms of association.” (p 147) This more personal and grassroots way of organizing has been at the root of community networks that have been successful in publicizing information to counter the politics of corporations and transnational economic regimes. Participants in these networks have organized global demonstrations and activist campaigns against corporations that have resulted in greater regulations and more sustainable operations. Bennett notes, “These nimble campaigns aimed at corporations and transnational trade and development targets lend themselves to the repertoires of digital communication: lists and action alerts, swarming responses (e.g., denial of service attacks on corporate websites), and the continuous refiguring of web networks as campaigns shift focus and change players.” (p 148)

From an ICT perspective, Garrett (2006) suggests three mechanisms that link technology and participation in social movements: reduction of participation costs, promotion of collective identity, and creation of community. With regard to the decentralized and nonhierarchical organization of many networks, Garrett cautions against losing sight of hybrid possibilities. “We should not neglect the significance of
mixed forms, employing traditional hierarchies for some tasks while utilizing new ICTs to facilitate more decentralized, collaborative processes for others. To date, there is no clear analysis of the integration of these strategies within SMOs.” One aim of this dissertation project is to explore the multiple structural processes that emerge both online and off in the communication of the actions and goals of the Transition movement.

Garrett also points out that evidence that ICT use is producing significant social change does not mean that the changes identified are inherent to the technology. Used in different contexts, technologies yield different effects. (2006)

Servaes and Carpentier (2003) strongly echo a similar notion. They suggest that there must be a shift in emphasis from information and communication technologies (ICTs) as ‘drivers’ of change to a perspective where these technologies are regarded as tools which may hybridize the information embedded in ICT systems with the creative potential and knowledge embodied in people.

Rojas and Heaney (2008) explored the potential of hybridization in a study that suggested that the blending of movements through organizations with hybrid identities helps to guide the flow of movements into one another, ultimately strengthening and sustaining each movement while building relevant connections between them. Antiwar activities, for example, may be taken up by climate change activists, while they negotiate how to pursue issues of global warming. The authors argue that ties through these networks “facilitate the dissemination of information, trust building, identity construction, values creation, and the sharing of tactics which stimulate the mobilization process,” (p 8) and are thus more likely to draw participants from outside the movement into the new movement.
This study is particularly relevant to my dissertation project as one of the goals is to better understand how Transition Amherst communicates with and is shaped by other social change organizations in the area. In the context of exploring organizational sustainability, Rojas and Heaney (2008) note that while it is inevitable that all movements pass through high and low points of energy, attention, and resources, a more allied campaign might be able to carve out a niche in another, more active and energized movement. They cite examples from the environmental and antiwar movements, and women’s and civil rights movements. The authors use the acronym SPIN to describe the structure of social movements: Segmentary, Polycentric, and Integrated Network. They argue that it is segmentary because it is composed of many diverse groups, which grow and die, divide and fuse, proliferate and contract; Polycentric because they have multiple, often temporary, and sometimes competing leaders or centers of influence; and Networked because they form a loose, reticulate, integrated network with multiple linkages through travelers, overlapping membership.

Della Porta and Mosca (2005) examined data collected during two supranational protest events: the anti-G8 protest in Genoa in July 2001 and the European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence in November 2002. The authors found that the Internet empowers social movements in four central ways: 1) As an instrumental and logistical resource for ‘resource-poor actors, 2) As a direct expression of protest; 3) As a symbolical medium favoring identification processes in collective actors and 4) As a way to inform and sensitize public opinion. The latter is accomplished because the Internet makes organizing demonstrations easier; increases the possibilities for a direct intervention in politics through different forms of cyberprotest, influences identity processes and helps to
spread alternative information.

**But what about access?**

While online networks can facilitate activist organization using video and podcasts to post news in real time with an immediacy never possible before, ultimately, increasing the potential for a democratic space for marginalized populations (including activists in the feminist movement, underserved migrant laborers, gays and lesbians, racial and ethnic minorities and others who view themselves, and/or who can be viewed, as marginalized by dominant actors and discourses) (Payne 2006), scholars continue to disagree about the actual impacts of these networks in terms of sustainable empowerment of poorer people. Della Porta and Mosca, (2005) note: “Not only does CMC [computer mediated communication] seem easier for the elite to use than for the masses, but it also tends to reproduce hierarchy, developing vertical relations instead of interactive, horizontal relationships.

Deluca and Peeples (2002) describe what they call the “public screen” as a supplement to the public sphere, arguing that new communication technologies inevitably introduce new forms of social organization and new modes of perception that intensify the speed of communication and obliterate space as a barrier to communication. “They physically shrink the world while simultaneously mentally expanding it, producing a vast expansion of geographical consciousness… TV places a premium on images over words, emotions over rationality, speed over reflection, distraction over deliberation, slogans over arguments, the glance over the gaze, appearance over truth, the present over the past.” (Deluca and Peeples, 2002:14)
From Seattle to the Arab Spring: Decentralized Mobilization

The historic anti-globalizations protests that occurred in Seattle in June of 1999 continue to be the source of scholarly attention and analysis because they displayed perhaps for the first time in history public acts of global citizenry coordinated in part via online mobilization, suggesting new conditions for the possibility of participatory democracy. (Deluca and Peeples, 2002) The Seattle World Trade Organization protests were organized over the Internet and in alternative newspapers, handbills, and flyers largely by marginalized activist communities who felt their voices were not being heard by the people at the WTO meetings. Tens of thousands of people converged to express their resistance to the WTO policies, protesting that it was an undemocratic organization with a pro corporate agenda that in practice overrules national labor, environmental, and human rights laws. (Deluca and Peeples 2002) There was an immediate negative affect on the WTO meetings that year—which many deemed to be a failure. The protests also may have changed the content of former President Bill Clinton’s speech to the WTO. That year he called for economic justice, worker rights, human rights, and environmental protections. (p 20) But perhaps most importantly, the protests galvanized an international prodemocratic globalization movement that has since staged protests all over the world, many of which have managed to get mainstream media attention by linking sweatshops, union-busting, human rights violations, environmental degradation, and poverty as consequences of corporate globalization. (p 21) They have unified farm and environmental and union and anti-colonial groups into a voice that has effectively named corporate globalization as a problem and site of struggle, not an inexorable natural
process—a process of unification made possible and public by the Internet.

Just over two decades later, the Arab Spring was also comprised of many sites of mobilization that, similar to the Seattle WTO protests, used processes of decentralized online communication to galvanize a population to show up in the physical public sphere. The decentralized communication worked on behalf of the activists in Egypt. The lack of a visible leader (note: visible is the operative word) kept the revolution from becoming an ideological one and paved the way for a wide coalition of various people to unite under the call for Mubarak’s resignation. Indeed, Hamarneh (2011) suggests that while conditions for revolt are for the most part historically and culturally determined and deal primarily with issues that negatively affect and impact people’s daily lives, the Egypt experience differs from other equally successful uprisings because of this very reason. “The mass events that led to what is now known as the January 25 ‘revolution’ had no known leadership, no written manifesto or platform. And in a very early and crucial period of the transition, following Hosni Mubarak’s resignation as president under popular pressure, the mass of demonstrators had no representatives in the military council or in the government.”

It is important, however, to distinguish processes of revolution from processes of nation/community building in the context of a “social movement”. While some members of the Transition movement might suggest they are participating in a “revolution”—that is revolting against the unsustainable capitalist structures that dominate their lives, I would argue that the core of the movement is oriented toward community building—that is transitioning toward sustainable and resilient communities. This research will explore how structures of leadership emerge (or don’t) that support or detract from accomplishing
these goals within the Transition towns, regional and national hubs, and the larger
decentralized, nonhierarchical network.

**Internet and Community**

Juris (2005) notes that the Internet has the capacity to simultaneously facilitate
global connectedness, even as it strengthens local ties within neighborhoods and
households, leading to increasing “glocalization.” “Network-based politics involve the
creation of broad umbrella spaces, where diverse organizations, collectives, and networks
converge around a few common hallmarks, while preserving their autonomy and identity-
based specificity. Rather than recruitment, the objective becomes horizontal expansion
and enhanced connectivity through articulating diverse movements within flexible,
decentralized information structures that allow for maximal coordination and
communication.” (p 342) This networking logic thus forms the base of a communication
practice where members relay and exchange information, “generating concrete practices
involving the reception, interpretation, and relaying of information...” (p 343)

The earliest theorized concept of community most often referred to geography
and ethnicity (Carpentier 2008) as structuring stable, if not rigid notions of the collective
identity or group relations. Post structural approaches looked beyond geographical
situatedness to incorporate shared interests as one possibility for reimagining
“community.” Another approach views the concept of community as “culturally
constructed” (Cohen 1989) and actively created by its members, with members deriving
their identity from this construction. The Internet has certainly built upon and/or
expanded the latter toward a feeling of belonging and sharing among a group of people
who communicate on or offline. Willson (2006) argues that the concept of community
will always remain a relatively amorphous one, both descriptive and normative depending on the context, and that as ways of “being-together” change, the concept will be understood and referred to differently at different times, according to the ways in which it intersect with different ontological categories. The concept has been used to describe place, language, race, culture, profession and shared interest. According to Willson, concepts of community entail membership, a sense of responsibility, some reciprocal obligations and perhaps most importantly, it is dependent upon and constituted by communication practices—dialogical, written or nonverbal.

Wellman, et al (2003) gathered the results from a number of studies about how the Internet affects community with regard to how it is influencing interpersonal relationships and involvement in social networks. The authors argue that society in developed countries has moved away from groups and towards “networked individualism:” A move from densely-knit and tightly-bounded communities to sparsely-knit and loosely-bounded networks. The Internet has become “embedded” in everyday life via a broader bandwidth that allows the immediate and frequent transfer of large amounts of data including photos, videos, texts and other graphics, the ability to always be connected, increased opportunities for personalization, wireless portability, and globalized connectivity.

All of the latter factors are transforming traditional, normative concepts of community, however, Gurstein (2011) argues that a fusion of the local and global – interacting and being enabled both by face-to-face connections and digital media are creating new communities that are internally networked but not necessarily more individually-based. The Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement may be
indicative of this fusion. The Occupy Movement overall is characterized by processes of community formation enabled by ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies) on a micro level (locally – site by site) and on a macro level (as a movement wide, mega-community linking the individual sites electronically and through shared values.) For Occupy activists, there is a consistent emphasis on physical space as much as on virtual coordination, since the occupation of a specifically bounded territory as a symbolic gesture of protest is at the heart of the movement. The images of tents, and masses of people gathered at these sites are then recirculated among electric networks by individuals who are also participating in and identifying with the movement while not necessarily physically “occupying” a site. Gurstein (2011) notes that the occupation of a specific site requires a variety of structures of internal management and governance, all of which create and sustain elements of a community—food provision, waste management, security, education, governance and decision making, and external relations/diplomacy. “The characteristic of place-based communities as resilient and persistent locales for education and nurturing become dynamic opportunities for the recreation of individuals not as fragmented profiles but as whole beings linked both organically and technologically with their fellows as well as into the larger world and most importantly being able to work outwards from the strength that such communities provide in a process of remaking and refiguring the world in their image.” (Gurstein 2011)

Osterweil (2005) refers to members of such communities as “place-based globalists,” whom she notes have created a set of emergent practices and political forms that are often experimental and that vary from place to place but share the desire to
transform and reimagine alternative culture and political structures. Participants work locally and in the present to demonstrate the political relevance of many sites or terms that are usually either excluded from, or undervalued, in most definitions of ‘the political.’ “In so doing, they work in the present to make its domination impossible.” (p 27) According to Osterweil, members do this by asserting and creating multiple other (successful and sustainable) ways of being in the world, thus robbing capital of its monopoly. “They destroy its hegemony, while at the same time furnishing new tools to address the complex set of problematic power relations it confronts us with from particular and embedded locations.” (p 28) Gibson Graham (2006) note that place-based globalism “constitutes a proliferative and expansive spatial imaginary for a politics that offers a compressed temporality-traversing the distance from “nowhere” to “now here.”

While a proliferative and expansive imaginary is important to consider for the recreation of society—indeed, the task is impossible without first imagining it—it is important to note the factors (cultural, social and political) that prevent all members of a community from actively partaking in the collective act. Cohen (2010), a member of Transition Stoke-Newington, an inner city area of London, explored concepts of diversity and inclusion with regard to community building and the Transition movement in her Masters thesis. She notes that while Transition seeks to build resilience through local community, “If it ignores the link between human-created environmental crises and social crises it risks failing to tackle their common root cause. The local responses it builds may not be lasting or effective if they fail to integrate consciousness of social justice.” (p 3)
CHAPTER 4
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study aims to undertake a micro (tactical) and macro (strategic) analysis of the Transition movement and thus requires a theoretical framework that can address the communicative relationship(s) mediated within the movement—between the hubs, regions, countries, individual members, etc. and the external relationships between the larger community—town officials, other sustainability groups, diverse populations, and also between the immaterial forces that govern social change: The economic systems, the cultural and social attitudes that govern behavior toward, access to and use of natural resources, as well as availability of education, time, technology and opportunities that facilitate involvement. As each chapter is focused on a different aspect of Transition, (Appeal, Impact, Sustainability, Culture, Diversity, Technology), I have attempted to explore both the theoretical assumptions that underpin each category, with a theoretical framework who’s analysis is predicated upon how each category interacts with and informs the other as part of a living, multilayered network. It is important to make a distinction between the former and the latter, as one explores the theoretical assumptions of the model, and the other is a framework out of which this project emerges. For example, I attempt to accomplish the former with an analysis of how the Transition Network builds upon post Marxist theories. In Chapter 8: The Multiscalar Role of Ideology and Transition, I suggest that the Transition movement shares the post Marxist concept of ideology as a relational, dialectical process of interpellation determined by social processes which places the actions of humanity at the center with the possibility of intervention (politically and socially) in the form of agency as something not necessarily
guaranteed, but rather made possible by the notion that reality and the structures that are a part of it are not fixed. (Hall 1986) I argue that the Transition model taps into this agency by taking a local cultural approach to environmental problems, and builds upon the work of post Marxist theorists Gramsci and Therborn to illustrate how ideological mobilizations occur in communities and draw connections between the ways in which the Transition movement is (trying to) apply such theories in order to achieve social change.

Although such theoretical analysis is crucial to this project as a way to understand how social change is mobilized within a community, my primary focus was to analyze the ways in which the many different actors that make up an initiative—material and immaterial—connect and interact to (per)form the network that becomes a Transition Town, and finally, to better understand how that network connects and interacts with the larger network of the social movement. Thus the study draws from Actor Network theory, Social Movement theory, and finally concludes with Deleuze’s rhizome as a useful metaphor for envisioning the entire analytical framework.

First developed by Latour and inspired by Foucault and other post-structuralists, Actor Network Theory (ANT) is a constructivist approach that emphasizes a material semiotic approach to understanding how people, ideas and technologies are and become connected. It suggests there is no reason to assume, a priori, that either objects or people by themselves determine the character of social change or stability, but rather, seeks to examine the relationships between both material and immaterial forces and how they are connected and related in a single network. It suggests that society, organizations, agents and machines are all effects generated in patterned networks of diverse (not only human) materials. (Law 1992) Knowledge then, is a social product rather than something
generated through the operation of a privileged scientific method with “knowledge” seen as a product or an effect of a network of heterogeneous materials.

“The notion of network allows us to lift the tyranny of social theorists and to regain some margin of maneuvers between the ingredients of society -its vertical space, its hierarchy, its layering, its macro scale, its wholeness, its overarching character- and how these features are achieved and which stuff they are made of. Instead of having to choose between the local and the global view, the notion of network allows us to think of a global entity -a highly connected one- which remains nevertheless continuously local... Instead of opposing the individual level to the mass, or the agency to the structure, we simply follow how a given element becomes strategic through the number of connections it commands and how does it lose its importance when losing its connections.” (Latour 1998)

According to actor-network theory, such actor-networks are potentially transient, existing in a constant making and re-making. This means that relations need to be repeatedly “performed” or the network will dissolve.

ANT as a theoretical framework is useful to this study for several reasons. 1) ANT does not privilege the role of human actors over nature. As this study concerns the relationship between grand global narratives around the environment and local communities, ANT offers a reorientation away from the singular cause and effect of humans on their environment by dismissing essentialist explanations that may only address for example, the cause of a problem such as climate change without addressing the root. 2) At seven years old, The Transition Movement is still very much in its infancy and is changing and evolving rapidly. ANT provides a framework for incorporating this constant evolution by recognizing that connections are transient and always being performed. 3) ANT provides a useful foundation from which one may analyze the processes that sustain participation in and involvement with social movements geared toward social change. The core of the actor-network approach is the base which informs the analytical approach of this study: “A concern with how actors and organisations
mobilize, juxtapose and hold together the bits and pieces out of which they are composed.” (Latour 1992) 4) As a theory, it resists traditional understandings of the boundaries of space and distance as the primary determinate of networks. There is no such a thing as a proximity or a distance which would not be defined by connectibility…The notion of network redefines space and offers a notion which is neither social nor ‘real’ space, but associations.” (Latour 1998) This is a useful framework for developing an analysis of the Transition Movement as a cultural moment, a kind of revolution that is at once connected to one geographical location, (ie: the Transition town) but made possible by a series of related and converging factors and systems: environmental, economic, cultural, and technological. 4) Finally, ANT seems to be ontologically matched to the Transition Movement—as both the theory and the movement take a decidedly apolitical stance, both concern themselves with relationships—the former is interested in how they are developed and maintained, the latter is interested in providing communicative guidelines for such development and maintenance. Thus this study is situated at the intersection of the theory (ANT) and the practice (the Transition Movement).

**But what about power?**

Both Actor Network Theory and the Transition Movement have been critiqued by scholars, activists and Transition participants for not taking power structures into account as a factor in creating social change. The ANT approach, for example, has been critiqued for assigning agency to nonhuman entities. Critics argue that a human’s capacity to have “intention” distinguishes it from immaterial objects. ANT theorists maintain, however that agency is neither human nor non-human but found in
heterogeneous associations of humans and nonhumans. (Latour 1998) Other critics argue that an ANT approach implies that all actors are of equal importance in the network. ANT does not account for pre-existing structures, like power, but rather sees these structures as emerging from the actions of actors within the network and their ability to align in pursuit of their interests. Related to this, some have argued that an ANT approach privileges description while failing to provide explanations for social processes, risking degenerating into endless chains of association that result in merely descriptions without prescriptions for action.

Thus additional frameworks are will be used in this project as a compliment to ANT and as a way to more specifically and directly address communicative social processes toward sustainability. Brick and Cawley (2008) examined the relationship between micro activist groups and macro social movements and their findings provide a complimentary framework for analysis of Transition as a group (Transition Amherst) and as a movement (Transition Network), two distinct yet interrelated actor networks. The authors argue that understanding the difference between groups and movement activities requires shifting the analytical gaze from more visible and perhaps immediate forms of (tactical) political activity (fighting for environmental policies, regulations, etc.) toward more subtle discursive framing processes (strategic). They argue that it is the movement’s role to create a framework that makes environmental ideas meaningful across a broad array of contexts, and in doing so, structure the discourse in ways that then support group activity. But it is the former role that is significant. “Effective movement frames are radically open and inclusive, even at the risk of appearing somewhat contradictory from time to time. As such, they afford myriad ways in which ordinary people can participate
in, and indeed constitute, social movements. Movement actors, in turn, encompass anyone whose thinking and/or actions are animated by the new frame.” (p 207) Indeed, the Transition movement has built its reputation and arguably, popularity, on consistently communicating its “radically open and inclusive” foundation.

While groups work for specific action, movements are engaged in changing the consciousness, values, and behavior in society, what the authors refer to as “the hidden life of social movements.” (Brick and Hawley, 2008: 207). The authors encourage moving away from analyses that measure the impact of coalitions of established interests and move toward “the latent possibility of new coalitions of ideas and discourses, where different strategic possibilities emerge.” (p 209) They argue, for example, that the climate change “frame,” has been a strategic success even if policy initiatives around regulations have failed. This is as important for understanding how behaviors change as it is for measuring the “success” of the movement. “Prior to the climate change frame, when freak storms, heat waves, cold snaps, or flooding occurred, they were interpreted simply as isolated events. No longer. Climate change links seemingly random events into a single interpretive schema. Now when strange weather events happen, environmental ideas are nearly always implicated, reinforcing the frame itself.” (p 213) The authors suggest that new(er) frames like “climate change” emerge when existing or evolving ideas find new resonance when combined with other ideas to create a force multiplier effect. When this happens, social reality changes, which is precisely what movements set out to accomplish.

This framework is relevant to this study because it provides a way to analyze the impacts of the Transition Movement as a global entity while still taking into account the
tactical activities of the local Transition Amherst group, as well as the relationship between the group and the movement. Perhaps it is a more specific metaphor for Actor Network Theory, as it allows for a more expansive analysis that considers other kinds of relational actions that lead to behavior and/or cultural change. “Business leaders using green frames to shape business models, farmers using biodiversity to help organize their operations, and consumers self-consciously choosing energy efficient products are all examples of tangible results produced by the subtle play of movement frames. They also suggest that when left to evolve in open and flexible discursive settings, environmental frames can create social change.” (p 214)

Finally, and relatedly, this project draws much of its theoretical influence from the metaphor of Deleuze and Guattari’s Rhizome. This framework is grounded in an ethnographic analysis of the relationship Transition Amherst in particular has with all factors, levels and structures of society—state, officials, community organizations and members, etc. This approach, which ANT builds upon, is rooted in an analysis that examines how the network interacts with and influences all parts of the community. The metaphor of the rhizome was developed by Deleuze and Guattari as a counter to what they referred to as arbolic thinking, (a tree-like linear, static and hierarchical system) which they viewed as the philosophy of institutions of the state. The rhizome—a horizontal underground plant stem with lateral shoots and roots, on the other hand, “ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles.’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987 p 7).

Similarly, the Transition Network, it might be argued, developed as an alternative
to global corporate neoliberal markets and government power, and seeks to establish (and sustain) connections to various points within a local community, including youth, elders, town officials, civil society organizations, etc. in no particular order. Rather, Transition groups exist as the crossroads for many different junctions of sustainability and seek to build linkages that will build and catalyze resiliency. It is important to note that these “linkages” do not preclude building relationships with government officials, but that is not the sole intention or priority and much like the rhizome itself, the movement resists appropriation or assimilation into larger power structures.

This framework builds upon Scott-Cato and Hillier’s (2008) work. The authors, noting that the Transition movement was founded by a permaculture expert, applied this nature-oriented metaphor to the Transition Network. Citing Colman (2005) they note that the rhizome maps a process of networked, relational and transversal thought that can challenge and transform structures of fixed and static thought into a ‘milieu of perpetual transformation’ composed of causal and/or chance connections and links. “To think rhizomically is to reveal the multiple ways to assemble thoughts and actions in immanent, always-incomplete processes of change and innovation, or becoming.” (p 872) This metaphor can be applied to both the structure of Transition Amherst, as it evolves to accommodate a diverse membership and to the Transition movement itself, which must remain flexible and adaptable to each community’s needs as it begins to build resiliency. Scott-Cato and Hillier note that Deleuze’s rhizome metaphor may also describe the movement’s spread from its origin in Totnes, England to other part of England, and now all over the world. But the metaphor is also useful for addressing the participants.

“Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 213) suggest that ‘every politics is simultaneously a
macropolitics and a micropolitics’. Interactions with formal political structures differ depending on local circumstances… Deleuze wants us to explore creatively beyond the orthodox, to invent new, pragmatic ways of being and becoming… Innovation and experiment birth alternatives (transformation) rather than transgression or revolt: experimentation as social innovation.” (Scott-Cato and Hillier: 881)

Although Deleuze developed the image of the rhizome as a counter to arborescence, the authors argue that the Transition movement does have some arbolic features—namely that despite the movement’s claims there does appear to be a hierarchy: Rob Hopkins is definitely a “leader” and as noted earlier, there are specific requirements that each community must meet before it can become a “Transition Town.” This study builds upon Scott-Cato and Hillier’s analysis. I do not argue that the movement favors one metaphor—rhizome vs. arbolic—over the other, but rather, explore the tensions between both images within the movement in order to understand how these tensions might actually work on behalf of the movement in some ways and constrain it in others.
CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative research methodological framework that is both dialogic and interpretive. The primary methods were textual analysis and ethnography. The former was used to understand how the Transition model communicates and accomplishes its goals on a macro-level, the latter was used to understand how this happens on a local scale. The themes for each chapter emerged from my research questions and the data I collected from conversations, interviews, and participant observations. Beginning in September of 2011 through January of 2013, I was an active participant and observer in my own local transition town: Transition Amherst. The ethnographic tools used in this study included, as noted earlier, textual analysis, participant observations and interviews, field notes, interpersonal conversations, photographs of relevant events, recordings, and audio, video, and written observations of meetings, and events.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) trace eight historical moments of ethnography and suggest that they overlap with elements operating in one form or another today. The first half of the twentieth century brought the traditional positivist ethnography, founded with the central assumption that there was indeed an objective reality that could be understood, studied and explained. Rosaldo (1989) describes this as the period of the Lone Ethnographer, the story of the man scientist who goes out in search of the native in a distant foreign land. This period gave way to the modernist (1950-1970) and blurred genres (1970-1986) eras which put ethnography on a more interpretive-oriented
trajectory. *Interpretive* ethnography sought to describe, “A stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures where meaning is produced, perceived, interpreted and without which they would not exist.” (Geertz 1973) During this time Geertz called for what he described as “*thick description*” of particular events, rituals and customs— not just the description but the context in which it occurred. (This era included postpositivist arguments, new interpretive qualitative perspectives including hermeneutics, structuralism, semiotics, phenomenology and feminism but still depended on establishing validity). The crisis of representation (1986-1990) would soon follow bringing with it the move toward self reflexivity, locating the researcher in the text and calling into question issues of gender, class and race. Finally, the postmodern era, which some might brought (and is still bringing) experimental ethnographies and alternative evaluative criteria rooted in local understandings.

My methodological approach combined elements of interpretive ethnography and ethnographic action research. I selected these methodological approaches because they share several related characteristics that permit me to enter the space as an active participant as well as a researcher. Both approaches are dialogic. Data is generated through an interactive and participatory exchange with other participants in the movement. The second similarity is that both approaches address in concrete ways issues of power and voice—specifically, power relations between the ethnographer and the community being studied. I approached this study not only in the role of researcher, but also as an active member of my community. I am personally invested in the community in which I am studying. It is the place where I spend the majority of my time, where I am employed, and where my daughter will likely go to school. I have a vested interest in
understanding how this community can become more sustainable and resilient. My methodological approach must be able to account for this vested interest. At the same time, I recognize the limits to this approach: Despite my attachments to the community, I enter the research site with an identity bound to the academy, the transient population that inevitably comes and goes within Amherst; a category of people about whom some members of Transition Amherst spoke with some weariness and mistrust. Furthermore, my place of residence is 15 minutes away in Northampton, a small town on the other side of the river, whose own Transition initiative is no longer active. The majority of Transition Amherst members live within three miles of each other. Thus I cannot host meetings. I recognize that my investment in the community of Amherst is complicated by also being an “outsider” uncertain of where she will ultimately reside. My “outsider/insider” position enabled and constrained various parts of my analysis and findings as I was in constant negotiation between my role as an active participant and as a researcher. That only one member of the original initiating group has responded to my emails since the original group stopped meeting at the end of October 2012, is perhaps further evidence of this mistrust, or perhaps suggestive of my own failure to adequately build and sustain meaningful relationships within the group; or perhaps a failure of the Transition model to adequately guide members in creating sustainable relationships. I suspect it is some combination of all of the above. I mentioned that I was hurt by this lack of responsiveness in June of 2013 to Fiona, the one member with whom I have kept in touch. I told her that I had had lofty visions that findings from this project would be used by the group in a meaningful way, as that was how I had initially introduced the project and the offer had been positively received. She said that she didn’t think anybody
in the group kept in touch with each other, and she too had only maintained contact with one other person besides me.

With regard to the Transition group’s potential use of findings and recommendations: I did draw from ethnographic action research, a methodology that combines ethnography with participatory techniques and action research in order to aid in a project’s development in a local context. (Tacchi, et. al, 2003). It has been implemented specifically in the context of ICT initiatives but can be applied as a method. In the traditional application of EAR, the focus is successfully coordinating and completing a project, however, in my study’s application, the intention is to use the method’s tools as a way to enhance the dialogic process between the target group’s participants and myself.

According to the EAR handbook, (2003) this method can be employed 1) When you want to understand and involve users or target groups, and understand their social, cultural, economic and political environments. (In the case of this study, the target group was Transition Amherst.) 2) When an initiative is flexible and will respond to research findings in order to become more relevant to its users. (As noted earlier, all of the participants who regularly attend Transition Amherst meetings expressed a desire to hear and discuss research findings.) 3) When the initiative team will value research as an important and ongoing component of their initiative's development.

The three components of the methodology include ethnography, participatory techniques and action research. In the context of EAR, ethnography is described as a long-term approach that requires the researcher to be embedded in a local culture. Participatory techniques are used by EAR researchers to draw the people they seek to
understand into the process of producing, analyzing and using research data. Finally, “action research” describes a process by which initiative workers respond to the new understandings of ‘context’ that result from the ethnographic research and participatory techniques, by reviewing their initiative's program and planning new activities. Thus the research’s aims, methods and analysis arise from, and then feed back into, a rich understanding of a particular place. An EAR researcher listens carefully to what people know from their own experiences and brings this local knowledge into the ongoing processes of planning and acting. (Tacchi, et. al, 2003)

My methodological approach to this study builds upon a long history of participatory research. Lilja and Bellon (2008) note that this kind of research engages people in a community, who work together to develop research questions and approaches to obtaining information as well as deciding what the research means and how it should benefit the community. Participatory approaches can enhance and empower a community’s capacity to learn, make changes, evaluate and monitor change, experiment and draw conclusions and learn from mistakes.

Participatory communication shares much in the principles of the Transition movement. Both posit that communities should be the main protagonists of processes of social change rather than passive beneficiaries of decisions made by government and/or multinational interests. Both critique the view of development as a top-down-driven process. Both promote local forms of knowledge and action and note that dialogue between all actors is essential.

Waisbord (2008) argues that the inherent messiness and uncertainty of participatory processes clash with the bureaucratic logic of rationality and predictability
that govern development agencies. Similarly, I acknowledge the inherent messiness of
dialogic approaches to ethnography. I hope my findings are useful and useable, but I am
not attempting to obtain objective and sterilized data cleansed from the complexity of
responses to crises that are themselves messy and uncertain.

EAR seeks a combination of ethnographic methods combined with participatory
techniques in order to generate detailed, rich, and varied understandings that are aimed at
generating short, medium and long-term plans with and for the group. These can include
business plans; ideas for new initiatives; solutions for problems; targeting particular kinds
of users; or finding new resources or partners.

I have implemented EAR as a methodology in this project particularly in the
concluding summaries of each chapter where I offer suggestions based on the data
generated and in my final recommendations in the concluding chapter. I plan to send this
dissertation to the Transition Amherst Council of Working Groups; to post it in the
Research section of the Transition Network global site; and to edit portions of each
chapter for publication on Transition Amherst’s website. It is perhaps important to caveat
the above with the fact that it was difficult for me to negotiate when to employ EAR
during the course of this research, particularly as I also occupied the space as a
communication scholar whose identity was connected to being able to facilitate
successful communication. Unfortunately, there were many times when I remained silent
as people disagreed and tensions increased among group members. Many of the factors
written above prevented me from interjecting successfully at the time when it was
perhaps most needed. I explore this further in the “Limitations” section of this chapter.
Data Collection

This project has received IRB approval. As part of that condition, all of the names of people who were interviewed for this study have been changed with the exception of the Executive Director of Transition US, Carolyne Stayton. When relevant, I did identify age ranges, occupations, and countries of birth, as all of these factors informed power relations within the group and effected decisions that were made. I did not however, note specific places of work or describe physical characteristics, in order to maintain the privacy of the group members.

Formal and informal conversations that addressed the research questions occurred with each of the Transition members and other community members connected to the Transition movement and/or Transition Amherst. During these conversations I was able to gather personal information about the members of the group and to better gauge the reasons why they became involved in it, and to begin to assess participant feelings about the successes, failures and impacts of Transition Amherst. I recorded these exchanges on my computer and in my notebook and used them to assess internal communication processes (within the group,) external processes (the larger community), as well as the communicative relationship between Transition Amherst and the larger Transition Network mediated by the digital network. A portion of all of the interviews focused on participant attitudes toward the movement and toward their own Transition town, including successes and failures, leadership structures, reasons for its global appeal and rapid growth, predictions for the future, and suggestions for how it could be better.
Participant observations and field notes

Transition Amherst meets twice a month for just over two hours. I regularly attended meetings from September of 2011 through October of 2012 and wrote and/or typed notes of each meeting, (a feat made easier when volunteering to be notetaker—simultaneously fulfilling my service to the group!) In addition to regular meetings, Transition Amherst coordinated and hosted “re-skilling” workshops for members of the larger community. These workshops have included cider making, winter bicycle safety tips, peace and conflict resolution and communication. There are currently several planned for each month. I helped to organize these workshops, but unfortunately time and weather constraints made it impossible for me to attend them. I did participate on behalf of Transition Amherst at the town’s Sustainability Festival. Additional opportunities for participatory observation included a weekly book club and potluck that occurred just before each Transition Amherst meeting, a regional Transition gathering that included over 70 participants in other active groups across Massachusetts and New England, and finally, Transition Amherst’s “Great Unleashing,” a culminating event for a Transition Town’s initiating group.

The Transition Amherst group also had active subcommittees that met on a regular basis to plan and coordinate activities. I actively participated in several subcommittees include the “Building the Transition Amherst Website” subcommittee and an “Outreach” subcommittee that helped to promote the group’s activities to the larger community. This latter committee was particularly helpful for gathering data on the ways in which the group communicated with the larger community. As an active member, I
also helped to facilitate meetings (facilitators rotate each week on a voluntary basis) and recorded the minutes from the meetings that are then emailed to the rest of the group and posted on the website.

**Textual Analysis**

The Transition Network communicates its messages through the production of a large amount of media both online and in traditional print in order to educate, inform and recruit participants into the movement. This study includes an analysis of the digital Network in order to understand how its structure, (i.e.: Are there patterns or trends for the “top” stories that appear on the homepage, etc.) format of organization, navigatability, language tone and style (formal or informal, etc.) interactivity, and types of content contribute to and sustain its growth globally and locally. Rob Hopkins produces a regular blog called *Transition Culture* that was also analyzed. The Transition Network partners with Green Books to publish a number of how-to books. These books vary from the general to the very specific and will each be examined as individual and related texts. These include: *The Transition Handbook: from oil dependency to local resilience* (Hopkins 2008), *The Transition Companion: Making your community resilient in uncertain times*, (Hopkins 2011) *The Transition Timeline: for a local, resilient future* (Chamberlin 2009), *Local Food: how to make it happen in your community* (Pinkerton and Hopkins 2009), *Local Sustainable Homes: how to make them happen in your community* (Bird 2010), *Communities, Councils and a Low Carbon Future: working together to make things happen* (Rowell 2010).

The Transition Network has also produced two movies, “In Transition 1.0” and
“In Transition 2.0” which was analyzed along with the dozens of “homemade” videos posted to the Transition Network site of various activities conducted by Transition communities all over the world. Other texts included in the analysis: Articles and commentary about the Transition movement that have been published in newspapers, magazines, and other online media, as well as the recorded minutes from the meetings and emails sent from individuals to the group.

**Interviews**

I use the term “interview” to refer to one tool of ethnography, however, they were in reality, productive, if not more formalized dialogues where knowledge was exchanged and shared with the collective goal of this “research” being used as a way to have a positive impact on the local Transition Amherst group in particular, and perhaps the movement, in general. I conducted one-on-one interviews/dialogues with all of the active members of Transition Amherst; with a United States Transition trainer who lives in western Massachusetts, along with members of other Transition initiatives in nearby communities. I also interviewed the Executive Director of Transition US at the headquarters of Transition U.S. in Sebastopol, California. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Data analysis**

Grounded theory was used for analyzing the collected data. First pioneered by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is a research method that leads to the generation of theory from the research data, rather than starting your research with already-developed theories. There are four stages of analysis that ultimately lead to a theory(ies) 1) Coding, (gathering key points from the data), 2) Concepts (Organizing the
codes that share similar content into groups), 3) Categories (Broad groups of similar concepts that are used to generate a theory) 4) Theory (A collection of explanations that attempt to engage with the central concerns and themes of the research). Although many of my groups and categories formed along the lines of my research questions, other sub-categories developed from the codes to expand the numbers of categories.

**Limits of Dissertation**

The greatest strength of this analytical study may also be its greatest weakness. As noted earlier, the Transition Network is still very much in its infancy. At barely six years old at the time of this study, it is in a constant state of evolution and growth. Just this past year, for example, there has been a marked shift in the language of the movement from concerns with peak oil to economic security. Smith (2011) notes that while the Transition Network does draw on and rebrand a number of other existing movements with longer histories, particularly that of permaculture, it is still appropriate to say that the movement is in a ‘fledgling’ state, still trying to find its wings. (p 104).

This process of “finding its wings” manifests in a website that can be contradictory and confusing—first there were 12 steps, now there are four ingredients, etc. It was difficult to distinguish the current working principles and guidelines with ones that are out-of-date, even as an effort was made to historically contextualize the changes.

**Measuring resiliency (generalizability)**

The purpose of the Transition Network is to support and encourage communities around the world to respond to the challenges of peak oil and climate change by becoming more resilient. The movement, however, does not offer any way in which this “resiliency” can be measured on micro or macro levels. Instead, it insists, much like the
multiplicity framework, (Servaes 1999) that the answer is dependent upon the needs and values of each community and the success of the specific Transition-related projects that they choose to develop. Thus the “success” (so far) and the sustainability of the movement in each community must be determined by interviewing individual participants in each Transition Town but this is complicated by several issues. 1) How can anybody know if a community is truly “resilient” unless they are tested with an apocalyptic or cataclysmic event? One can assume certain levels of resiliency, but it is not something that can be determined absolutely. 2) Should resiliency be determined by the members in the Transition group or by the general sentiment of the larger community many of whom might not have the time or opportunity to participate in Transition? 3) Many of the members of the group shared different and in some cases varying ideas about whether or not Transition Amherst was making the community more resilient. Thus a study of this nature must take into account potentially opposing sentiments and ideas about the movement and still be able to suggest whether or not it is moving toward resiliency.

**Subliminal Bias**

People invest a large amount of time and energy into these meetings and activities. They want to believe it’s working, and that their community is changing for the better. This may affect the way they answered questions. Indeed some participants were quite positive, that is they expressed what they imagined or wished for the group instead of focusing on describing practices that were actually occurring. Some interviewees, particularly those employed by Transition such as the trainers and/or the executive director might not have been able to express potentially disruptive or negative opinions
because to do so would negatively impact their job. A sentiment commonly expressed on Transition Network’s website and in the literature about the movement is the need for positive visioning. Expressing negativity is highly discouraged. Some participants may have felt like they were betraying the movement’s ethos if they said anything negative. Any research findings must account for this possibility.

**Time, scope and scale**

This was perhaps the greatest limitation to this study and is connected to but not dependent on the previously mentioned issues. The Transition Network supports nearly 2000 initiatives in three dozen countries. It is a truly global enterprise that is evolving and growing each day. Ideally, I would have been able to conduct a long-term ethnography of my own Transition Town: Transition Amherst as well as visit all of the other initiatives all over the world in order to better understand their functions and impacts and the populations who are (and are not) participating. This data could be used for comparing and contrasting initiatives and to potentially aid the movement. Unfortunately, this scope was not possible. Instead I chose to follow the directive of the movement and focused locally with an ethnography of Transition Amherst.

The majority of my interviews for this project were with members of Transition Amherst and others who were affiliated with the movement. While this was certainly the most important part of the study, if I had had more time I would have been able to interview more people in the town of Amherst who were not necessarily affiliated with Transition but who had contact with the group. This would have added a more comprehensive gauge of the initiative’s overall impact.

With regard to scope and scale, I did have some trouble negotiating the tensions
between my personal participation and investment and my role as a researcher. For example, during the coordination of the “Great Unleashing” event, there were many occasions where I disagreed with choices that were being made and with ways that I thought others were being treated. At times it was very difficult for me to reconcile my own personal commitment and investment in the group’s success, with my own duties as researcher and ethnographer. I also did not have the time or resources to participate as fully as I wanted in the planning and organizing of many of the group’s activities and this left me feeling at times as though I was not “enough of a member” of the group and thus did not have the capacity to evaluate the actions as I would had I been able to participate more fully. Interestingly, this feeling of inadequacy regarding participation was shared by several members of the group, who felt that they too lacked the resources, specifically time and money, to participate to the extent that they wanted.
CHAPTER 6

THE APPEAL OF THE GLOCAL NARRATIVE(S)

As noted earlier, the Transition Movement began during a historical convergence of several major global crises, and a digital revolution that has made more people aware of current and impending environmental and financial disasters, and perhaps more eager to prevent the situation(s) from getting worse. It also emerged at a time when a series of global protests are occurring all over the world and processes of resistance are being redefined as are the cultural and political visions of democratic practices. (Escobar, 2008; Gibson Graham, 2008) The Transition movement and its extremely rapid growth are certainly a testament to and a part of this historical moment, serving for thousands of people around the world, (primarily in Europe, Australia, and the United States) as one alternative that ultimately gives shape and form to the desire to “act.” However, three central themes emerged from the data which may illuminate why the Transition model has appealed to large numbers of people, and achieved its rapid growth. 1) Positive discursive framing that focuses on the local, 2) Rapid and effective spread of information via multiple Transition media networks, and 3) Although it builds upon the environmental movement, it is currently the largest resiliency model for community building based on the permaculture principles--earth care, people care and fair share. Thus the model attracts a variety of participants by keeping its focus on creating community resiliency, not necessarily on addressing a specific environmental problem. I will discuss these three themes in detail in this chapter. I also want to note, that these three central themes do not exist independently of each other. An Actor Network Theory
approach to this study suggests that each theme exists in relation to and informs the other. For example, the third appeal, the permaculture principles are focused on positive design solutions which informs both the first appeal of positive discursive framing and the second appeal, as it is these efforts which make up the content of the information spread through various media channels.

The Value of Positive Framing for Drawing Large Numbers of People

A core tenet of the Transition model focuses on positive framing. Indeed it is the first principle and a crucial part of the communication processes of the group. The “primary focus is not campaigning against things, but rather on positive, empowering possibilities and opportunities.” (transitionnetwork.org/about/principles) Thus a Transition town may be seen as not only transitioning away from high levels of energy consumption, high carbon emissions, and a generally “unviable way of living” (transitionnetwork.org) through practical projects, but it also aims to conduct a sustainable culture shift by and for the community through a communication process that insists on focusing on the positive via the contributions that each participant can make. The Transition model continues to be adapted by communities around the world at a time when the media is saturating the public with a near constant barrage of negative, violent images. (Gitlin 2002) Additionally, the majority of the world’s most robust environmental organizations with global networks similar to Transition, such as Greenpeace, Conservation International, and Bill McKibben’s 350.org, focus on campaigns meant to protect and conserve resources and endangered species, prevent drilling in the arctic refuge and/or the building of the keystone pipeline. The “actions”
one might take are to sign petitions, or protest with signs at specific events at specific times. While many people whom I interviewed expressed shared values with these larger environmental groups, the majority indicated that Transition appealed to them because it was not a group that was “about protesting, it was a group that was about doing something positive with and for their own community.” (Kat Boggs, interview, January 17, 2013)

Rob Hopkins, the man credited with starting the Transition movement stated:

“I think that one of the reasons why Transition is growing so fast, and why it is attracting a lot of people who have not usually been involved in environmental campaigning, is precisely because it is addressing and responding to the very real concerns people feel about rising fuel costs and the changing climate without polarising people. It is positive and solutions focused, it is undogmatic, and it allows space for people to explore how change on this scale will affect them personally… It is complementary to more activist approaches, but its rapid spread and the viral nature of the growth in interest in it is due, in part, to its more accessible and engaging approach.” (transitionculture.org, May 15, 2008)

Carolyne Stayton the Executive Director of Transition US echoed Hopkins when she suggested that the reason for the Transition movement’s popularity is largely as a result of the positive discursive framing.

“I think the Transition model worked because it was providing a means of action that was positive and hopeful. I just don’t think there’s anything else like that: Something that really addresses some fears and concerns in the population with actionable steps to take to do something about it. I think it’s a relief and a joy and offers a lot of possibility…Transition is upon us, right? There’s droughts in the Midwest, people are selling off their livestock because they can’t feed them, the corn crop is failing. I think the main thing is to focus on community building and building resilience. It doesn’t matter what brings an area to its knees, it matters what the safety net is there to catch residents.” (Interview, July 23, 2012)

Kat Boggs, a long-time community activist in her early 60s and one of the instrumental founders of Transition Amherst supported that statement:
“Uncertain times it seemed clear to me are what we have ahead of us. I don’t know what form things will unfold in but it certainly seemed like this would be a way to help more people. If you just try to scare people by saying AHHH, these things are happening a lot of people just block that right out. The thing I liked about Transition was that there was a real positive message which is together with our creativity we can figure out ways to respond to these worrying trends and concerns and that appealed to my tendency to want to look for positive solutions rather than dwell on the fear and trembles.” (Interview, January 17 2013)

Jasmine Paul, a mother who was born and raised in Bogota Colombia, and Assistant Professor of Marine Biology at the University of Massachusetts said she was interested in a “nice social gathering of like-minded people” but did not want to talk about the ending of fossil fuels and the impending collapse of the economy and “all of these really horrible things that are predicted to occur because of our lifestyle choices.”

“I was completely turned off by that. I think partly because I’m a mom and it makes it really difficult to figure out what am I going to do with my kids… So the part that I liked about the Transition movement was the idea that there are better ways to live our lives and ways that are more connected. Something that’s positive rather than you know go to Town Hall and protest. Sure—it’s important but it’s not something that I want to do because I don’t feel that really does much for my personal life. I was never interested in that kind of activism, I wanted to do what I can do with the people I know and with my kids.” (Interview, December 19, 2012)

Positive Framing at Transition Amherst Meetings: Adapting a global model locally

Before describing the way Transition Amherst incorporated positive framing into its meetings, it’s important to note the structure of the meetings. Between ten and twelve people were present at each meeting which occurred every other Thursday evening from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. The meetings followed a traditional format. A facilitator was selected during the previous meeting and he or she was responsible for writing the agenda with a marker on a notepad and easel, while ensuring that everybody was satisfied with the agenda, and the time allotted for each item. A time-keeper was selected. Each meeting
began with an informal check-in and after two hours, an informal check-out. The majority of the meetings were held at a working horse farm owned by Jasmine and Jarod Paul, three miles from the center of downtown Amherst. Jasmine and Jarod and their two daughters, ages nine and six, had recently moved to the area from New Haven, Connecticut, where Jarod had been active in Transition New Haven.

This positive framing during Transition Amherst meetings was incorporated into the general culture of the meetings, both in the communication processes and in the specific goals of the group. Several examples of the former and the latter may be illustrated during events that occurred during a meeting on December 8, 2011. All of the participants sat in a circle on couches and chairs. Hector Lasix, a computer programmer in his mid-forties, originally from Hungary, made sauerkraut from scratch and brought a jar to share. Jasmine brought out tea cups and brewed a pot of tea made with herbs she grew in her backyard. Bread and pastries from a local bakery were laid out on the coffee table. During the check-in at the beginning of the meeting, a woman named Kate in her early forties said this was her first time attending a Transition meeting. “I just keep getting more and more scared,” she said. “I want to be here to do something positive to prepare, and to be with other people who care about all of this.” At the end of the check-in, Dr. Peter, a man in his late 70s who works as a therapist and spends a portion of the year working on peace and conflict resolution in Palestine and Israel, noted: “I really like the vigor here. I used to fall asleep at meetings, but I’ve been awake here the whole time!”

The meeting followed a traditional format with agenda items that included an upcoming Transition-sponsored bike repair workshop hosted by Hector at his house; an
initiative coordinated by Kat to create a town government liaison with Transition Amherst by meeting with the town’s new sustainability coordinator; an update on the Transition Amherst website development, another project spearheaded by Hector; an update from Jasmine about the work of the Great Unleashing committee; a proposal for a workshop lead by Pete on peace and conflict resolution; and an update from Kat on two interns from Amherst College who were slated to work with Transition Amherst in the near future. I note the agenda items from this meeting as evidence to suggest that the “positive framing” that is a core tenet of the Transition meetings is multilayered and manifests in both the material substance of the meetings, (the shared food and drink), in the expressions of gratitude for the group (note Pete and Kate’s comments) and in the projects themselves, the majority of which (at this stage) were efforts to make Transition Amherst a more robust and productive presence in the town.

At the close of the meeting, Jarod asked each member to share what projects he/she would like to see Transition Amherst work on in the future. I note each response here as additional evidence of the particular way Transition Amherst adapted a positive framing into its own group. I also note them as a way to illustrate the shared values of the group, while also bringing attention to the vast differences in interests and goals of each member. Thus it is important to note that while “positive framing” as a communication process designed to attract large numbers of people might be successful in initially drawing a diverse range of community members, there are indeed other communication processes that must be negotiated in order for the group to be able to organize and prioritize its goals and function in a sustainable way. These communication processes will be explored in later chapters.
Kevin Smart, a lawyer in his early seventies, noted that he would like to see more networking with other Transition groups. Jarod Paul, a behavioral ecologist said he would like to organize a bulk order of 500 plants that the community could plant as a symbol of sustainability that the town could visualize over time, I noted that I would like to see Transition Amherst connect with students from the five colleges who were interested in sustainability efforts, Kat said that she would like to identify and map all of the fruit-bearing trees and organize a team of gleaners to use and donate the fruit, Hector said he would like to encourage more dumpster diving and find people who would be willing to do different reskilling workshops, Kate said she would like to find money to get all of these projects going and to organize a seed swap, Jasmine said she would like to start a health and well-being group to help take care of those who were ill in the community, and Pete said he would like to become more active with the community gardens in town.

**Critiquing the positive framing as unsustainable**

The core principle of positive discursive framing has been critiqued by many people within and outside of the Transition Movement as an ultimately ineffective communication process. The most widely-referenced critique: *The Rocky Road To A Real Transition: The Transition Towns Movement and what it means for social change* (Chatterton and Cutler, 2008) argues that in order for a Transition Town to be effective, towns must be able to take a public stance against “exploiting and polluting” corporate practices, (p 6) that is to say, an ethos of positive framing might work in attracting people to the Transition model, but it will not ultimately lead to a successful Transition town because it does not address the root causes of our environmental and economic crises, it only attempts to ameliorate the symptoms. The authors caution against avoiding
communication around political debates while only focusing on what participants have in
common. They argue that unsustainable government policies and corporate practices
have material effects on local lives that if left unchallenged could wipe out the best
efforts at local sustainability.

“Around the globe, in Wales, Nigeria, Georgia, Mexico and Alaska, to name a
few, people are struggling against energy multinational corporations in similar ways.
Their lives and livelihoods are directly threatened, not just by future climatic catastrophe
but also by pollution, repression and loss of land as the extraction happens. Those who
challenge or try to prevent these things are often portrayed as needlessly angry or violent
which is a divisive tactic that we should guard against. Providing support for
communities who are resisting the efforts of the industries to extract and burn ever-
increasing quantities of fossil fuels is one of the most important strategies in dealing with
climate change and this solidarity and exposing the companies and the political systems
that facilitate them must surely be a central part of transition.” (Chatterton and Cutler,
2008, p 7)

Hopkins responded directly to the arguments made in this critique on his
transition culture blog (transitionculture.org) and invited a dialogue to which 44 people
responded. The open invitation to dialogue and the long response is further evidence to
support the notion that the Transition movement is in itself in transition and new media
including the capacity to blog, allows for the flow of ideas and analysis that
simultaneously reflects and shapes the movement.

Hopkins, employing an Actor Network Theory approach, suggests that Transition
is a fundamentally different model for social change than the traditional confrontational
us-and-them activist approach advocated by Chatterton and Cutler. Building on Vandana Shiva’s assertion that “these systems function because we give them our support, but if we withdraw our support, these systems will not be able to run,” Hopkins defends what he calls the movement’s “determinedly inclusive and non-blaming approach,” arguing that a successful transition through peak oil and climate change will by necessity be about a bringing together of individuals and organizations, rather than a continued fracturing and antagonizing. (Hopkins, 2008) It is worth noting that this sentiment is echoed in many different places on the Transition Network and in the public comments of the people who are affiliated with it.

Hopkins also refers to the psychology underpinning social change. From a communication perspective, he argues that “the approach is usually one of information dumping, giving people a large amount of distressing information and expecting them to change. What we try and do in the Transition movement is to design in an acceptance of the fact that information about peak oil and climate change can be very distressing, and that it can lead to an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. An approach based on information exchange, allowing people to discuss with others how peak oil and climate change ‘feel’, and to enable them to feel part of a wider community of people exploring this, is very empowering and much more healthy.” It might be argued that Cutler and Chatterton have a more tactical approach to social change and Hopkins has a more strategic approach. Indeed Brick and Cawley (2008) argued that effective social movements must create a broad framework that makes environmental ideas meaningful across a broad array of contexts, and in doing so, structure the discourse in ways that then support group activity. They make an important distinction between the work of an
individual group (i.e.: The Transition Town) and the Transition Network (i.e.: The social movement responsible for shifting the behavior and values in society.)

It is interesting to note that the data suggests that members of Transition Amherst generally supported and adopted the positive discursive framework into its meetings and activities. From a class perspective, the participants in Transition Amherst were quite similar to Hopkins, an educated financially-secure white male with the resources and capacity to discuss “how peak oil and climate change ‘feel.’” Hopkins reflects his position by publicly empathizing with the organizations and corporations that control much of the world. “I find the same in a series of other prominent organisations, they haven’t thought it through at all, and they have absolutely no idea what to do, yet become enthused to begin to explore it when approached in a constructive manner. These are, in the huge majority, not wicked people, rather they are as lost and enmeshed in the way the world works at the moment as the rest of us are, they have families they return to at night. We are all in this together.”

Others who may be more directly impacted by the damages wrought by the corporations whose policies have caused the financial crisis and climate change—food and water scarcity, toxic waste dumping, excessive pollution, job loss, etc. may not have the same opportunity (or desire) to be a part of such a discussion. Indeed a strategic community-led approach to sustainable social change looks quite different for those members of the community with the resources to “prepare” for crisis and those who are already in crisis. (This will be explored further in Chapter 10: The Value of Diversity.) Thus the positive framing as the primary tool for attracting people to Transition towns might be successful in attracting large numbers of people, however, these numbers do not
necessarily indicate that the numbers are representative of diverse members of the entire community.

Hopkins does allow that Transition is an approach that “sits alongside and complements the more oppositional protest culture,” but continues to see the two approaches as distinct and separate tools in the larger context of achieving sustainable social change.

It is interesting to note that the positive discursive framing is one of the strongest appeals of the Transition Movement and is also the source of one of its biggest critiques. It is also important to note that this framing was not a source of conflict for the particular members of Transition Amherst, the majority of whom were educated and financially secure and who (as noted in their project goals) wanted to participate in local projects to make Transition Amherst in particular and the community in general more resilient. Conflict occurred for Transition Amherst when the projects, goals and ideas that arose out of the positive discursive framing were not guided with effective communication processes or organized with effective leadership, both of which will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters.

**The Second Appeal: Transition is “everywhere.”**

Data from this project also suggests that the public visibility of the Transition town movement has also contributed to its appeal and momentum. Sarah Lyme, a United States Transition Trainer, has conducted hundreds of Transition trainings and counseled communities all over the country regarding how to become a Transition Town. She has a home in Amherst, and sporadically attended Transition Amherst meetings.

“To do anything to reach the mainstream you need to be successful, you need to have something that looks like a lot of people find it useful because the
mainstream doesn’t want to be different and unique they want to be successful within the framework. Once any social movement reaches a certain level of mass appeal it can really take off and you can get all kinds of people involved. So the fact that it was global and in all of these countries and there were hundreds of these initiatives forming in the UK meant that it was successful. So you could market it that way. Plus it was fun! It was play!” (Interview, January 3, 2013)

Indeed Transition has been quite successful in marketing itself through a diverse range of media that has enhanced its visibility around the world. Although, at the time of this research, the movement was less than seven years old, the Transition Network had already published eight books about Transition, produced two documentary movies, developed two core courses to help introduce and develop the idea of a transition initiative, have conducted transition trainings in 20 countries, a downloadable graphic with the Transition logo for promotional material and a Transition badge for websites or blogs and an extensive (and extensively updated) presence on Twitter, Facebook, Ning, Youtube, Flickr, and LinkedIn. Sarah said that during her Transition trainings she would tell the participants:

“Look at all these people that are using this and these books and books are a sign of success. And they [the Totnes, England based staff of the Transition Network] were very good with technology. You know Ben he worked in computers and he’s the Transition Network executive director. But he also has a really good sense of humor and I think that combination of good values, great sense of humor, interwoven into the methodology without being preachy gives the model a lot of appeal. We all want to do practical things to help our communities. That’s a safe ground for appealing to average people.” (Interview, January 3, 2013)

The strong media presence across a variety of outlets, particularly social media where one is invited to participate is indicative of a thriving movement, and one that holds promise for somebody searching for an opportunity to “do something” in the face of a series of global crises.
Kat said that being able to see what other people were doing around the world inspired her to take part in her local initiative.

“I’ve been working on these things definitely since all through the 90s and the 0’s. This just seemed like even a better way. It was such an inspiring model with details of other people doing it in other places…” (Interview, January 17, 2013)

Roger Reed, a community organizer with his own carpentry business said that he first became involved with Transition Amherst after hearing about it “everywhere.”

“The Transition movement is out there and it’s visible and so if people hear about it it seems like it’s a way and it has its act together and it can be helpful.” (Interview, December 6, 2012)

George Heart, a professor at the University of Massachusetts and a leader in developing sustainability initiatives at UMass, also noted the movement’s visibility as an appeal.

“You see it everywhere. It’s definitely the hot thing to be talking about right now. If you ask me, I’d rather be talking about guerilla gardening. But Transition is the thing that everybody sees now so everybody’s talking about it.” (Interview, September 16, 2011)

**The Third Appeal: Permaculture principles as the convergence of the altruistic and the selfish**

As noted earlier, the Transition Town model is the only global model for social change that incorporates permaculture principles into its design. The three main principles are earth care (work to understand and create provisions to maintain a healthy planet for all life systems to continue and multiply), people care (create sustainable systems for people to access and share resources), and share the surplus (Create systems where the outputs are set aside to nourish a sustainable life cycle for all.) The focus of
permaculture is on maximizing the connections between each element in a design system. In order to be resilient, the Transition model suggests that communities must adapt these principles as core values and as part of its design.

Data suggests that this third appeal was perhaps the largest draw for members of Transition Amherst. All members at various meetings expressed a desire for their community to embody the above principles in one form or another and many expressed a specific desire to maximize connections with each other and with the larger community.

Jarod Paul: “I think at least conceptually what permaculture and Transition state they want to try to do is make connections in what is mostly a landscape of silos that are unconnected. I see a deficit in connecting between all these things that are happening and the vague idea that the more connections are made, there’d be a greater good more than the individual parts.” (Interview, December 12, 2012)

I want to reiterate again that there is an important distinction between the way the public principles that underlie a model for social change can effectively appeal to and attract large numbers of people and the ways in which those principles are actually applied in the model. I note those distinctions because while the desire to maximize connections and build a robust and resilient community served to attract the members of Transition Amherst, the reality of actually embodying and enacting the principles was much more difficult.

Kat found the permaculture principles to be much more in line with her approach to activism.

“I’d been feeling very concerned about the environment for oh about 30 years and about climate change when we started hearing about it in the 80s and Transition really seemed to be responding to some of my concerns but by working in all the different communities where almost everybody can relate to neighbors and talk about: How do we set up systems for resilient having our needs and our children’s needs met and our community’s?” (Interview, January 17, 2013)
Cindy Chesterfield, a bodyworker in her fifties who is an active member of Transition Amherst and Transition Pelham, a town that borders Amherst, said she was drawn to participate in Transition because she wanted to expand her community to be around people who were concerned about the “enormous unprecedented shifts” in the world and wanted to do something about it. Now, however, she says she is more invested in the people-share part of permaculture principles and doesn’t necessarily need to call her work “Transition.”

“I think people are hungry to stop living alone. You know there’s a lot of people who live alone and have very few friends. I have a wonderful home life and a lot of friends but I still feel the need for greater community because I know that change is coming and there’s a lot of things that we’re going to need each other for in a big way. I’m guessing that the people who are drawn to this Transition movement know that.” (Interview, December 13, 2012)

Kevin Smart, Fiona Nims, a Lecturer at private college in her early 40s, and Hector Lasix, a computer programmer in his late 40s, were all active members of Transition Amherst and each said that Transition appealed to them because they wanted an opportunity to create a larger community around shared values and actions. Hector said:

“As humanity is concerned, the environmental things are just way too big to survive. I don’t know whether it will be extinction or a big die-off but my belief is that we are too late so I am not doing it [Transition] for success, I’m doing it for the emotional support that I’m not alone in knowing this or thinking about it. They [Transition Amherst participants] also know that some change is afoot and we all want to do something about it locally. Tomorrow I might die from a totally unrelated reason to social or environmental collapse. You know I might get hit on my bike tomorrow coming to work so what do I care about tomorrow or the day after, I want to really enjoy my life today. This helps me to connect fuller to people, bring my life back to today where I can make a difference for me and for others and build community which is important any way any time.” (Interview,
The data suggests that the permaculture principles that underlie Transition appeal to participants who would like to build community around them, but they also hold a separate strategic appeal for other members like Jarod Paul, who see a personal gain in adopting them. Jarod noted that the model’s permaculture approach appeals to many people who see it as a practical way to save money in the future.

“I mean certainly the cheapest vegetables are the ones you can plant yourself. Several people attended an interior storm windows replacement workshop sponsored by Transition. Part of what attracts people is that it’s so much cheaper. There’s an immediate payoff and a direct economic benefit.” (Interview, December 12, 2012)

Jarod said that he has not been able to find another model for social change that is more strategically effective in combining both personal gain with a global sense of good will. He said:

“As a personally motivating strategy I’m attracted by the convergence of selfishness and altruism. I can do what’s good for me, my family and my neighborhood and be totally selfish about it and just have a good life. Or we can be motivated by ‘Well this is the way we have to live in order to make the world better and solve great big problems.’ Yeah we drastically have to change humanity’s relationship with itself, ecology, resource use everything but I can work on that at the same time as I can get mine and have it too. So strategically it’s more effective than other models. We have many of the environmental movements before—save the polar bears for the most part does not have the selfish side of things except to the extent that you gain a reputation for caring for those things and then that can benefit you. In Transition you have a whole suite of selfish motivations that are in line with the ultimate goals.” (Interview, December 10, 2012)

**Conclusion**

Three main themes emerged from the data that may serve to illuminate why the Transition model has appealed to such a large number of people and grown so rapidly.
While the data focuses primarily on interviews with and observations of members of Transition Amherst, it is important to note that it is consistent with commentary (included above) from the national and global Transition hubs. 1) A positive discursive framing that focuses on how members of Transition Towns can use their “gifts” to make their communities more resilient. 2) A ubiquitous and active presence through diverse media channels and 3) An underlying structure of permaculture principles that focuses on community building rather than fixing environmental problems. The above appeals may suggest the reasons why people become interested in and join their Transition towns but must be distinguished from the ways in which these appeals are actually applied and used by members on the ground and/or as a means to keep people involved with the initiative.

As noted earlier, a theoretical analysis grounded in Actor Network Theory suggests that each theme exists as an actor that is constantly being “performed” in relation to the other actors that make up the network of “appeals.” One cannot separate for example, that the first appeal: a positive discursive framing, must be successfully mediated via communication tools (appeal number two) and reach a large enough audience of people who will want to participate. The third appeal, the permaculture principles directly inform both the first appeal by focusing on positive design solutions and the second appeal, as it is these efforts which make up the content of the information spread through various media channels. If one were to expand the analytical gaze out even further, an Actor Network Theory approach also suggests that these appeals are themselves an actor in the larger network that makes up the movement and also inform both the diversity of the movement (another actor) and its sustainability (another actor). (IE: if the appeals are targeted to one group of people in a community, the Transition
initiative will likely be neither diverse nor sustainable. This will be explored further in Chapters 9 and 10.)

Thus while the former appeals operate in conjunction with each other to provide an overall strategy for attracting large numbers of people to the Transition movement, these “large” numbers are not necessarily equated with “diverse” numbers. Evidence from past research (noted in the lit review and in this section) suggests that a communication process that insists on a “non-blaming and inclusive” attitude may ironically occur at the expense of those who are gravely suffering in severe crises. The movement would do well to incorporate a more contextual and tactical understanding of resistance in situations that demanded it while supporting those Transition towns who seek to take a political stand regarding an issue adversely affecting the community. This is not to suggest that political stances always be equated with traditional “us vs. them” activism, as Rob Hopkins seems to suggest, but rather, it allows for the relative and situational possibilities to emerge where such a subjective stance would be welcomed if not encouraged in the name of achieving sustainable social change and with a nod toward the overall strategy of achieving community resilience. I could find only one place on the entire Transition Network where such an action was deemed tolerable. Under the “branding” link of the website, in the section for campaigners regarding “Endorsement Marquees,” a paragraph reads:

Campaigners
We’re often asked by campaigning organisations for support. We’re exceedingly picky about this, owing to our feelings that, while “campaigns against” certain negative things are essential, we’re focusing more on “working towards” positive outcomes. That said, given the times we’re facing, we feel that some campaigns need all the help they can get. (transitionnetwork.org/support/branding)
It is still unclear what the above “help” means and/or what the effect of an endorsement marquee is but regarding the focus of this chapter and the appeal of the movement: a more vocal acceptance of political and tactical approaches from the movement might also serve to draw a more diverse group of people, from a wider range of class, race, and education perspectives, particularly those who are on the front lines of the global crises.
CHAPTER 7
MEASURING AND COMMUNICATING IMPACTS

The previous chapter analyzed data from this project regarding the primary reasons why the Transition model has achieved its rapid popularity. It focused largely on the processes behind Transition Amherst—that is the structures and foundation that inform its popularity and appeal. This chapter seeks to shift the analytical gaze away from the processes and toward the products of Transition in order to better understand how members of Transition Amherst understand, measure and communicate their impact.

The Transition movement does offer several suggestions for how to “measure progress” (Transition Companion, p 109) some of which were inadvertently done by members of Transition Amherst. I note that it was inadvertent because nobody referred to the model’s guidelines for measurement during the course of this research. In fact, finding formal ways to measure progress was never a priority that was communicated by the group. Nevertheless, the Transition Companion suggests that Transition participants might keep a spreadsheet of events and the number of people who attended them, in addition to recording “easily measurable outputs from projects.” Transition Amherst had sign up sheets for all of its events, making it possible to measure the numbers of people in attendance. The number of people who attended Transition Amherst events and activities such as the reskilling workshops and movie showings were always recorded and noted in minute notes and ranged from four to a dozen people who attended reskilling workshops to a few dozen who came to movie nights to upwards of a hundred at cosponsored events such as the Amherst Sustainability Festival and the Regional Transition Film Festival. The Transition movement also suggests that an initiative develop an annual “survey of
the community” to establish how opinions have changed and the effect the initiative is having. (Transition Companion p 110) It notes that collaborating with student researchers might also be beneficial in designing and conducting surveys. The movement suggests that initiatives might conduct semi-structured interviews, where a list of topics is explored through a series of open-ended questions, not unlike the ones conducted for this dissertation project.

One of the most important suggestions that the Transition movement offers is to use surveys and questionnaires with key community leaders to find out what they’re already doing and to identify concerns within the community. (p 111) The results of these surveys then inform the activities of an initiative, and help to build bridges between community groups already doing Transition-related work, ultimately increasing the effectiveness of the Transition initiative.

Although the Transition movement notes that each initiative must determine its own ways of measuring its effectiveness, it does emphasize the general importance of doing so early on. “As the effect of your project grows, it will become increasingly important that you document it. Getting into the discipline from an early stage will stand you in good stead for later, as well as providing insights that will help increase your impact.” (Transition Companion, 2011, p 111)

As noted earlier, even though Transition Amherst recorded the number of people who attended events, there was never any sustained effort to organize the data and measure the impact of the group. Thus, my analytical starting point draws from participatory methodology by starting from the perspective of the members themselves. The intention of this chapter is not to develop a way to measure and/or critique Transition
Amherst’s impact, but rather to better understand how members of Transition Amherst understand the role the initiative played in their community. Data from field notes and interviews suggests that there are several categories that people used to measure whether or not they believed the Transition Amherst initiative was successful in working toward community resiliency and these categories are directly tied to how the participants defined community resiliency. While the members shared the same general idea of resiliency based on the model—resiliency is a community’s ability to withstand shock and bounce back from catastrophe—members had varying ideas of how to achieve it and perhaps more importantly, how to successfully complete projects devoted to that goal. As a global model is adapted on a local level, one must still be able to take into account the varying ideas, plans, and goals that the local group has and thus the results gleaned from this part of the data are situated in the perspective of the participants.

In general, all participants expressed a mixture of disappointment and satisfaction with the impact that Transition Amherst had on the community and each member tied these emotions to categories within the initiative that they were working on. Dissatisfaction with impact was the result of three main reasons: members felt they did not have enough time in their lives due to other family and work commitments to fully realize their Transition projects and efforts; tensions between those who wanted to work on group processes and those who wanted to work on action projects were unable to be resolved; and participants had difficulty communicating effectively and consistently with other groups and organizations in the community already working on similar projects. Members expressed satisfaction primarily with the personal impact Transition Amherst had on their own lives with regard to learning how to work effectively in a group; some
of the personal connections that developed while working together; and with the amount they learned regarding environmental issues of concern and potential solutions.

Satisfaction was also expressed by some members with regard to the successful organization of Transition Amherst’s Great Unleashing. The specific categories that emerged when members were asked to describe the impact they thought Transition Amherst had on the community are described next.

The first category referred to by participants was what the movement terms “Practical Manifestations.” This category refers to the practical, material accomplishments of the group, from the smaller re-skilling workshops on bicycle repair and peace and conflict resolution, to the community movie nights, to the larger town projects like the creation of an “All Things Local” cooperative market in Amherst, a project that Sarah Lyme brought to the group as an idea in the winter of 2011 and has since taken on its own role in the community with several of its leaders remaining active Transition Amherst members. The second category was “Transition as a Network and Umbrella for the work of similarly aligned groups.” This category refers to the participants awareness of and desire for Transition to use its communication networks (email listserv, website, facebook group) to facilitate local connections with other groups already working on Transition-related activities, and to network as both an information hub, and a sponsor and/or host of various community-resiliency related events and activities. The third category was referred to as “Neighbor to Neighbor” and involved hands-on activities that directly benefited and/or helped neighbors in the community such as bringing food to somebody who was sick, or helping to bale hay at a neighbor’s farm. The fourth category was “A Place to Learn” and this involved the capacity for Transition
Amherst to serve as a place to learn more about and deepen communication around environmental issues such as climate change and peak oil, as well as a place to develop skills in negotiating group dynamics and developing institutional processes for keeping Transition Amherst sustainable. For example, the development of a mission statement, or learning how to successfully facilitate a meeting could fall under this category. Finally, the fifth category “The Planning and Execution of the Great Unleashing.” I note this as a separate category even though it contains elements of all the others because each member at several points during this research process connected their thoughts about the impact of Transition Amherst to the ability for the group to successfully plan and coordinate a Great Unleashing. As noted in the previous chapter, and again here, Actor Network Theory is useful here as an analytical lens that suggests these categories do not exist as separate and distinct entities but are in fact related to and informed by each other as actors in a network of “Impacts.” For example, members would not have been able to discuss the personal learning they experienced as a positive impact if they were not working on a project, whether it be organizing a reskilling event, working on a subcommittee for the Great Unleashing, or reading for the book club. I separate the categories here in order to provide richer descriptions and to more fully understand participant’s perceptions of ways to measure the impact(s) of Transition Amherst on the community and in their own lives.

“Practical Manifestations”

During the span of this research period (November 10th 2011 to February 2013), Transition Amherst hosted and/or sponsored a series of workshops and activities that
were open to the entire Amherst community. Hector organized monthly reskilling workshops at his home including winter bicycling and bicycle repair, an energy saving workshop, an elder flower syrup workshop, blackberry preservation, peach canning, food preservation and an emotional and physical preparation for changing times. The purpose and intention of these events is to help educate the community about a more sustainable way of living while building community through participation in a shared event/experience. Many of the workshops were taught by members of the community who did not necessarily attend Transition Amherst meetings. Dr. Pete hosted a peace and conflict resolution workshop in the local library and Jasmine hosted a series of movie nights with Transition related themes, also at the library, and sometimes including local experts who facilitated a dialogue at the end of the movie. For example, on April 5, 2012, Transition Amherst sponsored a showing of the film Queen of the Sun, a documentary about the bee colony collapse and local bee keeping expert hosted a discussion afterward. On May 14th Transition Amherst cosponsored the movie “With my Own Two Wheels” with the organizers of Amherst Bike Week in the Amherst Town Hall. Jarod organized a series of “Get to Know Your Town Walks,” through nature trails and old growth forests in town, and Roger Reed organized a water treatment plant tour and a solar project walk. Transition Amherst also sponsored a regional Transition film festival and participated in the towns annual Sustainability Festival with a table and information sheets. The group also held an open potluck and book club. All of the above may be considered “practical manifestations” of Transition Amherst because they were organized, and discussed at Transition meetings, communicated over the Transition listserv, and advertised on the website.
Jarod articulated a sentiment that was expressed by many people in the group regarding his feelings about what Transition Amherst was able to practically accomplish:

“It is mixed because I think we’d done some of it and not as much as I’d liked to see. And it’s been very personally meaningful and connecting to people to work on projects that have been great successes and then seeing things stagnate where people have been too busy.” (Interview, December 12, 2012)

Jarod defined “great successes” of the projects based on community participation, particularly at the reskilling events and during the movie nights, and the friendships that were formed with people while working on them. Although I was unable to attend all of the events, the ones I did attend (The Transition Amherst Film festival, the Sustainability Festival, and the potlucks and bookclub) were well attended and afforded ample opportunity for community building through discussion and dialogue.

The tension, however, between wanting “to do more” and not having the time was expressed by almost every member of the group with regard to their sense of Transition Amherst’s capacity to have a meaningful impact. Hector noted:

“The downside is that we had to take responsibility for everything that was going on and we already have a full life. Transition activities don’t come as the survival necessity that is, for example, work or some other personal activity. It comes on top of an existing and busy and sometimes crammed life. Do you have the energy to do all that much when you already have this full life?” (Interview, December 10, 2012)

Jarod said one of the projects that he felt had the most impact was the planting of hazel nut trees in New Haven, CT. when he was a member of Transition New Haven. One might see this example as a tangible metaphor for Deleuze’s rhizome. Transition New Haven was the actor that built a network of connections between the town, (beautifying it with trees), providing a sustainable food source for the community
(hazelnuts), while increasing the education for community members with an opportunity to learn more about how to grow and care for these trees. This analysis is rooted in an understanding of the interrelated connections between actions and networks, however, it must be noted that the implication in this instance is that community members were able to afford the price of the trees and had the time to attend a workshop about how to plant and care for them.

“Essentially we set up a buying club. We collected all our tree orders, got a buying price and then had a planting workshop on all of it. Between 500 and 1000 trees were ordered and presumably 80 percent of them were planted and presumably they survived. It really just took the leadership of one person to do the email and ordering and set a date. It was very tangible.” (Jarod Paul, interview, December 12, 2012)

For some members, the practical manifestations didn’t have to be directly organized or sponsored by Transition Amherst, but rather were inspired by the global movement in general. Cindy Chesterfield said:

“You know the Transition Movement might have started with the fear of no hope and ice caps melting but in Amherst definitely an offshoot from Transition is this huge surge of local farms in Amherst, the All Things Local store, the political biking community… And so maybe the impact of the Transition Movement is not even the movement itself. It’s like: Lets come together but what springs out of it in different towns and cities looks different. In Pelham it’s become neighbor to neighbor. It wouldn’t have started without Transition. In Amherst maybe it’s going to be an unbelievably coordinated local food economy.” (Interview, December 13, 2012)

Cindy suggested that the dialogue that comes from a group of people connecting around a practical Transition-related activity is perhaps the most effective way of creating community resiliency. She also noted that although she defines her Transition Pelham group as successful, it is not so by the Transition’s guidelines. For example, the guidelines of the model suggest that the intention of an initiating group is ultimately to
disband after organizing a Great Unleashing, or rather a big event, the purpose of which is to help community members identify their own interests and commit to forming more specific working groups such as local food production, or alternative transportation to build greater resiliency for their community. Cindy, along with several other members of Transition Amherst, did not necessarily want either the Transition Amherst or Transition Pelham initiating groups to disband. The tension between the movement’s guidelines for having the most impact and what each member wanted and/or felt was best was communicated at several different points by several different members and never resolved. In an interview with Cindy on December 13, 2012, we talked about these tensions.

Cindy: We [Transition Pelham] don’t even really use the word Transition anymore. There’s a dozen of us so it’s a pretty big group and we’ve all gotten really close. I had a movie at my house the other night. I showed this movie Switch about energy and 17 people came. We had a movie at the library and we had 15 people come. I don’t think I knew any of these people before and now we’re getting really close.

EP: I would say that’s a pretty successful Transition group.

Cindy: Yes, but not by the Transition checklist. Transition says you have to do massive outreach. It’s the American way. Plan a GREAT UNLEASHING with hundreds of people. We’re not interested in that at all. We just want to know each other better and do practical things to help take care of each other.

It is perhaps important to note that the texts produced by the Transition model are consistent in suggesting that the principles and ingredients are simply guidelines, not mandatory signposts for universal community resiliency. Each community must adapt the model in a way that best serves the community.
Sarah Lyme also noted in an email to the group on Dec. 5, 2012 that many initiating Transition town groups have decided to keep meeting and have adapted this decision into the overall guidelines.

“Many Initiating Groups have done this -- continued to meet socially, for mutual support, or to discuss how things are going in the broader community. Sometimes they pick up or sustain communications functions, continue educational events, etc. You can officially form as a Working Group. Or you can unofficially hang out as friends. In Transition, you can do whatever you want! There's no ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ Parties are good! Continuing to show movies is good!”

Although the model emphasizes that there is no “right” and “wrong,” there are certainly suggestions for more effective and efficient ways of creating a Transition town. At the time of this research, however, there were no processes of communication for when a group decides to break from the guidelines of the model, and no structure for how to proceed effectively. Thus the tension—between the emotional needs of members of the group and the underlying sense that the model should be followed in a certain way in order for the town to be an effective Transition Town was never resolved by members over the course of this research.

With regard to Transition Amherst’s impact in the context of “practical manifestations,” Roger Reed suggested that the biggest impact that Transition Amherst had were the two large town-related projects that he is now a co-coordinator of and which he learned about through his participation in Transition Amherst. The two projects are the development of a cooperative store in Amherst called “All Things Local” which supports local farmers and artisans directly, and an organization initiated by George Heart with many members of Transition Amherst called Grow Food Amherst, aimed at engaging residents to grow food locally. Again, Deuluze’s rhizome is an important analytical
framework here. Transition Amherst functioned as the rhizome, establishing connections between actors (community members), sustainability projects, and the town, (the sustainability coordinator Stephanie Ciccarello is also involved with the projects and is one of the leaders of Grow Food Amherst) in order for these initiatives toward resiliency to continue to grow. Roger Reed said:

“I’ve gotten involved with the Grow Food Amherst effort in town. So I’m going to those meetings now and I find that very satisfying and I’m working on this market project which for me is the primary culminating activity to come out of the Transition initiating group’s work. It wasn’t as though that was planned through that group but it came to it through [Sarah] and her enthusiasm after seeing the local roots project in Wooster, Ohio. If nothing else of any prominence or visibility comes out of Transition Amherst but that market, that will have been of itself a great accomplishment.” (Interview, December 6, 2012)

Finally, it’s important to note that in some instances the “practical manifestations” that result from Transition town activities may have already been in practice before the Transition group started, however, they are reframed and re(represented) by the Transition group and this reframing serves its own purpose with its own impact because it is focused on benefiting the entire community, not just one group of people. Jarod Paul and I discussed the benefits of re(representation) during an interview on December 12, 2012:

“As part of Transition New Haven, I got to explore things with a bunch of people and they became friends and often it was really informative. Now they were doing this BEFORE Transition and just reframed it in a different context. So similar to permaculture which Transition came out of, one of the critiques and strengths of permaculture is that they collect all of the things that are good and call it permaculture.

EP: What’s the value of framing it as this new thing when it’s not?

JP: Well, I think the way we’re [Transition Amherst] practicing skill-sharing adds a couple of elements that make it better. One is the free nature of it. We’re not paying for classes. Everybody is welcome. And then the selfish aspect. Not only
do I want to learn this and teach this but because of the context of Transition my neighborhood and my life will be better if more people know how to fix the plumbing or the insulation and can come and help me when I need it.

Thus the reframing as a Transition activity situates it in the larger context of community resiliency, potentially connecting it to something larger than one’s own personal interests.

**Transition as an Umbrella Network**

The second category that participants referred to with regard to the impact Transition Amherst had on the community was the group’s capacity to serve as a successful bridge between and network for other organizations in the community doing similar work. During meetings it was often stated that one of the resources Transition could provide was to serve as a bridge for and between people already doing Transition-related work: A kind of umbrella that could potentially raise awareness of what other people were doing and help to support them by announcing and attending their events. During a January 5th meeting, Dr. Pete said, “I like that Transition Amherst is a switchboard for anybody who comes to us, we can connect them to others.” While this was stated and generally agreed upon as one way the Transition group could have a meaningful impact, at the time of this writing, the model did not provide any kind of communication framework for conducting outreach to other local community-resiliency focused groups except to suggest and encourage the initiating group to do it. They do, however, encourage initiatives to “Not Reinvent the Wheel” and to cultivate a sense of “Interdependence” both of which involve observing and learning from other Transition initiatives, not necessarily from other local community-based organizations.
Transition Amherst facilitated the connection between other groups and activities through interpersonal communication and primarily through the use of the Transition Amherst listserv. At each Transition Amherst event a sign-up sheet was passed around, and all of the names were entered into a digital database. At the time of this research, more than 500 people were in the database and received the general Transition Amherst emails. (There was a separate, smaller email designated for the “steering group” only.)

During the course of this research, emails that were advertised over the listserv included information about an Interfaith Climate Committee forming in the valley, updates on the work of local organizations like Climate Action Now and an anti-fracking conference, a reuse and recycling rally, and various Occupy-related events; pleas to financially support various local environmental causes and/or sign petitions; information about other meetings including Valley Time Trade, a local resiliency initiative that uses time spent in the service of somebody as a currency instead of money, and a new local beekeeping initiative; announcements of Transition-related happenings including various speakers at the five-colleges, a neighborhood yard sale with over 100 families, the opening of the Amherst toy library, as well as announcements of other organization’s conferences and events including the North American Biochar symposium, local Tar Sands protests; and finally information and news about a model for Global Village Construction; Transition related topics not limited to the valley including, for example, articles about Trader Joe’s stance on GMOs, the effect of climate change on business, and videos on alternative investing models, anti-Exxon activism, and finally, requests for furniture and exercise equipment for people in need.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it provides a useful picture of the plethora
of local transition related activities and information that is being circulated into the larger community. The majority of people who regularly posted to the email list were active members of Transition Amherst, however, there were nearly a dozen who were not. The direct impact of this transmission of information is nearly impossible to measure, first because it was impossible to accurately measure how many more people showed up to an event or activity because they heard about it on the listserv and secondly (and relatedly) because it was circulated to hundreds of people who are already familiar with the Transition movement. For example, the Amherst Sustainability Festival was publicized through the listserv and almost all of the dozens of community members with whom I spoke at the festival had already heard about the festival from other sources and/or were already involved in some kind of sustainability effort in the community. Many people also said they had heard about Transition elsewhere and expressed curiosity about the initiative’s work. Yet, many members of Transition Amherst acknowledged the opportunity for the spread of local information via the Transition listserv as a positive impact. Cindy said:

“Because of the Transition group I’m e-listed in with other groups that are doing great and important work. I’m excited about those things. I feel connected in with my local larger community and the great visionary work that they’re doing and without being hooked in to the Transition Amherst group I don’t think I ever would have been a part of that information or dialogue. So that is one of the biggest impacts to me. It’s not what we did as a group or even when we met, it’s just in general having met you all and now being part of something bigger.” (Interview, December 13, 2012)

The role of Transition Amherst as a networking hub for other similarly-aligned groups was generally positively received as long as Transition Amherst was the communication medium and not perceived as the umbrella under which the project took
place. In other words, people could use the Transition listserv to promote their activities as “Transition-themed” but that did not necessarily mean that the project itself was to be under the guise of the Transition Town movement. Tension sometimes arose when it was perceived that a project would be called “Transition” simply because it shared the same values and/or associations and/or was promoted via the email group.

For example, George Heart a professor at UMass who was organizing Grow Food Amherst at the time of this research did not want his group to be under the “Transition” label. He said:

“Transition wants to be the umbrella. I’m going, I don’t want an umbrella, I want to do what I want to do! Networking is a great model, let’s talk to each other, let’s recognize and celebrate each other and if we can do that digitally I’m happy to do all that but I don’t want to be put under an umbrella with somebody else’s name on it. That’s not attractive to me. In the All things Local project, when we were going forward with that, I said ‘Please please do not lead with the Transition Towns, it’ll kill us, it’ll just kill us.’ People want to come to a store thing, a coop thing, they don’t want to come to an idea thing. It’s not about Transition Towns it’s about the store. Lets invite them to work on the store.” (Interview, February 6, 2013)

George Heart did not think sustainable participation was possible when people came for an idea or a theory, over an action and/or activity. Thus he argued that the practical manifestations that were inspired by the movement did not have to be constrained by the label of it. It is important to contextualize George Heart’s comments. He has lived and worked in Amherst for decades and is friends with many of the members of Transition Amherst. He said that he attended several meetings when the initiating group was first forming but stopped after what he perceived to be “too much theorizing” and not enough action.

“If you talk about making bread together people will come. If you talk about creating community, that’s not enough to make me pay attention. I desire that, but
you know I’m really too busy. But make bread, okay that’s really cool. I can do that.” (George Heart, interview, February 6, 2013)

I would argue that George Heart’s perception of the Transition movement and its relationship to resiliency-building activities in the town is in part a result of the lack of communication guidelines developed from within the global Transition movement or Transition Amherst regarding how to dialogue with other sustainability groups in the area. Jarod Paul said:

“The Transition model is not trying to take credit for it or have it be theirs. In fact that is sometimes ways I’ve gained authority in helping to move things forward by saying I don’t have a vested interest. I don’t want to run this thing I just want to have it in my community so I can benefit from it. (Interview, December 12, 2012)

One might suggest that it has not been a priority of the movement to define itself in relation to others who are already working on the same issues, because for many “Transition Towns,” the sustainability efforts spring forth from the initiating group. In a place like Amherst, however, sustainability efforts (as described above) have been occurring long before the Transition model was ever developed. Thus communication between Transition Amherst and the coordinators of other local sustainability efforts is not only necessary, it’s fundamental. Roger Reed said:

“That was one of the things I was concerned about. Are we really creating anything new in this community where there’s a lot of community involvement already with these activities. This is an area filled with immensely educated people and a lot of activity so I was wondering what we were really going to be able to accomplish. I have to say that so far beyond the market and beyond the Grow Food Amherst activity I don’t really think anything else has really stuck or at least coalesced to the point yet where it’s really visible and looks viable at this point.” (Interview, December 6, 2012)

The model would do well to support the development of communication processes contextualized with meaningful ways to dialogue with these groups. During
the course of this research there was never any time during Transition Amherst meetings devoted to how to do outreach, how to approach and talk with other groups who may have already been doing this work for a long time, and perhaps most importantly, how to dialogue around the various roles that Transition could play in supporting the organizations without necessarily sweeping them under the “umbrella of Transition.”

Thus the rhizomatic possibilities of Transition, while evident in the successful projects coordinated by an initiative, can get lost in the lack of communication between a Transition initiative and other initiatives in town. Sarah Lyme noted several times during meetings that it was important to collaborate with other groups, but there were never any guidelines for what that outreach would actually look like or who would be responsible for doing it. I would argue that this lack of communication negatively impacted the role that Transition Amherst had in the larger community.

**Neighbor-to-Neighbor**

The third category of impact is the “Neighbor to Neighbor” activities that are facilitated by the Transition group. These can include activities such as helping to build a neighbor’s greenhouse; to organizing neighborhood potlucks; to helping a post-operative friend find a recliner while he or she heals from surgery, all of which occurred during the course of this research. This category is an interesting contrast to George Heart’s comments, however, because it suggests that one of the most positive impacts of Transition is indeed its role in community building. But perhaps more importantly, it suggests that there are a variety of reasons why people participate in Transition and a wide range of potential impacts that a group might have.

Jarod Paul noted, however that the neighbor-to-neighbor category of impact is
sometimes less valued and thus less cultivated than the others because of the Transition movement’s emphasis on “growing.”

“Too often I’ve been hearing why can’t we grow this movement? Why are we essentially failing in that, why is it the usual suspects? The movement needs to grow, but I think part of our culture is feeling successful if we’re growing something exponentially. So I take a step back and think: Why don’t we practice what we preach and be really happy with our six friends that got this thing going? Transition New Haven and Transition Amherst have been really personally satisfying and enriching to me as a gathering people of like mindeds and having that feeling of shared something.” (Interview, December 12, 2012)

Hector Lasix echoed a similar idea regarding the neighbor-to-neighbor connection and the positive impact that has.

“The biggest impact for me is that I didn’t have to feel so alone. I don’t call myself a survivalist because I don’t believe we will survive but I do believe I can make a difference in my life today. I want to live today as oppose to survive tomorrow… So the ups was the emotional support, the community building, the feeling that I am useful that I can provide something to strengthen my community and the personal connections with people I love and respect and think similarly. (Interview, December 10, 2012)

Cindy Chesterfield said that all of the activities of her Transition Pelham group are focused on helping her neighbors.

“It’s true we can’t talk about polar bears forever and ultimately we do need something positive. I personally think that the biggest value of the Transition movement is the sweet neighbor-to-neighbor stuff that goes on. One member of our group is 72-years old. He’s really fit and active but you know he’s getting old. I just dropped off a truck-load of kindling to his house the other day. Just that—that’s what matters. One of the guys in the group is having back surgery. We’ll all be totally on that, helping his wife. That’s the real value of it.” (Interview, December 13, 2012)

Cindy noted a distinct difference between the focus of her Transition Pelham group and the focus of Transition Amherst. She felt that the Transition Amherst group was not focused on the neighbor-to-neighbor activities, but rather had other goals that were prioritized over that. She said that the Transition Amherst meetings were conducted
like business meetings as opposed to community gatherings. This idea was communicated by several other members of Transition Amherst and I include it here to distinguish between what group members perceive as the most valuable impact of the group and what they perceive the group to have actually accomplished.

“Did the Amherst group do it for me? No and I don’t know why. I’ve been confused by the fact that I’ve always known that the Amherst group were a group of thoughtful intelligent, articulate self responsible people and when we came together I rarely felt a part in it. It was a business meeting. I never understood why we sunk into that groove and could never get out of it.” (Cindy Chesterfield, interview, December 13, 2012)

It was not for lack of trying, according to some members. During several meetings Fiona Nims commented that the [Transition Amherst] group should be having more fun. For example, during a meeting on January 3, 2012, she said:

“These meetings are so heavy on the agenda. I think we are forgetting that the model says we should be having fun. When do we do that?”

**Personal growth and learning about group processes**

Several members of Transition Amherst stated that they felt they learned a lot from being involved with the group. Thus the biggest impact was on their own personal lives. Three main “learning” themes emerged from the data. Participants said they learned about important environmental issues, they learned about themselves, and they learned about group processes (or rather they learned about what happens to a group when there is no formalized group process.)

Kat Boggs said that when Transition Amherst first formed a lot of time was spent learning about the Transition model and environmental issues.

“For a long time during the spring of 2010 it seems to me we learned more about things. We started a book group that summer about the Transition handbook and
that was when a number of people met every other week to talk about that book. We were learning and this had a big impact on all of us.” (Interview, January 17, 2013)

Kevin Smart said that one of the biggest impacts Transition Amherst had on him was helping him to understand himself better.

“It [Transition Amherst] did have a big impact on me in helping to clarify some of my limitations and some work that I need to do inside myself so in that sense I learned a lot from it. It was very helpful. I need to build my own resiliency much more and then give only as much as I can. So it helped me a lot with the mistakes that I ran into. Don’t know how that’s going to translate.” (Interview, November 27, 2012)

Kevin Smart said one of the reasons he was interested in Transition Amherst was because he felt his experience with mediation could help the initiative to develop group processes to help them negotiate decisions—from how meetings are run to activities the group sponsors to how to organize the Great Unleashing. Tensions arose however between group members who thought too much time was being spent on process and not enough time on action. Kat, for example, said:

“Well it just felt like we met and we met and we met and we met and we met and it just felt like that the whole way through. We just kept meeting. There was this whole thing of trying to get a mission statement going. This was [Kevin Smart’s] initiation because something of great concern to him all along is that we would have a coherent mission and methods so that he would feel safe. I felt like he had a lot to offer in that way but always wanted way more than anybody else did. We’d take it to a certain stage and that would be enough for everybody else so we’d move onto something else but there would be this tension sometimes between the process people and the let’s do something people.” (Interview, January 17, 2013)

Kevin, however, continued to argue at group meetings that Transition Amherst’s impact would be hindered if it continued its activities without a formal strategy. He expressed his dissatisfaction and frustration with the group meetings regularly. (This will be discussed further in later chapters.) He noted, for example, during a meeting on March
28, 2012: “We’re functioning like a man who loses his keys and searches for them under the light post because that’s where the light is.”

Cindy agreed with Kevin and suggested that there was never any process developed for negotiating different communication styles among group members and this may have had a negative impact on the group.

“We all had different styles of how to get from A to B when you have a goal, and we were together for a couple of years and it’s a long time to never discuss group dynamics, it’s a long time to never discuss the different ways that people achieve goals, and how they communicate in the process of doing it.” (Interview, December 13, 2012)

The Great Unleashing, discussed in the following section, illustrates this point.

**The Great Unleashing**

Although it would be possible to write an entire dissertation on the communication processes around the planning and coordination of Transition Amherst’s Great Unleashing, I include it here because planning the event took up the majority of the group’s time and resources during the course of this research. It was also the culminating event, after which the Transition Amherst initiating group stopped meeting.

Although plans for the “The Great Unleashing” were discussed at every single meeting and a subcommittee devoted to planning and organizing it was formed shortly after I started attending meetings in November of 2011, a devoted planning effort was not organized until the date of October 13, 2012 was finalized in July of 2012. Up until this point in July, the agenda for the meetings was devoted to updates on past and upcoming reskilling workshops, website developments, other Transition-related projects, with a small amount of time allotted to the Great Unleashing—(selecting a location, a name for
the event, talking about the goals of the event and outreach efforts). There was often confusion expressed over which agenda items should be prioritized and a significant amount of time was spent discussing which items should get the most attention and the reasons why.

The Transition movement describes a Great Unleashing as “a celebration of a place’s history, and the potential of a low-carbon, post-oil future. It is envisioned as the event that future generations will commemorate with a blue plaque in celebration of the day when the community’s transition began in earnest. How to do an unleashing is a work in progress, and every community that has one does it differently.” (Transition Companion, 2011, p 184)

Indeed the idea for a Great Unleashing held a kind of mystical allure for many members of Transition Amherst and news of the successful planning and implementation of other Transition Towns were often discussed at meetings. A successful event would serve two primary purposes: It would validate and make public the work of Transition Amherst and simultaneously open up the doors (via planned activities throughout the day) for the larger community to form working groups based on specific Transition related interests. According to the Transition Companion, “An unleashing should feel dynamic, colourful and celebratory, and balance the informative with the entertaining the factual with the inspirational.” (p 187)

What was never discussed at length, however, was how to conduct such an event in a town where such a transition has already begun in earnest. The topic was brought up several times by Fiona Nims and Kevin Smart, however, by the time a date was selected and agreed upon, it was deemed by the majority to be more pertinent to organize the
activities of the day based on the general purpose of the event, and not the context of it being held in Amherst.

During my interview with Kat, I asked her how we finally made the decision to go through with the Great Unleashing. She said:

“Well that was certainly my goal all along. It really came from the model just to go public, sort of like a public offering of a private stock. We have this little group and we’re meeting and we might do a few events and that’s all very well but to kind of take it to another level is the idea. The model is that you do this public event and that brings more people in. In our case it worked to a certain extent but not nearly as well as I think we would have liked it to. Maybe it wasn’t done process wise as well as it should have been but I think there was a couple of us—me and [Jarod] who really had that as a strong desire because we wanted to get it over with.” (Interview, January 17, 2013)

From July through October, Transition meetings focused primarily on organizing the event. Kat Boggs, Roger Reed and Cindy Chesterfield, assumed the primary leadership roles in organizing with Sarah Lyme serving as a guide. Jarod Paul and Sarah Lyme were designated as the MCs of the event. A schedule was formed collectively and based primarily on two participatory events: An Open Space session and a World Café: Two opportunities for community members to participate in small groups of similar interests. Music, food and children’s activities were organized by Dr. Pete and Jasmine. Fiona and I interviewed four “elders” in the community about life in Amherst and created a digital story that we displayed on a screen in the beginning of the day. Everybody, except for Kevin Smart conducted some form of outreach, whether it was hanging and distributing fliers, calling or emailing people on the phone, or sharing the news with local groups and friends. There was never a strategic process developed for organizing the event, conducting outreach, or communicating exactly what would happen to the initiating group once the Great Unleashing ended. People decided to do organizing
activities ad hoc and the leaders of the event emerged organically largely as a result of who had the most time to devote to the planning. The lack of coordinated and strategic process for planning and implementing the day was a direct factor in contributing to a general feeling of unease among the group in the months leading up to the event. There was also tensions between group members who wanted to have a deeper connection with one another during the process of organizing the event; frustrations over varying time limitations, (to connect and develop more strategic processes), and different visions of how the day should unfold. Kat, for example, said:

One thing that did get lost in the shuffle was definitely our social connection and our personal nourishing and that’s too bad and some of that might have been different personalities but it also might have been because we were all a little overwhelmed it was more that we could take on and do well. (Interview, January 17, 2013)

Thus for the purpose of analyzing impact, the Great Unleashing might be analyzed in terms of the impact it had on the community, but perhaps more importantly the impact it had on the initiating group. All members expressed strong feelings about it after the event, and similar to their feelings about Transition Amherst, they expressed a mixture of disappointment and satisfaction. Cindy, who was unable to attend the event due to a family commitment, expressed strong feelings about the event.

Cindy: I don’t give a shit about a Great Unleashing. I never did.

EP: So why did you spend all those resources, time and money planning it?

Cindy: Because I was committed to those people. Because I said I would. Because I felt like there wasn’t a lot of glue holding that group together and because of tensions and negativity and the ambivalence of the event—I don’t even know exactly why it happened, but I felt like I was needed. My skills in communication is basically why I did it. It wasn’t because I cared about the outcome. I never thought the outcome would build community.
EP: Why didn’t you communicate that?

Cindy: Early on when we were still meeting I questioned our vision of the event, but once the train was moving and was halfway at its destination I just felt like I was sitting on the train. But that’s part of the incompetence of the dynamic of that group. (Interview, December 13, 2012)

Members did express satisfaction with the actual event, along with disappointment over the number of people who attended, and a general sense of being “burned out” with Transition. Around 50 people came to the event, the majority of whom were white and over 40 years old. There were a handful of young people in attendance, mainly students from the area. Members expressed their thoughts about the day in emails sent to the group shortly after the event.

Hector: We were great (I think). We had about 50 people, which was a bit disappointing to me, but, as [Jasmine] said, all the conversations were inspiring, and we did have good energy in the room. We followed the program pretty exactly, and might even been a little early. [Jarod] was a great coordinator, and everyone did do their role. And at the end we symbolically passed off the baton to a group of people taking on the working groups. (email to group, October 13, 2012)

Sarah: There were lots of fun moments and happy connections. Turn-out was lower than we hoped, but I counted at least 75 people over the afternoon. I’m proud of everybody! (email to group, October 13, 2012)

Roger: It was a nice day, but as [Hector] and [Sarah] indicated the turn out was not as large as we’d hoped. The first nice day is a while, I wanted to be outside too. There were great food donations, the set-up went smoothly, the music was all wonderful, and everyone who stayed until the Marketplace activity at the end of the day seemed really engaged. We also took in $200 in donations. Yay!

The generally positive attitude of members in the emails suggests that they are continuing to embody the “positive” discursive framing advocated by the Transition movement, despite the disappointment with the turnout.

People who went to the event but who were not necessarily connected to
Transition Amherst also expressed satisfaction with the day, although nobody commented on the long-term impacts.

A male student at the University of Massachusetts said:

“I’m here because my teacher is giving me extra credit to come but it’s been a really inspiring day. As students we don’t get to interact with the community as much and it’s cool to hear what people have to say about new ways to recycle bottles from water and plans to have more community gardens. I didn’t really think too much about this before.”

Transition Amherst members blamed the lower-than-expected turnout on the weather and on the lack of time to devote to a coordinated outreach effort. George Heart, who also attended the event, felt that it was not appropriately marketed to the Amherst community. By marketing as a Transition event, he felt that a theory was being marketed, not an action, which was something that just wouldn’t appeal to a lot of people.

“That Great Unleashing was masterfully organized. But it was marketed as a Transition event, not a place to come and change your life and change your community and get involved with people who want to do bicycle stuff. That’s why people didn’t come. Transition Towns comes with a theory and people don’t find that attractive. I love Transition Towns, I read the book, but I don’t want to come to another meeting.” (Interview, February 6, 2013)

The process of organizing, planning and implementing Transition Amherst’s Great Unleashing event can be seen as a microcosm for the way in which Transition Amherst operated in the community. Members expressed a shared desire for connection but an inability to sustain one throughout the process, an acknowledgment of the lack of time to develop a mutually-agreed upon organizing strategy and an inability to resolve the tension between those who wanted to develop sustainable group processes and those who wanted to plan activities for the day, and finally, despite the former bumps, a general
sense of satisfaction and pride in being able to host a successful event based on the Transition model.

**Conclusion**

This chapter takes a participatory, grass roots approach to understanding the impact of Transition Amherst by focusing on the thoughts, feelings, opinions and ideas of members of Transition Amherst with regard to their understanding of Transition’s role in the community. The data exemplifies the biggest strength and the biggest challenge of the Transition movement: There are as many different reasons to become a part of a Transition town as there are ways to understand its role in helping the community to become more resilient. As with any long-term project, data suggests that members shared both disappointment and satisfaction with the impact of Transition Amherst and this was sometimes because of, but more often, *in spite of* the way in which the initiating group functioned. Members referred to the practical manifestations including the reskilling workshops, movie nights, and town walks; the capacity for Transition to serve as a communication network between similarly-aligned groups and activities; the neighbor-to-neighbor activities, the personal learning, and the planning and implementation of the Great Unleashing as categories under which the role and impact of Transition Amherst might be better understood. As noted earlier, although I separated the categories (actors) here in order to provide more detailed descriptions, many of the categories were connected to and influenced by other categories that made up the network of impacts for the participants in Transition Amherst. For example, some neighbor to neighbor activities were first introduced as an idea at a reskilling workshop; the capacity for
Transition to function as a communication networks between groups would not have been possible were people not a part of the network and they became a part of the network by attending a Transition event such as a movie night. The personal learning occurred as a direct result of participating in the organization of a Transition project or event. An actor network approach is useful here to illustrate that any effort to improve one category or another must acknowledge its interconnectedness with and relationship to the other categories. It is also interesting to note that most members shared the definition of “successful” impact as that which generated deeper dialogue and support within the community, something connected to and fulfilled in some capacity by each of the former categories.
CHAPTER 8

THE MULTISCALAR ROLE OF IDEOLOGY AND CULTURE IN TRANSITION

As I have argued in previous chapters, a central reason for the appeal and growth of the Transition model is that it addresses the cultural and ideological roots that have contributed to the global crises and recognizes the necessity for behavior change at the cultural level in order to create a sustainable shift in action toward community resiliency. The first part of this chapter will explore how the Transition model builds upon post-Marxist concepts of ideology in an effort to create a new one for communities. The second part will analyze the relationships between various scales of culture—mainstream US culture, the culture of the Transition movement, the culture of the individuals that constituted Transition Amherst, and the culture of Amherst. All of these scales of culture directly informed the motivations behind all levels of participation in Transition Amherst. While Chapter 6 focused on the processes of Transition and Chapter 7 focused on the products, this chapter’s analysis of the relationships between the layers of culture informing Transition Amherst are situated at the intersection of the processes and products of the movement, and better enable us to describe the complex network that makes up a Transition Town and understand the possibilities for sustainable social change.

Considering Ideology in Transition

The Transition Town movement (wittingly or unwittingly) draws much of its cultural foundation from Marxism. In order for the Transition Town movement to continue to grow, the capitalist ideology that has informed value systems must change as
people are awakened from their “false consciousness” and into a deeper awareness of what is possible in the name of community resiliency in the face of great change.

(Hopkins, 2011, The Transition Companion) Hopkins notes:

“When we first started Transition in 2005-6, I imagined we were developing an environmental response, a sustainability focused process…I now see it as a cultural process. It is about asking what the culture of your community would need to be like to be as resilient as possible…It goes beyond reducing energy and planting trees, and needs, ultimately, to seep into the culture of a place: how a place thinks of itself, what it takes pride in. This is the depth of the change Transition initiatives are attempting to effect.” (p 74)

The “change” for Hopkins, is a move from one ideology to another. According to traditional Marxism, ideology is accomplished with false consciousness. This concept, however, assumes normative definitions of power. We operate within determined positions and there exists a true consciousness that can be attained as soon as we are made aware of our predicament and choose to revolt. The Transition movement aligns itself more with post Marxist theorists, however, who have built upon this concept while suggesting that the analysis not be limited to the relations of and between production, but rather extend to the intricacies and influences of all social formations, while continuing to recognize the historical contexts and constraints that shape it. Ideology in this sense is much more fluid, a relational, dialectical process of interpellation determined by social processes and expanded beyond the fixed constraints of true and false. This framework places the actions of humanity at the center with the possibility of intervention (politically and socially) in the form of agency as something not necessarily guaranteed, but rather made possible by the notion that reality and the structures that are a part of it are not fixed. (Hall 1986). It is an analysis predicated on the movement of human action.
not on the stability of structure even as it recognizes the ways in which culture and class inform thought and action.

I argue that the Transition model taps into this agency at a historical moment by taking a local cultural approach to environmental problems. Communities must work together based on their own needs to shift values long-term in order to create sustainable solutions to the problems of peak oil and climate change. Transition argues that the value shift must come from focusing on the community’s cultural strengths, not only on its capacity to come up with environmental solutions to immediate environmental problems.

Sarah Lyme: That’s why I like the model so much. I want us to be able to reach across the ideological boundaries. My cousin who disagrees with me on global warming just put me in touch with my nephew and told him all about Transition even though she doesn’t agree with the climate crisis that I devote my life to working on. As a trainer, part of the fun is going in and learning the local context. You go into a place and the price of oil is going up and a lot of them plan to be there. If you help them find each other, the ones who really care about the long-term well-being of the community and you say to them: How can we have fun together, who are you and what gifts do you want to give to helping to fix this problem, the personal growth and the healing is just amazing. I mean people crying with joy. (Interview, January 3, 2013)

Therborn (1989) defines ideology as the aspect of the human condition under which humans live their lives as actors in a world that makes sense to them. Ideology is the medium through which this meaningfulness operates. According to Therborn, ideologies qualify subjects in three ways: 1) Clarifying what exists and what does not exist, (creating a sense of identity.) 2) Distinguishing between what is good and bad, (creating a sense of normalization) and 3) Making known what is possible and what is impossible.
The ideology of the Transition movement is quite developed in terms of its capacity to qualify its participants. The model creates a sense of identity for both participants and the town at large in several important ways. First, because it is a global movement, participants in local initiatives are aligning themselves with and for a value system that recognizes the instability of current global systems, and the necessity to contribute to positive solutions. On a local level, this identity manifests as a pride in one’s “hometown,” a loyalty to place and to the people who populate it. It is an identity that is attached to the materiality of a place and accompanied by the desire to make it “better.” The Transition movement distinguishes between “good and bad” thus creating a sense of normalization via its branding and communication materials and through the communication processes of the model. This is perhaps one of the most important parts in creating a successful ideological mobilization and must also be considered alongside other cultural factors that contribute to a sense of normalization. For example, what is the expectation in the town regarding the use of public transportation versus driving one’s own car? What work in the town has been or is already being done to promote the ideological mobilization? (This will be discussed further in the Gramsci section of this chapter, specifically, and throughout the rest of this project.) Finally, Therborn notes that ideologies make known what is possible and impossible. The Transition model depends upon enthusiastically illustrating (again, via its vast communication resources including its websites and numerous books) that nothing is impossible when a community comes together to create projects that work toward and support its resiliency in the face of impending crisis. As noted earlier, this utopian sense of possibility permeates every
sector of the model, contributing to its appeal and the foundation upon which its ideology operates.

Therborn (1989) developed four dimensions that he argues make up human subjectivity in the context of ideology, thus expanding it out of the predetermined realms of class: a) The inclusive historical—(tribe, ethnicity, nation, church) b) The inclusive existential—(the meaning of life, suffering, death, the cosmos and the natural order, mythologies, religion, morality) c) The positional historical (members of a family in a structure and lineage of families, occupants of an educational status, incumbents of positions of political power, members of different classes and d) The positional existential (age, gender, etc.) He argued that ideologies are never static, and always subject to change. While it is true that new modes of production will create new historical positional ideologies, it is also true that gender, race, family roles, and cultural expectations will also influence ideology.

So too does the Transition model recognize and incorporate each of Therborn’s dimensions to some extent though it might be argued that if Transition were to actually apply all of the dimensions in a more strategic way, it might be more successful in sustaining the mobilization it seeks. For example, the positional existential is recognized by the movement’s vocal support of the importance of honoring the wisdom of a community’s elders and valuing them as an integral part of an initiative, as well as emphasizing the importance of engaging young people. (The latter is number five of the third ingredient in Transition: Connecting.) However, on the ground, this value is not necessarily applied or prioritized in a strategic way. Research indicates that there is little diversity in terms of the age of participants in Transition, and Transition Amherst for
example, did not prioritize harnessing the wisdom of the elders in its community, nor did it sustain any effort to engage young people.

I suggest that Therborn’s four dimensions of ideology might also be applied in the context of Transition as a way to explore what is working in a community, rather than what needs to be changed as a way for Transition to relate and integrate itself in a local context. For example, a recognition of the influences inclusive historical (tribe, ethnicity, nation, church) might help Transition initiatives to better align itself with the values already present in the community. A clear communication process that recognized the influence of the positional historical (members of a family in a structure and lineage of families, occupants of an educational status, incumbents of positions of political power, members of different classes) would create the space for participants to acknowledge the different power dimensions that will inevitably inform the operation of the initiative and to develop communication processes for nurturing a more fair and just group.

Therborn (1989) notes that ideological mobilizations can occur on the basis of three things: 1) A return to past values, 2) Mobilization by example—for example revolutions in one part of Africa might trigger revolution in another, and 3) Mobilization of anticipatory fear.

I argue that although the Transition movement has been quite strategic in coordinating an ideological mobilization, as noted earlier, the movement is itself one actor in a larger network of actors and factors that have made this historic moment possible. A closer analysis of Transition, suggests that it seeks to accomplish Therborn’s return to past values, through permaculture, by emphasizing the severe limitations and harm of our industrial resource use and the need to share skills and strengthen local
community support infrastructures that may have existed before the industrial era.
Perhaps it is ironic then, that it is technology in part that enables the Transition movement
to align itself with Therborn’s second ideological mobilization: mobilization by example.
Shared information, lessons learned, and other experiences can be accessed via the
various communication networks that Transition has developed so that others just starting
out can potentially learn from the example(s) of other initiatives undertaking similar
projects. Finally, and perhaps arguably the most complex and important of Therborn
ideological mobilizations: anticipatory fear. Transition participants have noted this as one
of the most significant mobilizing factors for people to become involved with the
movement. It is important to note that the Transition model does not intend to make
others afraid of the impending global crises, but rather offers a model for how to
effectively respond and begin to create a cultural shift necessary to build community
resiliency.

**Gramsci and the Transition Movement: Common Sense**

A post Marxist analysis of ideological mobilizations and processes of a cultural
shift in the context of the Transition movement must include Gramsci’s theory of
“common sense,” which describes ‘the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the
practical consciousness of the masses…is actually formed.’ (Hall, 2005, p 431)
Common sense, described by Gramsci, as the disjointed diffusion of uncoordinated
thought common to a particular period and environment, is what occurs in everyday lived
reality and are themselves material forces which need to be considered in the context of
achieving hegemony. This may also be compared to Therborn’s second notion of how
ideology qualifies its subjects by creating a sense of normalization.
The process of developing practices which articulate differences into a collective will allows different social groups to be effectively drawn together...and capable of intervening as a social force.” (Hall, 2005, p 96) This process of articulation—“a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases...but which requires particular conditions of experience to appear at all...” (p 113) is the process through which social relations are represented and reproduced, and through which new hegemonies are constructed and maintained.

I argue that the Transition movement is seeking to achieve a new hegemony as a necessary response to the limits of peak oil and the damage wrought by climate change and unsustainable financial systems. Gramsci argued that new hegemonies are won during times of contestation and crisis. (1971) When an alternative ideology is articulated in a way that resonates with a population not as necessarily a discursive strategic intervention, but rather as a rediscovery of what has always been, the ideology may come to be viewed as “common sense” and thus pave the way for a popular consent. This, according to Gramsci, is necessary for the maintenance of a hegemony since it can only be achieved through a process of reordering this very common sense along all lines of society. “Common sense is itself a structure of popular ideology, a spontaneous conception of the world, reflecting traces of previous systems of thought that have sedimented into everyday reasoning.” (Hall, 1988, p 55). According to Hall, popular morality is the most popular material-ideological force among the popular classes especially during times of social upheaval. Popular morality is a language which touches the direct and immediate experience of a group of people regardless of their education, training, or income and may be used as a lens through which one might see, interpret and
understand the complex social reality around him/her in clear unambiguous moral terms. Social movements have historically been able to tap into this morale. The Transition movement has been successful on this front, especially in communicating the importance of cultivating and/or remembering “intrinsic values: feeling connected to other people, working together, making positive change happen…” (p 75) that might be shared across class, race, age, and gender lines.

Hopkins suggests: “Cultural values lie along a spectrum from the intrinsic (the value placed on a sense of community, affiliation to friends and family, and self development) to the ‘extrinsic’ (values that are contingent on the perception of others and relate to envy of higher social strata, admiration of material wealth, or power)…Research shows that when people adopt a behavior change due to an intrinsic motivation they will pursue it longer.”

Yet the difficulty of mobilizing a cultural shift cannot be understated. Kowalski (2012, p 13) notes that “We surface as individuals who have been subjected to programming of which we are not particularly aware…and we are already set in ‘paths of least resistance’ (Fritz, 1994) framed by habits, cultural norms, and identity (individuality)...As Yolles (2004, pp. 737-738) noted: ‘Although people can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances, critical inquirers recognise that their ability to do so is constrained by various forms of social, cultural and political domination.’”

**How did it work for Transition Amherst: A local context**

This section of the chapter seeks to understand how the many levels of culture working within Transition Amherst informed the ideological network of the group. For
members of Transition Amherst, and arguably the larger “culture” of Amherst, the ideology connected to the Transition movement directly and/or indirectly informed the culture of the town long before the Transition movement began. Many members recognized this and did not necessarily perceive Transition Amherst as responsible for creating an ideological mobilization within the greater town, but rather saw their role in Transition Amherst as participating in a necessary response in the necessary and inevitable transition to community resilience. Yet the culture of the members played a vital role in the way in which the group interacted with each other and with the larger community. It is important to note that the majority of data for this section came from one-on-one interviews with members who were asked to reflect on the relationship between culture and Transition Amherst. There was never any public discussion or reflection on these personal ideas and feelings at meetings. I suggest that if there were, perhaps the group dynamics would have been less “business like” and members of the group would have had more positive feelings toward each other.

Cultures of Individuals in Transition Amherst

When I asked Jasmine Paul about her role in Transition Amherst she said the most important role she played was that of a host. Providing a home for people to meet was very important to her, and informed by a cultural value that was a part of her life growing up in Bogota, Colombia.

Jasmine Paul: Well honestly one role I play is just facilitating people coming together. I always have a sense that especially here in the States, people are always feeling kind of weird about hosting people in their house. You have to plan everything so carefully and people always feel uncomfortable if they’re like intruding in your house. There’s this cultural thing that I never grew up with. My parent’s house was the epicenter of the family in many ways and our house was always filled with people. It just never felt like it was a big deal to get people to come together and hang out. That’s something that to me is so easy to open up my
house and say: “Just come over. It’s not a big deal. It’s just life, that’s what happens, people come to your house, that’s the way it should be. (Interview, December, 19, 2012)

Jasmine noted several times that “the spirit of community” is key in South America anywhere you go, largely because extended families live near each other. She said the idea that you leave your parents when you go to university is not the cultural expectation in South America. (She went to a university in Bogota where she lived and lived with her parents.)

Jasmine: Part of it is certainly economics. Parents can’t afford to send their kids off to college elsewhere. I grew up with my cousins and my aunts and uncles… There’s no feeling of isolation. I always had somebody that I could talk to and I moved here and holy cow I was like: you do have to plan when you’re going to see your friends! Like if I call someone and I’m like hey what are guys doing for dinner do you want to come over? They say, “No. It’s too hard.” I still don’t understand. Why is it so hard? You just pick up and go. It’s not hard. There’s some barrier or something, I just don’t get it.

It is interesting to note the relationships between economics and culture. A culture of community and support emerged, in part, as a result of financial constraints that made it difficult for young adults to leave the place where they grew up. Thus the expectation that one would participate in and be responsible to his/her community was both a necessity and a cultural value. The Transition movement seeks to develop a similar community of support as a cultural value, but perhaps the irony is that such structures of support seem to historically emerge in the absence of monetary capital, and research suggests that the majority of participants in Transition have the financial resources to participate.

Hector Lasix drew comparisons to Jasmine when he talked about his life growing up in Hungary.
HL: When I came here I had a huge culture shock. It was just terrible to see neighbors getting into their car and not even look at me as they left their home or came home or whatever.

EP: It wasn’t like that when you were growing up?

HL: Oh no. Neighbors were very important because you couldn’t live a good life just alone in Hungary. Not too many things could be gotten for money but through the community there could be things. There were all of these little one-to-one services like my family had a peach orchard so we grew peaches in the housing block of flats maybe 200 apartments in that block of flats. We were known as the peach family, we always had peaches at peach season, baskets and baskets that we carried home from a garden that we had 17 km from Budapest where we lived. We would just sell it or many times just give it but even the selling was a token. We had our jobs but you didn’t have to work in order to make ends meat. Hungary had a really strong social support system. Communist, yes, but you also couldn’t fall out of the system.

EP: Do you prefer that system?

HL: Yes I really knew how to be Hungarian. I was good at communication. By age 24, I have gone to college. I remember thinking: Whoa I wrote this letter to a girl and I reread it later and thought: Wow I’m good! And I came here and I lost everything. I was the worst communicator. My English was quite broken. I didn’t know the culture. In Hungary I knew the culture, I felt like a king. (Interview, December 10, 2012)

With regard to Transition Amherst, however, Hector said his ability to navigate two cultures has had a positive impact on his capacity to bring more diverse ways of thinking to the group.

“Well, in Amherst we are very White of course. But Transition Amherst is not single-cultured. [Jasmine] and myself bring a little bit more to it. I feel like me talking Hungarian and English makes me a lot more privy to what’s going on because I can step out of the frame of the picture and look at the American society as a Hungarian. I can look at it now as an American but I don’t have to. It’s not my only choice. Carlos Castaneda talks greatly about having imprinted thinking patterns that are really hard to give up. So I feel like I have a little bit of something else that paints me a picture of “Hey this is not the only way. There is something else.” Maybe I don’t know what the something else is in full and maybe I’m not able to switch on command between those social systems and participation but I am able to know that there is something else out there and that’s very valuable. (Interview, December 10, 2012)
The topic of culture did not only extend to nationality. Jarod Paul, Jasmine’s husband spoke at length about the way the culture of his family relative to mainstream American culture, informed his actions and attitudes in Transition Amherst.

“In America, we have a culture of specialized experts. We can’t do it ourselves, we have to attend a class, we have to pay a professional. But I grew up in a household with a tool for everything. In part because my dad grew up in a hotel environment in the woods down in Florida. He learned all kinds of stuff because that was his playground. But also a big part of my elementary years was being a boy scout. Going to summer camp where I made my own bull whip. The whole merit badge thing: go and learn something. For me, skill sharing kind of satisfies and continues what I grew up culturally appreciating. We learned to become good at it, and I had the confidence to say alright I can learn something either by reading, watching or finding a mentor. (Interview, December 12, 2012)

Jasmine’s comments suggest that the ideology of Transition was easier for him to adopt because he already grew up, in part, with that ideology. His comments are also indicative of how he was able to emerge as a leader within Transition Amherst at significant moments during the course of the group’s work. Because he had lived experience with a similar culture, he was confident and familiar with the values and processes. This will be discussed further in the following chapters.

**Transition movement as a counter to western culture**

Many members of Transition Amherst said that the Transition movement provided a viable cultural alternative to mainstream western culture. Roger Reed suggested that the Transition movement might be effective in changing the culture by placing a greater emphasis on community over the nuclear family.

“I think everybody at some point in their life wants to have a sense of community which for most people means a sense of connection with one or more other people. But you know there’s just too much emphasis on the nuclear family in our culture. I mean it’s important to care for your family and provide for those who
your partially responsible for but it’s also important to look beyond that and
realize that community is a much bigger thing and I think that attitude and
awareness is growing—it’s a much bigger thing particularly over the last 30 to 40
years. (Interview, December 6, 2012)

According to Roger Reed, the Transition movement is effective in motivating
behavior change because it provides an alternative education that’s missing in our society
for how to participate in a more fulfilling sense of citizenship.

“This culture doesn’t teach us to prioritize. This culture teaches us to be good
workers so that we can serve the elite very well. That’s what schools are about.
They teach you math and that if you don’t do good enough you will be punished.
But it doesn’t teach you how to take full responsibility over your own life and
how to build community and how to be exemplary citizens. (Interview, December
6, 2012)

Jarod Paul suggested that the Transition movement is able to work toward a
cultural shift simply because it provides an alternative model for happiness outside of the
mainstream consumer culture.

“We [Americans] have a cultural idea of happiness which is naïve and simplistic.
I think happiness is probably something we need to keep practicing because it
needs renewal. Any happiness won’t last forever or long enough. But that also
means accepting or trying to learn to accept that you are not going to achieve
ubiquitous bliss all of the time which means leaving room and acceptance
culturally of pain and sadness. (Interview, December 12, 2012)

I asked Jarod if he thought Transition Amherst was successful in providing an
alternative model for a more sustainable happiness. I noted that there was a shared feeling
of longing for a greater, deeper sense of personal connection and happiness that was
communicated to me by all of the members of Transition Amherst, however, nobody
suggested that their participation in Transition Amherst provided them with it. His
answer seemed to suggest in part that Transition Amherst was unable to operate from
outside the confines of mainstream U.S. culture.
“I think it is more an issue with our American culture. I’ve traveled extensively in Central and South America with my wife and one of the first things you notice going to any party is that you’ve got 2-years-olds and 80-year-olds and they’re all dancing. You sort of only think about that in your own culture when you see something different. We have very age segregated parties often alcohol or sports-game centric—the kind of bread and circus of Roman times in a culture which is not as rich as others. I spent time in England and there’s the whole pub culture which is very different than our bar culture. It’s the communal living room. We don’t have some of these elements of community. Inventing a new culture of parties would be wonderful. (Interview, December 12, 2012)

Jarod again, reiterates the need and the desire, however, is unable to state if the Transition model in general and Transition Amherst in particular, has the capacity to be successful in creating this new culture. Hector suggested that Transition Amherst has the potential to facilitate such a cultural shift, not by providing a how-to model with specific steps for creating a culture of happiness, but rather by creating the space for dialogue about how to do it.

“I think Transition creates the environment so that those conversation can come up. By allowing people to know that they are not alone. I have concerns about how life is going. Other people have concerns and we know that about each other.” (Interview, December 10, 2012)

But is it enough to simply “create the space for dialogue?” When and in what instance do specific models for sustainable social change emerge that can be adapted by an initiative, especially when that initiative appears to be unwittingly subscribing to the cultural norms it is trying to shift? Furthermore, who is responsible for pointing this out when many of the members have expressed the practical desire to “plan and organize” events and actions, and do not want spend valuable time “talking about the group process.”

Jasmine said the ideal of the Transition model is to make you feel more comfortable with your neighbors so that structures of support are enabled and this is
accomplished through engaging in projects with them, doing potlucks, etc. However, she noted that many members of Transition Amherst did not reach this level of comfort with each other.

“We really did not do a lot of socializing and it’s a shame because I really do like all of these people. You know I wish we had a chance to do that a little more but again it comes back to that difficulty of well, it’s like when I was saying let’s do the potluck and start earlier and we’ll hang out and eat and it was nice the few times that we did it but then people were starting to get worried about the potluck because they couldn’t make it or they had to bring something or they were bringing something they didn’t consider was good enough. So there’s still this cultural barrier and people didn’t make it.” (Interview, December 19, 2012)

Jasmine also noted that the issue of time was very important. Many people felt pressed to “work” because of the amount they wanted to accomplish relative to the short time of the meeting. This issue of time as a finite resource was expressed as a common theme throughout this project. Everybody spoke about the limited amount of time they had and the business-like meetings that were focused largely on getting through a heavy agenda, suggest that the majority of people thought that the labor of working on practical Transition projects should be prioritized over the labor of “getting to know one another.” The connection between the two as a practical way of practicing a micro version of the culture they were seeking to create was never communicated during the meetings.

In our interview, Jasmine discussed why she prioritized work during the meetings.

JP: The main barrier is the time issue. I feel it a lot in my own personal life. I would love to have more parties and I would love to have more opportunities to hang out with people but I am so busy working all day and coming home and trying to whip up a meal in 15 minutes and it’s different. My mom was a stay at home mom so she would cook and she would always have something delicious ready…

EP: When we think about the resources that go into creating a transition time is the biggest one.
JP: The way that I viewed it was that we were in this very work-mindset of like we need to do this work in order to make this reality happen in the future. Transition Amherst was more like okay we know what our community needs and we are going to figure out how to build the support to help our community get there and it wasn’t necessarily our community of those who were sitting there. And because the opportunities to work were so few I mean we really did need to get stuff done when we were meeting, it was very goal-oriented.

EP: But in your culture, these structures of support emerged organically out of economic and social necessity.

JP: Yes. Your great grandparents and [Jarod’s] lived in a totally different cultural mode. They knew all their neighbors; it was their business to know. Everybody needed to know what you got, what you need, how are your crops this year. Survival depended on it. Transition is a new model that’s going back to that and we’re adapting it to our modern circumstances. So if my kids are gonna grow up with that, it will be a part of their life if my neighbors do the same thing then it will be a part of their life and that’s the way we’ll do it. The idea is to break the pattern and teach this generation a better way of doing it. (Interview, December 19, 2012)

It is interesting to note that Jasmine’s desire to break the pattern did not necessarily extend to the Transition Amherst meetings themselves, but rather to the end result and/or consequences of the work of Transition. This attitude signifies a notable disjunct between the processes of achieving a cultural shift. Can the behavior of a society change if the people advocating the change are themselves reinscribing traditional work structures by not necessarily building and nurturing their own micro-community?

The answer(s) are complex and contextual. For example, Kat Boggs suggested that it is indeed through the participation in the projects themselves where community is built and the culture shifted, and not necessarily through general socializing at the biweekly meetings. Kat shared a similar interpretation to Jasmine’s regarding the work-first orientation and mission of the group and this idea was informed in part by the culture
in which she was raised: one in which the expectation and priority of her life, as a wife, mother, and practicing Christian, would be one of service.

KB: And that’s the problem. A lot of us women have been trained like that. Remember the Brownie Scout oath: Be useful and serve others? I mean that’s been central to my upbringing.

EP: Is it not possible that these spaces and places where you are being of service can also nurture and give back to you? Perhaps allowing that will aid in a cultural shift?

KB: I mean I did enjoy some conversations with some people. But there wasn’t a lot of room to develop that. Partly because of our action-orientation of the overall group and my own action-orientation. (Interview, January 17, 2013)

I asked Kat if she was implying that building relationships was akin to “not taking action,” or rather a distraction from the necessity to act with practical Transition-oriented projects. For example, did she perceive the evening we spent in November sharing our personal experiences with the power outage wrought by a hurricane as unproductive compared to the evening we spent organizing the schedule for the Great Unleashing? She responded:

“No, I do like to build relationships. But that wasn’t my focus for being there. I guess because my life has many relationships in it. It’s not that there’s not room for more and I do feel like a lot of the people I’ve gotten to know are people I’d like to continue building relationships with but for me doing things with people IS a way to develop those relationships.” (Interview, January 17, 2013)

Both Kat and Jasmine’s comments are indicative of the many different ideas that people in Transition Amherst had about how to build and nurture community and the effect this would have on shifting the culture. Transition model offers guidelines for how to run a successful meeting, but does not emphasize that the meetings themselves should be a microcosm for the cultural shift one wants to see.
Activists, scholars, and participants have suggested that the Transition movement is indeed trying to create a global culture of shared values even as it purports to maintain a grassroots participatory approach centered on the local needs of each community.

During the trailer for the In Transition 2.0 documentary for example, the narrative across the screen reads (with dramatic music): “A true story of a global community coming together in extraordinary times and in extraordinary ways.” The overarching permaculture values can inform and challenge previously taken-for-granted choices and actions of a local community, indeed globalizing an ethos of resiliency.

According to Sarah Lyme, a US Transition trainer, this global cultural shift is directly tied to a human being’s biological imperative to collaborate and work in community.

“So part of what people recognize is that it’s our biology. It’s part of what we’ve longed for. Security, comfort, friendship. All of the societies prior to agriculture 10,000 years ago were much more egalitarian. You get the hierarchies with food surpluses. You develop war-making capacities and you need to control land when you are trying to use irrigation methodologies to grow crops. Whereas when it was hunter gatherer there’s more of a fluid dynamic between tribes. Our 7 million years of hardwiring as community-focused egalitarian cooperative empathetic indigenous people living in our ecosystems is how we want to be and that the Transition model is the closest to that then anything else I’ve ever worked with.” (Interview, January 3, 2013)

Sarah noted that in her experience as a Transition trainer, the culture of each community presents its own strengths and challenges with helping people to live in alignment with their biology.

“Transition has all of the values and all of the infrastructure to make it easy. It has all the principles but every place is different…Like the New Zealanders they get collaboration much better then we do so they’ve been able to rock and roll but
they have other challenges. If you take the values—inclusion, equality, local living and positive engaging, every society is going to have different strengths. Every part of the US has different strengths. When I go to Canada I have to change how I do the training. When I’m in French Canada I have to be very conscious of the French Canadian feeling of being excluded from or not fully seen by the Anglo Canadians. I have to be very careful—their government is working much more closely with their communities and a lot of nonprofit groups and governmental groups pride themselves on being at the forefront of this. It works best if I make a few American jokes…jokes about how we Americans are kind of crazy and not quite as organized and respectful and considerate sometimes. They really appreciate that. Even here in the US, if I go to Ohio its very different to train than in West Chester, New York.” (Interview, January 3, 2013)

It is important to note that when considering how a global model for social change is adopted locally, the trainer plays a fundamental role in this actor network. He/she is responsible for communicating the values of the model while also understanding the specific culture of the community. Thus he/she can help negotiate the cultural terrain over which the model can best be adapted. He/she takes on a particular kind of leadership role, as both the voice of the global movement and as the vessel through which it may be translated locally. From a development perspective, this person performs the role of an advocate, combining both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Several members of Transition Amherst, however, expressed confusion and some resistance around this process, taking into account the origins of Transition and the lack of communication around what and how it has borrowed from older, indigenous models of community resiliency.

Fiona Nims: My critique was always that it did start in England, among this colonizing power, and all of a sudden we’re adopting this model? What does that mean not that their pushing the model, but this is what they really think is going to save their towns? Something about that feels ironic. (Interview, November 8, 2012)
Although Fiona acknowledged that the Transition model is not trying to “push the model” on the world, it is worth noting the culture from which it first originated. I suggest that although it was indeed developed by Rob Hopkins, a White Western educated male, it adopts, builds, upon and reframes indigenous principles and values as it aims to provide a viable and sustainable alternative to western culture. One weakness in the model may be in its failure to communicate the extent to which it borrows from older, more earth-centered models for social change, and the extent to which the Transition model was able to achieve its popularity largely because of the privileged voices of its leaders. (IE: It builds upon and taps into previous environmental movements led largely by White, upper class people.) This will be discussed more in later chapters.

Conclusion

The Transition model builds upon Post Marxist theories for achieving sustainable social change as it seeks an ideological mobilization for communities towards greater sustainability, resiliency and happiness by placing an emphasis on the actions of community members with the possibility of intervention in the form of agency as something not necessarily guaranteed, but rather made possible by the notion that culture, class, and the structures that are a part of them are not fixed, even though they have certainly informed them.

In this chapter, I have argued that the Transition model taps into this agency at a historical moment by taking a local cultural approach to environmental problems. Communities must work together based on their own needs to shift the values in order to create sustainable solutions to the problems of peak oil and climate change.
Unfortunately, in local practice the theories do not always translate successfully. Although our cultural behaviors, and values are not fixed and are subject to change, many members of Transition Amherst seemed to continue to subscribe to the traditional culture they were trying to shift, not so much in what was said, but in what was left unsaid. For example, many members lamented that the group, while working on creating a cultural shift for the larger community that involved greater support, and a deeper awareness of each neighbor’s needs, did not have a stronger social connection with one another nor was an emphasis placed on community building within Transition Amherst, even though it was a shared value expressed for the larger community.

There were many reasons for this. Considering agency from a social theory perspective, Kowalski, (2012, p 10) quoting Stacey and Griffin (2005, p. 16.) notes that: “A social object … does not exist as a thing (physical object) but as a generalized tendency on the part of large numbers of people to act in similar ways in similar situations. There is social structure, but it is a property of a series of human acts. It is not an entity.” Thus an agent is momentarily able to act in ways that maintain the social structures or that call their existence into question, but then has been and is subject to the influence of those very social structures. (p 13) Transition Amherst was able to act as one agent that called into question certain social structures, but was unable to entirely circumvent the influence of them.

The second reason is a lack of communication from the Transition model around how to conduct meetings that are a microcosm of the community one seeks to create. The model states that “meetings be fun and feel more like a party.” But as Kat suggested, it is sometimes difficult to negotiate the fun part with the getting things done part. Finding
that balance was difficult for Transition Amherst as it tended to lean toward the latter at the expense of the former. More specific guidelines might help support members in the initiative.

The third reason is as Jasmine suggested, people had a difficult time shifting their own cultural sensibilities even as they expressed a longing for greater connection. The idea of potlucks and other social gatherings, although met with a positive reaction, were not a priority for the group. The value was placed on creating the infrastructures for the larger community so that when the initiating group disbanded, the working groups would be able to continue on in a more focused, sustainable way—an emphasis that many members said they took directly from the model. Finally, while members expressed satisfaction with the friendships that developed between members while working on projects, there was never a sense that this was a priority, as the focus was on the projects themselves—reskilling workshops, movie nights, and community events, etc.

A central question for this study has been: How effectively can a local group adapting a global model for social change participate in an ideological mobilization when the town has already in part, adopted the ideology and when the group working on it doesn’t necessarily adhere to the values it is trying to propagate? I concur with Hector, and suggest that the greatest value of such an initiative is ultimately in its capacity to create the space for continued dialogue with and between members and the other actors in related networks. The network of the initiating group will inevitably dissolve as new ones form to continue the work toward resiliency.

Finally, I suggest Transition will always be vulnerable to critiques of colonialism in its effort to create a globalizing (perma)culture of shared values so long as it does not
communicate effectively the extent to which it has borrowed and reframed older indigenous values to aid in living more harmoniously and sustainably with the earth. One way the model might communicate this better is through its diverse trainers, who are largely responsible for translating the model to a local, cultural context.
CHAPTER 9

ARE TRANSITION TOWNS SUSTAINABLE?

The Transition movement as a framework for achieving positive social change has great appeal to many people, however, this study seeks to explore the extent to which a Transition initiative is sustainable long-term within a community and the factors that contribute to or challenge its viability. It is particularly important to note that all of the chapters in this dissertation are deeply connected to and inform the complex answers to the question of the movement’s sustainability, particularly the previous three: The appeal of the movement and its ability to attract a wide range of members (and keep them involved); the perception of the initiative’s impact and capacity to create community resiliency; and the many different layers of culture that inform both the town and the group members, which in turn effect how the members organize their time, communicate with each other and work through tensions and disagreements. All of this will be discussed further in the context of the Transition movement’s sustainability globally and locally.

Many members of Transition Amherst expressed a feeling of “burn-out” with Transition during the weeks leading up to and after the Great Unleashing event. As noted earlier, the model suggests that the initiating group will ultimately disband as Transition working groups take over with a focus on more specific projects for the community. At the time of this writing, Transition Amherst’s initiating group had disbanded and a new Transition group called “The Working Council of Transition Amherst” continues to meet every other Thursday. Roger Reed, Hector Lasix, and Dr. Pete are the only original
members of the Transition Amherst initiating group who continue to meet regularly with the Working Council. This suggests that while the original network may have evolved, at the time of this writing, a core group of actors has managed to sustain it.

As noted earlier, a significant limit to this project is the inability to measure the long-term sustainability of a Transition initiative in a movement that is only seven years old, however, it is important to note that the foundation of the Transition model rests on its viability long-term. Many factors will and do contribute to the sustainability of a successful initiative and each factor is dependent upon and relative to the specific circumstances of the town. The structure of the model presents its own challenges for analyzing the potential for sustainability since the initiating group is eventually supposed to disband into working groups regardless of whether the group has lost its momentum. For this reason, an analysis of the sustainability of the Transition movement in Amherst will incorporate all activities branded as “Transition” activities.

One of the most pressing issues articulated by members of Transition Amherst was the notion of “burn-out.” This was also a central theme of a month-long online dialogue in December of 2012 on the Transition US listserv between 18 Transition initiatives around the United States.

The Transition model does acknowledge that member burn-out is a significant risk and does offer several general tips for how groups might sustain their momentum. Some of the following were discussed in the previous chapters. According to the *Transition Companion* (p 172), initiatives can get stuck because they don’t plan for succession, (who will be coordinating the activity in two years time?); members feel that the same faces are always appearing at events and there are no new participants;
unaddressed problems between members of the group: anger, disappointment, frustration cause energy to be directed to suppressing feelings rather than working through them; members feel that there is too much “processing” and not enough “doing”; and finally funding to support the continued development of projects is low.

I suggest that with the exception of the latter, Transition Amherst suffered from all of the above-mentioned problems and each of the problems were directly related to and informed by each other. The Transition model suggests several brief and general anecdotes that Transition initiatives might enact: More people should be invited in and asked to take responsibility for the work with an eye directed toward the future; give as many people as possible the opportunity to present at a wide range of events; create space for meetings which focus solely on “How are we doing?”; build on the passions of the group; and finally design some high profile and practical initiatives to build morale while understanding that all projects ebb and flow, with some areas more active than others. (p 173).

The suggestions read as very practical solutions to the problem of sustaining momentum and avoiding burn-out, however, none of them take into consideration the obstacle that all members of Transition Amherst have expressed as a defining deterrent to the group’s progress: The limited amount of time that each member had to participate and the limited amount of time available at a bimonthly meeting to make decisions and coordinate sustainable activities. Tensions arose and momentum declined when members wanted to discuss “how the group was doing” and other members argued that there simply was no time given the projects and goals that the group sought to accomplish, particularly with regard to the Great Unleashing. This will be discussed further in the
“Group Meeting Structure” section of this chapter.

The question of burn-out

The first part of this chapter will explore data from the online dialogue between 18 initiatives across the United States regarding the sustainability of their initiative and use it for a comparative analysis with data from Transition Amherst. Similar themes emerged between all of the initiatives, and all were related to how the initiatives handled leadership, organizational structure, (including the capacity to fundraise and conduct successful meetings,) and the ability for the group to communicate effectively with other groups doing similar work. The second part of this chapter will take a closer look at the organization and structure of Transition Amherst meetings, the role of leadership (or lack thereof), and the role of the former or latter in building and/or constraining the foundation of a sustainable, long-term Transition initiative. My aim in this section is to further analyze the specific experience(s) that contribute to a feeling of “burn-out” for members of Transition Amherst.

During the month of December 2012, 18 transition groups from all over the United States engaged in an online conversation about how to negotiate potential burn-out and the viability of their Transition movements in their areas.

The conversation was started by a member of Transition Santa Cruz who noted:

“Our Transition Initiative began in 2008, and went on fairly strongly in 2009 and 2010, before beginning a gradual decline in activity in the last couple of years. To some degree this mirrors my own energy for the project. I have been the person who has most consistently taken leadership in keeping Transition Santa Cruz going, and as I began to burn out, we have not found a replacement person to take that on. We still have a steering group of 7 people, 2 of whom are fairly new. We all really enjoy meeting every month. But the group is struggling to find direction, and there is not much activity. Has your TI peaked? Has it had a comeback? If so, how did that happen? Although every TI is different, I would love to hear some stories that might be instructive in some way.”
The responses ranged from numerous expressions of commiseration and solidarity to advice and suggestions, although many people shared a similar sense of “burn-out.” They reflect the relatively situated social, cultural, and environmental context of each initiative; suggest the shared difficulty in keeping the initiatives active over a long period of time, and reveal the rhizomatic capacity for the movement to function as an umbrella that can facilitate connection and learning between groups who identify with and participate in the Transition movement.

**On Leadership**

Allen from Transition Pittsburg emphasized the need for leadership and technology training as crucial tools for developing the capacity to effectively communicate the message of Transition and to sustaining the group’s presence in the town.

“For starting out, or (harder) restarting a group, you need someone with a clear vision of what the group's role in the community will be, and some idea of how to get there. These people are hard to find, and generally overcommitted to begin with. But someone needs to *push* from the center - climate change and peak oil are uphill responses…Internal education is great, external presence is better. Groups need a critical mass to keep going - and assuming that roughly 5% of general 'members' (however we define that) will become leaders, with 10% leading a project or group, there's a critical mass of 50-100 people needed to sustain leadership transitions. That mass is hard to keep with just educational events…We all need leadership training. And by 'we all', I mean us young folks, folks that have never led a group, people that have forgotten what they once knew, and most of the community members I meet. Leading meetings effectively is hard. Planning projects is hard. Using technology effectively is hard. But without these things, we will not be effective.”

Vera from Transition Whidbey, Washington expressed similar ideas to Allen in addition to disappointment with the difficulty her group was having in its effort to stay active. She too, indicated that it was an issue with leadership.
“I was one of the initiating group for Transition Whidbey back in 2007 and we were going strong and growing for a few years with strong commitment to community organizing for resilience, then there was a leadership slump and the $ we'd raised…ran out and the new volunteer group that soldiered on kept the home fires burning but dimmer. Now it seems there's a core of a dozen or two. Our heartbeat - the Potlucks with a Purpose - continue, but anything…systematic, inclusive, all facets covered - is not happening… I agree on the points made: strong servant leadership (able to focus, mobilize, reflect the community, support new leaders, keep the big picture in mind), group facilitation training a la what Starhawk offers, projects and programs - visible and recognized as useful and effective programs that actually build resilience…the scope of what we are doing - preparing for a low energy future with climate and economic disruptions - isn't do-able without consistent and skilled leadership.”

The question of effective leadership was one of the fundamental determinants in the context of sustainability for Transition Amherst and rarely discussed openly among group members, with the exception of nominating somebody to be the next meeting’s facilitator. The facilitator was responsible for assuming a leadership role at the meeting, however, there was nobody(s) to hold others accountable to or make responsible for fulfilling their commitments to the group long-term. It was generally assumed that people who came to the meeting with ideas for projects and events would lead the organization and development of them.

The Transition model very rarely uses the term “leadership” in any of its communication materials online or offline. Transition US offers a “Governance Toolbox” which includes tips for effective facilitation including helping the group to define its goals and objectives, assess its needs and create plans to meet them, provide processes that help members use their time efficiently, guide discussions, and support group members in feeling heard. The toolbox does not explain, however, how a facilitator can do the above, and/or how to negotiate the challenges that arise when the above does not happen. *The Transition Companion* (2011), the most recent book published by the
Transition Network, does use the word “leadership” once in the entire book when referring to the role of community volunteers. A section titled “Leadership and Communication” reads: “Volunteers need to know who they can go to for advice and support. They must be able to communicate easily within whoever is supporting them.” (p 151)

George Heart, professor of sustainable food and farming at the University of Massachusetts and a former member of Transition Amherst said that any group’s sustainability depends upon its ability to build capacity which requires a kind of facilitation that he did not see with Transition Amherst.

GH: Facilitation comes from the Latin word to make things easy. Which means you do things for people but then you create a structure that they can participate in. So they can celebrate themselves but not make their lives more difficult. So when we start a group we create group norms. We don’t call them “group norms.” Because that becomes really awkward. But we say how are we going to work together? What are the rules around here? How are we going to be together? Well we’re going to come on time, we’re gonna answer our emails, we’re gonna do what we say we’re gonna do. We say it right up front. And I’m gonna be the obnoxious time keeper and I’m gonna badger you until you get your job done. Group norms: We show up when we say we are. That never happened in my experience with Transition Amherst. It just wasn’t happening.

EP: And it’s the facilitator’s responsibility to set those norms?

GH: To create the conversation to make it happen and then we all buy in or don’t buy in. I’m really good at to do lists. I publish them and say by the way you said you were going to do this thing. Have you done it? That’s the facilitator’s job. Being obnoxious. One of the norms is to ask for help if you can’t get something done. Not to hide in shame, or not show up any more, or deny that you ever agreed to it, but to ask for help. Most of us don’t have examples of this being done well in our lives. Most of us have hierarchical systems where an aging white male vertebrate comes and saves the day every time. (Laughter.) So you need good facilitation. (Interview, February 6, 2013)
I suggest that George Heart is substituting the word leadership for facilitator but that the roles are the same. His comments offer a good example of the responsibilities of an effective leader: somebody who facilitates the process of figuring out group norms and then holding others accountable for their actions. George also noted that groups do not need one specific leader; they can share the facilitatorship so long as everybody knows how to do it effectively (which requires training and experience) and that everybody takes responsibility for holding each other to task.

I suggest that what George is calling “group norms” eventually become “cultural norms” for the group: A co-created social way of “being together.” Thus a connection can be made between strong leadership and a healthy culture (explored in the previous chapter) that is able to nurture the long-term viability of a group. I also concur with George, that Transition Amherst was never quite able to create this culture, and one of the reasons was a lack of clear, strong leadership.

Cindy noted that in the absence of effective, democratic leadership, the stronger personalities in the group were the ones who ended up dominating the meetings and the decision-making process. For example, she noted that although Sarah Lyme did not regularly attend meetings, when she was present, she assumed an authoritative role (leveraging her experience as a national Transition trainer) that other members, including myself, sometimes found disruptive.

For example, at a meeting that I was facilitating in August devoted almost entirely to planning the schedule of the Great Unleashing, it was agreed that we should make the day five hours instead of the originally-planned eight hours. I volunteered to take the schedule home and “edit” it so that the events might fit into the smaller time frame. I
promised to share my suggestions over email so that we could collectively discuss the changes at the next meeting. Sarah, who had not been at a Transition meeting for over a month, argued strongly against my suggestion. She said, “This is not about ‘editing’,” that we were not following a Transition-supported consensus-based process, and that everybody in the group should have a part in deciding the schedule, “not just Emily.” (Note: everybody did have a part in deciding the schedule, she was absent from the meetings where this occurred.) Almost all of the other members of the group supported my offer and I did end up “editing” the schedule and then returning it to the group for a collective discussion. However, my feelings were hurt, and I felt that Sarah used her authority within the global movement to trump my own capacity to lead the meeting effectively. I did not have the authority that Sarah did, and tensions in the group over decision-making processes were exacerbated. Ironically, Sarah was assuming a leadership role to argue against the possibility of another “leader” volunteering to take on a task that she felt should be collective. Cindy said:

“I think the lack of safety and trust in the group preceded [Sarah’s] arrival and then with her arrival people who didn’t have a voice had an even harder time having one. It’s all about leadership. When you have groups of people meeting together whether they’re planning a movie, planting a garden or inviting 1000 people to an event someone is going to take charge. How are people reacting to them?” (Interview, December 13, 2012)

In the absence of a clearly-defined leader, several other members of Transition Amherst were vested with authority and did take on more dominant roles within the group. Jarod Paul for example, elected not to participate in many of the planning meetings for the Great Unleashing, however, the group decided that he and Sarah should be the ones to host the entire event.
Jarod attributed his unsolicited and inconsistent leadership role within Transition Amherst to his generally “blindly overconfident personality,” that he says he owes to a “luxury of resources” and an upbringing where failures were welcomed as learning opportunities. He also noted that his leadership role was due to a convergence of factors, one of which was simply that others did not want to do the tasks and were happy to have Jarod take them on. Jarod did note, however, that he made a conscious decision to step back from Transition Amherst during the summer of 2012, largely because he felt dissatisfied with the group’s dynamics. I asked Jarod how he managed to become a person with a large amount of authority within Transition Amherst and why he eventually decided to step back from the group meetings. He said:

“I’m effective in many things when I decide to be. As discussions happened I was like ‘Oh sure I can do that’ or ‘That’s easy you do this and this or ‘I already did that in New Haven’ so people said, ‘Oh he knows what he’s doing let’s listen to him. I can convey my blind over-enthusiasm or confidence to get things done and I am a good listener. The downside of that is I can take on a lot of responsibility to do much more of the work that ultimately I think should be shared or I want to start it but not run it for my whole life. Maybe it’s because others aren’t willing to step up and help me or I’m not good at finding help or asking. Part of the Transition model to me is working together and finding more people to do it. So I don’t want to practice Transition where I have to lead everybody. I just thought if this is gonna work I need to pull back and let others rise to the vacancy.”

(Interview December 12, 2012)

It is important to note that Jarod’s decision to “step back” was never openly communicated to the group. People expressed confusion over his absence at meetings, yet still regarded him in a leadership capacity, which suggests perhaps that leadership is a mindset as much as a material role within a group. This inevitably added to the tension, however, and detracted from the group’s momentum: 1) Because it emphasized the lack of and necessity for stable, dependable leadership, and the need to establish group
processes around the structure of Transition Amherst and 2) Because people felt they were not being heard and Jarod had all the power. Kevin Smart said:

“I don’t think we were really functioning. We had an oligarchy aided and abetted by others and then you had some of us trying to express the conscious of the group and we were never really heard.” (Interview, November 27, 2012)

Roger Reed, concurred with both Cindy and Kevin that it was the strongest voices that eventually held sway, however, he suggested that the absence of effective leadership was directly tied to the group’s capacity to communicate with each other and resolve conflict.

“The way I’ve seen it happen more often than not in the Transition group is that there’s disagreement to the point where if a decision isn’t made everything’s going to fall apart. I think to a certain degree that’s what happened with the organizing of the Oct. 13th event. There was so much unending discussion and lack of making decisions that we got down to the last two to three weeks and eventually one or two people started making strong suggestions as to what should happen. At that point it was the strongest voices, strongest egos that held sway on how decisions were made. They were sort of accepted by everybody else but I don’t really feel that we had come to a consensus necessarily so that everybody was fully on board.” (Interview, December 6, 2012)

Roger Reed noted that this became apparent when a couple of members withdrew their participation in the weeks leading up to the Great Unleashing.

“They sort of dropped out which is unfortunate. It just takes time and education. The whole process we went through in order to get to the event on October 13th I thought worked amazingly well on the ground when we actually had the day. But the process was very cumbersome and took far too long to organize.” (Interview, December 6, 2012)

Roger Reed’s comment is significant for several reasons, namely for the contradiction with regard to time. He, along with many others acknowledge the amount of time it takes to establish and apply processes of consensus that result in everybody feeling heard and participating fully in decisions, however, he, along with many other
members also expressed frustration and disappointment with the amount of time it took for Transition Amherst to make any decision. This marked tension—between the general frustration with the process “taking too long” and the general acknowledgment that more time was needed to apply it effectively added to the confusion and general unease of the group, even as everybody agreed that there was a limited amount of time during the bimonthly meetings to accomplish all of the goals set forth for the meeting. Without an effective leader to negotiate either the limited amount of time and/or the tensions the group began to lose its cohesiveness, and pull apart.

It is evident that Transition Amherst struggled with building and sustaining strong leadership, largely because there was very little to no communication around the processes of determining who and what creates effective leadership. I suggest that George Heart’s description of strong facilitation is directly tied to leadership and argue that effective leadership is a process of holding somebody accountable to and responsible for their actions, and creating the space to guide sustainable group norms. Transition Amherst lacked a consistent person to do this. The lack of communication around leadership and its absence from the group created tensions, disrupted the momentum, and presented a challenge to the long-term sustainability of Transition Amherst.

**On communicating with other local groups: determining if Transition is necessary**

Before analyzing the contexts and factors that might contribute to the sustainability of the Transition movement in a town, it is important to consider two issues. First: In what ways a Transition initiative is relevant to the community, especially in a town that has already established community-run groups that work on Transition related activities, and second: how might the role of a local Transition initiative be
modified from the model to better fill in gaps and/or make connections between groups who might already be doing similar work? During the time of this research, Transition Amherst never discussed these issues as a collective group, although they considered them privately and in one-on-one interviews, but in fact, as noted with the planning and coordination of the Great Unleashing, the group worked very hard to apply the global model to the community of Amherst. Other Transition groups, however, did consider these questions in the context of the sustainability of their local group.

Lisa, a member of Transition Lancaster, noted that while her Transition group stopped as an entity, individual members remained active in a number of Transition-related activities including “supporting local food, local energy, and strengthening their local business network.” She suggested that “This seems to be a common evolution described by others” in her summary of the dialogue between 18 Transition initiatives. Leada noted that based on the dialogue, “Transition may be complementary to other solutions, and not THE solution… Maybe Transition is about initiating through connecting with groups, organizations and power structures, opening their views and helping change directions by giving a new way of thinking and working together.”

Lisa also noted that several members of other initiatives suggested that sometimes there is no value in starting a Transition group since a lot is “already happening and organizations are already well connected and playing well together.”

Fiona Nims said that she sometimes questioned the relevance of Transition in Amherst, where there was already so much environmentally-focused activity.

“I was wondering is Transition Amherst even necessary? It almost felt like were redundant because there’s a lot going on already…” (Interview, November 8, 2012)
This is an important question to consider in order to avoid duplicating efforts in the town, unintentionally competing with other groups, and to better understand and communicate the unique contribution that a Transition initiative might make. I argue that had Transition Amherst set aside the time to discuss and determine its relevance, it might have been more focused on setting explicit goals, communicating more effectively with other groups, and working to fill in the gaps of sustainability activity in the town.

**The impact of the action vs. process debate on the sustainability of Transition Amherst**

As noted earlier, Transition Amherst held a diverse range of appeals for its members. Each member had different goals and different visions and different skills and resources to contribute. In the absence of effective leadership to organize and funnel the energy to appropriate channels, several members became increasingly dissatisfied with the lack of strategy and group process within Transition Amherst. For example, despite the efforts of some members to establish a protocol with decision-making processes for the group, there was never any formalized agreement. Questions often arose over which events Transition might co-sponsor in the community, which causes Transition Amherst might support financially, and who might speak for the group to various media outlets to promote Transition activities. Such decisions often involved long and arduous discussions, largely because there was never any agreed-upon process for how such decisions would be made. Tensions arose between those who wanted to devote more time to developing the latter and members who wanted to devote the majority of the meeting time to organizing practical projects with and for the community. The root of these tensions were never communicated during the meetings and were a contributing factor in challenging the sustainability of Transition Amherst. Cindy said:
“I think the integrity and the intention behind those meetings was really deep and admirable. I guess I’m left feeling like along the way there were people who’s feelings were hurt in that group and who didn’t feel heard and never had the chance to be heard. I don’t feel settled about it. I feel like we all came together with really good intention and in the end I think people left feeling a little hurt and not really heard so that feels unresolved to me.” (Interview, December 13, 2012)

Kevin Smart said one reason he joined Transition Amherst was to help the group to develop strategic processes around decision making and strategizing for long-term projects.

“We had just formed so that I had certain visions of myself and certain values that were important to me and at that point there was enough space for me to express those and for me not to sort of freeze up and lose my voice. I wanted us to set some visions and goals and kind of adjust our participation to those visions and goals and I want there to be some inclusion where everybody would be welcomed in some way. I wanted there to be some discipline, to follow some type of format.” (Interview, November 27, 2012)

Portions of several meetings over the course of my research were devoted to developing group processes, specifically around developing a consistent strategy for event sponsorships and expected outcomes from the Great Unleashing. Unfortunately no consistent strategy was ever agreed upon, and with numerous other items on each meeting’s agenda, the time to discuss group process was often cut short. Kevin said he became frustrated when he felt he wasn’t being heard and “acted out” in “aggressive” ways including sending an angry email to the group that expressed his dissatisfaction, particularly with the lack of email responses around supporting the cosponsorship of a regional Transition film festival. Kevin said the root of his anger came from not feeling heard and the group not prioritizing the space for listening.

“There was never any hearing. In other words if I did something—if I acted out which I did a number of times, provocative and possibly aggressive ways… I was
pathologized. Nobody really heard anybody. So what would it take? It would take the beginning of some hearing. You teach them to hear by having the space to listen. By having the space within yourself. You need some commitment by the group to create that space. It was a freight train going faster than the speed of sound. So the group conspired against itself to create no space for listening and my judgment is the oligarchs wanted to run it and I didn’t have the space within myself to listen with compassion and nonjudgment.” (Interview, November 27, 2012)

I suggest that Kevin’s frustration was exacerbated by two key issues. 1) With two bimonthly two hour meetings, there simply wasn’t the time to develop the group strategies and processes that Kevin wanted to see, and still have time for all of the other items on the agenda. 2) Once a date for the Great Unleashing was selected, a greater sense of organizing and planning urgency began to fuel the group. Many members began to associate communication around internal group processes with a general failure to act externally and a particular failure to use the time to plan a huge event. In other words, if the group spent all its time talking about itself, where was the time to organize the Great Unleashing, plan events, coordinate activities, and develop workshops to help make the community more resilient? Kevin, however, argued that the group would not be sustainable if it did not first develop group processes for how it would function.

“You know I spent a lot of time studying process. The Transition website has a sort of preliminary process handbook in it but that handbook is kind of like a recipe for how to cook something. It doesn’t address: “Are people motivated to cook it and how are they going to behave with each other when they follow the recipe? What values will they subscribe to? So it skips over I think the most important point. So I’m saying in our experience and I’m guessing others experiences—the resources, the commitment, the awareness, the consciousness that I think is involved—the inclusion in democratic processes is just not there.” (Interview, November 27, 2012)

As long as the act of talking about group processes was not defined as practical action, the aversion to process became the dominant ethos of the group, and Kevin was effectively silenced. The social construction of “process” was defined by many members
of the group as “being told what and how to do something” and several Transition Amherst members openly resisted it. Although George Heart had stopped attending meetings by the time this research began, he articulated what many action-oriented Transition members perceived about the group’s process vs. action quagmire. According to George, too much processing felt like “being lectured to.”

GH: That’s what killed for me my interest in Transition Amherst.

EP: Because you felt like you were being lectured to?

GH: Constantly. About the theory of social change and about how things had to be. When we get together with Grow Food Amherst and somebody has an idea we say “Let’s go for it! Have you thought about this and thought about this?” With Transition Amherst somebody has an idea and then we get told how to do it. I’m totally disempowered. No longer interested. Because there’s a template for thou shalt behave and I don’t want to behave that way! Most people don’t come to talk about theory. People want to come to work, to do things that are fun with their neighbors!” (Interview, February 6, 2013)

With regard to the sustainability of Transition Amherst, members’ dissatisfaction threatened the momentum of the group, however, the consequences of not having any established group processes, also directly threatened the viability of the group. Several members expressed a general feeling of uncertainty about their purpose or role that they could play in Transition Amherst. Fiona Nims said she liked the process meetings where everybody discussed their role and goals that they had because it helped to clarify the purpose of Transition for her. She said:

“My observation is a lot of people were really involved in food, and then [Hector] does the biking and that’s pretty amazing but a lot of it—is everybody has their projects in mind. Some of us were more interested in being organizers. We wanted to do the outreach. You and I aren’t doing the farming so much or the reskilling but we’re interested in just seeing what all those other people are doing, what they’re interested in and connecting them up. I’d think that would be our group as opposed to… necessarily being able to DO the reskilling workshops or
being a farmer. That’s why the process meetings when we talk about what our goals are were so important. It could be frustrating when we all have different goals. Maybe we should have had a really expressed common goal and then put aside our little ones. But how do we arrive at that without processing this together?” (Interview, November 8, 2012)

Fiona and Kevin advocated for time spent on group processing as a way to develop the group norms George Heart referred to, clarify the group’s goals and role in the larger community, establish long-term strategies for how the group would make decisions, and offer the space for each member to share their own role and/or contribution to the group. The time spent developing group processes was limited by the time of the meetings, and the interest of the participants, many of whom perceived communication around process to be a disruption from more urgent issues. I argue first that the lack of time spent on developing group process, and second that the lack of group processes themselves had a negative impact on the group’s sustainability long-term. This may have had to do more with the communication around developing group processes. For example, Kevin was quite forthcoming about communicating his unease with the way meetings were run and although he attended them all, he eventually stopped speaking. Although nobody directly admitted that his interaction with the group created the aversion to making the effort to continue developing group process, I suggest that if the strategic needs had been communicated differently, with an efficient leader who could guide the group, the group would have been more cohesive and effective. It might do local Transition initiatives well to acknowledge the potential tension between action and process that will likely arise once the group gets going and to incorporate strategies early on to negotiate the necessary balance between the two.
Consensus based decision-making: Sustainable or no?

Much has been written already about consensus based decision processes. In brief, consensus decision making is a process used by a wide variety of groups: from Quaker meetings to cohousing communities to various factions of the Occupy movement. Although there is variation among different groups regarding the degree of agreement necessary to finalize a group decision, the process of group deliberation includes common elements such as inclusivity (As many stakeholders as possible are involved in group discussions, and all participants are allowed a chance to contribute to the discussion,) and collaborative (The group constructs proposals with input from all interested group members.)

The model is seen as an alternative to more traditional top-down decision making models including the majority-rules process and is unique because it denotes both the discussion process and the decision rule. (Hartnett, consensusdecisionmaking.org)

The Transition model supports the use of consensus as a way to make decisions. The Transition US, governance toolbox states: “Use consensus to help a group make decisions that take all members’ opinions into account” (p 3) During the time of this research Transition Amherst never discussed the terms of the consensus model (for example, it was not clear if every person needed to reach an agreement in order for a decision to be made or if every person just needed to be able to have a voice in the process.) Many members expressed confusion and frustration over trying to apply what they believed was the consensus model. Roger Reed suggested that some member’s personal feelings got in the way of making a practical decision that would have benefited the group.
“It’s been really challenging for me. Particularly the whole consensus idea which I sometimes think is very effective but sometimes very dysfunctional. Dysfunctional because it can extend what may become in the final analysis an obvious conclusion and extend getting to that point for months, weeks, hours even, unnecessarily. Just because people don’t look inside deeply enough to really determine where their emotional response or even intellectual response is coming from.” (Interview, December 6, 2012)

Roger is referring to several occasions during Transition Amherst meetings when Kevin Smart, who was unhappy with the lack of official strategy of the group, abstained from voting on group decisions such as what the roles and responsibilities of the college interns would be, whether or not Dr. Pete would charge a fee for his peace and conflict resolution workshop, or the locations for the “Get to Know Your Town” walks. As long as somebody abstained from voting, and as long as there was no clear process for consensus based decision-making, many decisions were not made, or simply were decided by the person initiating the project, which gave the impression to some, that the ones with the strongest voices, were the ones with the most power. Roger Reed noted for example:

“There are a couple of people in our group who are strong enough not to let somebody else take over and there are people in our group who would take over. I might even be one of them because I get frustrated. I think consensus helps us to broaden ourselves but it’s not an easy path.” (Interview, December 6, 2012)

Before a group can apply the consensus process, they must also be able to determine emotionally and intellectually which decisions should require the most time and effort and resources from the group. Transition Amherst attempted to do this by setting time limits for each agenda item, however, decisions were still difficult for the group to make.

Sarah Lyme credits consensus based decision-making in her cohousing community with the reason it has become a sustainable community. But she notes that in
order for it to work members needed “a high level of maturity and self-restraint and larger perspective” for it to work. “Because if every person in the community wanted only one hour of time for something they thought was important that would be 55 hours of meetings with nothing else discussed.” (Interview, January 3, 2013)

I don’t think members of Transition Amherst necessarily thought that each agenda item required an inordinate amount of time to discuss. However, I suggest that due to a general lack of consistent leadership and direction, and a lack of communication around how to implement a true consensus based process, (for example, if there were members absent from a meeting, could a decision still be made?) it was easy to devolve into analysis with few decisions being made.

**Individual Burn-Out**

Toward the end of this research period, shortly after the Great Unleashing event, many group members expressed a sense of personal burn-out with Transition, suggesting that in the context of sustainability, it’s important to consider and prepare for the emotional and psychological toll that service to a Transition initiative takes. I suggest that when a sense of community has not been nurtured within the group, as was the case with Transition Amherst, members will eventually look elsewhere for that support.

Roger Reed said: “It always goes back to how do you find time to do all this. So I think when we got to a point when it seemed like all of the effort we put in had reached a conclusion I think people were relieved and were willing to just sort of drop everything and if something else was going to happen somebody else would pick up the ball and it wouldn’t have to be them. I include myself in that group. I was fatigued after… and I was only involved for eight months! I was fatigued at the end of it and really willing to just say boy I’m glad that’s over and not worry about anything else.” (Interview, December 6, 2012)
Many members of the group expressed similar feelings to Roger. Kat Boggs, who was the primary organizer of the Great Unleashing event said:

“It would be great if Transition Amherst were sustainable, but I didn’t personally want to be in that central role anymore where there’s so much responsibility and all of this pressure and I have to keep all of these files and I’m getting emails all the time all of the stuff that takes over my brain to the extent that I can’t do anything else…I need years to recover.” (Interview, January 17, 2013)

Kat said that she had not yet found a way to sustain her energy to commit to all of the groups she was involved in and did not want to be involved with Transition Amherst any more. She perceived her role in Transition Amherst as an organizational one and did not necessarily come to the meetings for emotional support or community building. If that had been her focus, and her needs had been fulfilled there, I suggest she would still want to continue coming to the meetings. Thus it might also be suggested that one’s intention and reasoning for participating in the group will determine how sustainable the group is. For example, those coming to plan and organize visible actions may be more likely to leave once the action is done, whereas those coming to build community might experience a greater investment and long-term commitment to the group.

Movement beyond the choir

One way to compensate for the potential of individual burn-out is for initiatives to consider ways of engaging sustained participation from a wide range of community members. At a New England regional gathering of more than 80 Transition initiatives in October of 2012, a common question that emerged from many of the Transition initiatives was how to move “beyond the choir” in engaging the broader community in attending events and participating in the Transition initiative. Indeed, as noted earlier, the
Transition model suggests that one of the best ways to ensure the momentum of an initiative is to continue to attract a wide-range of people to Transition activities in the community. I do not have any data on the diversity of community members who attended Transition Amherst workshops and activities, but overall, Transition Amherst did not have a strategy for contacting and incorporating new members, except for example, to have people sign their name and email to a signup sheet at an event, after which their name was added to a general Transition Amherst listserv. Outreach was largely limited to advertising on the website or facebook page and face-to-face communication with friends. Jarod Paul noted that this was also the case during his experience with Transition New Haven:

“So in my experience in both groups [Transition Amherst and Transition New Haven] a major flaw has been not knowing how to incorporate new people in a meaningful way. People who come to one or two events and then we don’t know how to tell them to be a leader in many cases they don’t want to be the leader in many cases they just want to be the secretary of that project which isn’t happening yet. We’ve only got one meeting it doesn’t satisfy everybody. So it’s bad at converting new contacts to be part of the movement.” (Interview, December 12, 2012)

The geographical location of Amherst certainly informs the difficulty in sustaining a long-term commitment to the Transition initiative. With one large university and two colleges, there are more than 40,000 students who occupy a temporary residence within the town. Their involvement with Transition Amherst would likely be limited to an academic school year with limited transportation opportunities unless they had a car. During the course of this research period, two female students from Amherst College did volunteer with Transition Amherst for three months as part of an internship. When their semester was over, they didn’t return to the meetings.
Jarod Paul suggested that from a sustainability perspective, the fact that Amherst is a “university town” has its advantages and disadvantages. The new ideas and energy have the potential to fuel participation and engage the community in interesting ways, however, the high turnover means that people will not invest in the initiative long-term.

He said:

“If you know you’re not going to stay here and raise your kids you won’t be doing [Transition-related] things you might otherwise be doing. But the young people bring in all kinds of new ideas, energy and money and culture. We chose a college town very intentionally. It has a vibrancy that outstrips the population…but it also leads to a transience. I see the true benefits and goals of Transition is being one of depth not just breadth. So the question becomes: How do I become part of the neighborhood with depth?” (Interview, December 12, 2012)

**The question of funding: Money and long-term sustainability**

The issue of funding in the context of the long-term sustainability of Transition Amherst was not a main priority during the course of this research. Transition Amherst did have its own bank account with several hundred dollars in it. Money for Transition-related activities such as promotional materials for events and/or to rent out rooms in the library were either taken out of the account or subsidized by members coordinating the event, suggesting perhaps that a Transition town might be more productive with members who have the personal resources to sustain it.

According to the Transition Network, the lack of sustainable funding, is one of the primary reasons that an initiative loses momentum and stops its activities. The lack of funding emerged as a common theme during the dialogue between 18 Transition initiatives. For example, Vera of Transition Whidbey in Washington noted:
“Fundraising! Either you have people with ample time and passion because they have another source of part time or passive income or you have money to run programs.”

Carolyne Stayton, Executive Director of Transition US, the Transition movement’s hub for the United States said that the next step for making Transition Towns sustainable is making sure “money comes into it,” either by collaborating on fundraising with other initiatives, having a fiscal sponsorship or nonprofit status. She said:

“Volunteers can only do so much. The other thing is to do some kind of collaborative fundraising. So you have clusters that might be working on similar themes: school lunches program. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania they’re going to work with food security issues but with the inner city and apply to a foundation for funding.” (Interview, July 23, 2012)

Carolyne said that the role that Transition US plays in helping to facilitate the process depends on the skill or capacity of the cluster but may involve overseeing the disbursement of funds or hosting webinars about the content.

George Heart suggested that it should be a priority of all sustainability-focused community groups to figure out how they are going to sustain themselves financially. He noted that in his experience he has not been able to find a single example of a sustainable community group that’s been successful long-term.

“There aren’t any. Because they all get bought off if they’re successful. They either get bought off or they hit a wall. Usually a financial wall and they revert to hierarchy power and control every time.” (Interview, February 6, 2013)

Sarah Lyme supported George Heart’s statement and suggested from a social movement perspective, history indicates that all movements need financial support if they are going to be successful. She said:
There has never been a social change movement in this country that didn’t get nonprofit and major donor funding. Civil rights movement, women’s movement—everything you always have to have some infrastructure of support.”

( Interview, January 3, 2013)

The impact of physical space

The majority of Transition Amherst meetings were held in the living room at Jarod and Jasmine Paul’s farmhouse during a time period when a large portion of the house was under renovation. Jasmine always offered tea, and members often brought pastries and breads to share, however, the meeting space was often quite cold. People took off their shoes before entering the living room, but wore their jackets and hats.

I attended only five meetings during the course of this year-long research that were not at Jarod and Jasmine’s house. Two were held at Roger Reed’s house, two were held at Hector Lasix’s house, and one was held at Fiona Nim’s house. My ethnographic notes from those meetings read entirely different than my notes from the meetings at Jarod and Jasmine’s. During a meeting at Roger Reed’s house I remarked on how lovely it was to take a break and walk outside in the cool summer darkness to meet and hold the new baby chickens that Roger Reed had just acquired. I noted how we ate cherry pie after the meeting and talked about our plans for the weekend. At Hector’s house, I wrote about how Dr. Pete made us all sing “Aquarius” from the musical Hair and the tour Hector gave us of his property, including the inspiring collection of bikes that he had collected to repair and share with his neighbors. My notes from the majority of meetings at Jasmine and Jarod’s house read like formal minutes from a Town Hall meeting, noting in brief the discussions about each agenda item.
Applying Actor Network Theory, I note the difference to suggest the relationship between space and people as actors in the network that constitutes the initiative. An actor network approach recognizes the relationship(s) between material and immaterial actors and the influence each has on the other in sustaining the network. I suggest that alternating the space of the Transition meetings would have provided a meaningful way for members to get to know each other better without necessarily having to devote too much of the meeting time to it.

For example, Cindy suggested that having the meetings at Jarod and Jasmine’s house may have made it easier for both of them to attend, since they had two young children, however, the space where the group was meeting may have negatively impacted the group’s long-term viability.

“They’re something about Jarod and Jasmine’s house… I adore them both but they’re both very efficient goal-oriented people.. and that efficiency and goal-oriented energy clearly permeates the house. Every time we met somewhere else it was a different energy. That’s a factor you can’t overlook. You know for a year we met in a room that was unheated. It was fucking cold, it was under construction, there was chaos. That’s all feeds into what happens when people gather and I think it was a big factor.” (Interview, December 13, 2012)

Cindy said that in hindsight it would have been productive for the group to consider the physical environment of the meeting itself.

“You have to ask yourself: what makes a successful meeting? Look at where you’re meeting, is it not working? If people are cold and uncomfortable they’re going to be a little cranky. Go somewhere else. Transition Pelham meetings rotate from house to house. It’s always really warm, there’s always snacks, and always schmooze time. So actually when you think about what makes a successful meeting or group location is a factor.” (Interview, December 13, 2012)
Conclusion

Although measuring the long-term viability of a local Transition initiative is difficult, numerous factors do contribute to and inform its sustainability in a community. At the time of this writing, Transition activity was still occurring in Amherst under the guise of the Transition Amherst Council of Working Groups which included similar activities that the initiating group was coordinating, however, the majority of the Transition Amherst initiating group has stopped attending. According to minute notes from the Council of Working Groups on April 2, 2013, “There was discussion of how to clarify the role of the Council of Groups, including the questions: (i) Where are we? (ii) Where are we going? (iii) What about outreach? Administration.” This suggests perhaps that communication is still needed around the purpose and potential of Transition Amherst in the town, and the lack of this communication may affect the ability for the initiative to sustain its momentum long-term.

The Transition model suggests several primary factors that negatively impact the momentum of an initiative and it is worth noting that all of the factors (actors) are connected to and informed by other chapters in this project, particularly Chapters 8 and 10, the culture and ideology and diversity chapters, respectively. Momentum declines when 1) members fail to plan for the future; 2) there are no new participants over time; 3) unaddressed problems create tensions between members of the group; 4) members feel that there is too much “processing” and not enough “doing” and finally 5) funding to support the continued development of projects runs out. Transition Amherst suffered from the first four, however, data suggests that the most significant impact on momentum was the lack of consistent and stable leadership within the group. Such leadership would
have enabled an effective facilitation of meetings, where a consistent consensus process
was defined and agreed upon; balance could be negotiated between time spent on
planning actions and developing group processes; and time spent discussing the group’s
projects and building deeper connections with one another based on the values that
brought them to the group in the first place. The Transition model provides governance
tools for running effective meetings, however, it does not offer resources for supporting
effective leaders that can create the democratic space for all voices to be heard, while also
holding others accountable to and responsible for their actions connected to the
Transition initiative.
CHAPTER 10

THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY: THE ROLE OF RACE, CLASS, AND AGE

The Transition movement suggests its apolitical, permaculture-community focus and participatory design, promotes and prioritizes inclusivity as a core value. Inclusion and diversity are listed at the top of the ingredients in the “Starting Out” section of the model. A description states that “Inclusion and diversity need to be embedded at the centre of Transition as a defining feature from the start; they cannot just be added in further down the line.” (Transition Network) The model distinguishes between two forms of diversity. One concerns working toward a level playing field of fairness and equal rights (for example, access to basic needs such as housing, employment and health), and the other concerns what happens on that ‘playing field’ – a celebration of identity, distinct voices and cultural expression.

“The former concerns the rights of the individual and acknowledges that society has an inbuilt bias that needs to be monitored and redressed. The latter concerns the richness of our cultural commons and draws on a dynamic exploration of renewal, exchange and transformation that benefits society as a whole. To be clear about the difference between the two is to be able to embrace the celebratory aspects of difference along with the necessary measures to monitor inequality.” (Transition Network)

Catrina Pickering, the Transition Network’s Diversity Co-ordinator from March 2010 to October 2011 wrote a 25-page guide “7 Ingredients for a Just, Fair, and Inclusive Transition.” She also offers tips on the Transition Network website for making an initiative as diverse, equitable and inclusive as possible. They include stating from the outset that there is strength in diversity in its widest sense; Listening and observing; Seek
to build common ground and common language around universal human delights and needs – love, food, family, engagement, connection; Speak to people and start with where they are right now, rather than insisting on an agenda; Use plain human language. Avoid jargon; Pay visits to local groups and projects in your area; Challenge your own thinking; Engage with young people; Look out for events and partnerships that can create connections, participation and a sense of shared belonging to a place; Learn to recognise power dynamics; and finally, consider diversity training with agencies that specialize in providing it. At no point during this research period did anybody from Transition Amherst reference this list, or acknowledge its existence and this is perhaps largely because strategizing around outreach was not a high priority for the group.

Despite a public emphasis on “diversity and inclusiveness” the Transition movement is still largely perceived to be constituted of mainly White, educated, upper to middle class people with the resources to participate, not unlike the demographic of the environmental movement upon which it builds. (Cohen 2010)

Sharon Astyk, an environmental author and teacher, recently blogged about her experience giving talks at Transition events in the U.S. She noted that although each talk is different, there are some similarities she knows to expect. She writes:

The average age of the audience will be at least a decade older than me and often much more (50s, usually.) The audience will be largely or exclusively white (although I have also spoken to a very few impressive urban transition groups that are neither) and middle class…After my talk on food issues, oil and climate issues, transportation, etc… someone will raise their hand and say how wonderful it is that the audience is of X size, but how do we get the message out to everyone else, and why are there only white middle class people in the audience? Odds are I will have already had this conversation two or three times with the leaders of the group or others involved also. They will point out that they have done outreach and advertising, movie nights, etc… and it still seems to be mostly attracting the same group of people – older white people with money to spare. (Astyk, Feb. 24, 2013, scienceblogs.com)
Astyk’s comments are consistent with the response of one of the students who attended a guest lecture about the Transition model that I gave to an Anthropology of Development class at Amherst College on April 29, 2013. Indeed, immediately after the talk, during which I showed the trailer for the Transition 2.0 documentary and discussed several pieces written about the movement, a male African American student raised his hand and said: “I’m sorry, but I’m from the south side of Chicago and none of my neighbors gonna have anything to do with this thing.” The rest of the class laughed. He was holding a printed copy of the blog post from Rob Hopkins that I had asked the class to read. The blog explained why Transition would never be a “protest” movement.

I asked him why he felt the way he did. He said it just seemed like this was all about the stuff that rich white people cared about. It wasn’t something that anybody in his neighborhood would want to be a part of. “Go to the south side of Chicago,” he said. “You wouldn’t have to ask me that.” But I pressed him further. I told him I had never been there.

“Maybe if the movement took more of a stand,” he said. “Maybe if they saw that some of us need to protest what has been done to us and not sit around knitting scarves.”

The student’s disdain was informed by many issues, among them, perhaps my failure to accurately communicate the intention(s) and purpose(s) of the Transition movement, his own perception of the culture of populations of people who participate in such movements, (informed in part by his own culture) and perhaps most importantly, an inadequate and sometimes offensive discursive framing on behalf of the Transition movement. The following factors suggest the complex, multilayered and socially
constructed relationship between the culture of a movement and the culture(s) of people for whom it will not only have an appeal, but for whom it will be offensive.

Indeed it may be the very use of the word “inclusiveness” that has turned people off. During a roundtable on diversity at a New England regional gathering of Transition initiatives, a woman of color from Worcester, Massachusetts said: “I’m so tired of hearing about inclusiveness. Why do people think I should be so happy to be included in your project? Why don’t you come see what I’m doing over here and then we can talk?”

Cohen (2010) who researched approaches to inclusion and diversity in the Transition movement encountered similar responses from the people she interviewed. One of her interviewees suggested that Transition should perhaps not be seeking to include others but should be seeking to be included by them.

Carolyne Stayton, Executive Director of Transition US suggested words like “inclusivity” and “outreach” are not effective.

“Someone will say ‘We need to outreach to diverse communities.’ It’s like “No you don’t.” People need to go to THEIR events. If they ask for money, give money. If they ask for support, give support. I mean it’s that simple, and it’s that not-simple because it is time consuming. But that’s how you do it. And in doing that you will meet someone who’s generally interested in what you’re doing. And then you say “Can you come and talk at our event and let us know what you’re doing and how you think it relates to what we’re doing.” (Interview, July 23, 2012)

One reason that words like “inclusiveness” might be offensive to some is that sometimes the genuine attempt to “include” others in a Transition initiative’s plans for community resiliency comes at the expense of recognizing informal networks of resiliency that have been in place long before the Transition model was developed. For example, people who have to take the bus to work every day are certainly participating in
an effort to lessen their community’s fossil fuel use, however, their identity is not attached to performing and promoting the act as a “green” and/or Transition aligned initiative. Similarly, people who wear recycled clothes bought at thrift stores and/or can and freeze their own food because they cannot afford other options are not necessarily recognized by environmental groups as contributing to the sustainability of their town and/or as offering knowledge and skills from which these groups might learn. Rather, their acts are tied to the performance of an identity often constrained by class-based assumptions.

The Transition movement does recognize these informal networks to some extent, particularly in the context of “volunteering.”

“Another myth is the idea that people on middle incomes tend to always be the people doing voluntary work, whereas in reality people on low incomes make a massive contribution to improving the lives of people in their communities through ‘informal volunteering’. A survey in 2002 of household work practices in the UK, found that 6.8 percent of exchanges in affluent suburbs are unpaid, as against 15.6 per cent in lower-income neighbourhoods. These exchanges might include, for example, transporting or escorting someone to hospital, keeping in touch with someone who has difficulty getting about, looking after a property or pet for someone who’s away, babysitting or caring for children, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry or shopping, collecting pensions, writing letters and filling in forms, decorating and DIY.” (Transitionnetwork.org)

Participants in Transition initiatives are encouraged, in theory, to support the work “already going on that Transition can support, collaborate with and learn from,” however practical tools for how to acknowledge and recognize informal networks, and how to connect with people who are participating in these networks, are missing from the model. This might explain in part, why a movement that supports the return to the values of indigenous ways of life, does not have many participants from those very communities to which it is advocating we all must return.
I asked Carolyne Stayton why she thought the Transition movement was perceived to be largely white and (Western) educated. She suggested that communication around issues of peak oil and climate change are more in the conversation of that population.

“Peak oil — when you’re just trying to get enough money to feed your family it’s kind of a distant thing. Or what’s happening with polar bears in the arctic.” (Interview, July 23, 2012)

Carolyne suggested that one way to dialogue with more diverse members of the community is for Transition initiatives to make it a priority to identify and nurture relationships with “bridge” people—people who have access to many segments of a community. She admitted that Transition US does not have any models or guidelines for how to go about doing that but noted that at a recent Transition training event in Chicago there “were more youth, and more ethnically diverse people.”

“There were 16 new trainers and two of them under 30. That gives us a total of three under 30, of about 20 active trainers. And four people of color. So that’s a start isn’t it? It’s a movement and direction that we want to definitely continue.” (Interview, July 23, 2012)

Sarah Lyme, who attended the Transition training event in Chicago, plays a strong role in helping initiatives learn how to engage diverse segments of a community with Transition. She noted that expectations must be tempered with the amount of time it actually takes to learn how to dialogue with and engage marginalized members of a community, especially if participants in a Transition initiative have no experience doing so. She said:

“Actually the best workshop I ever did was in the inner city of Pittsburgh. That’s where I’m working now and it’s really really hard because people are trying to survive. You can’t on the one hand expect a movement to engage a broad spectrum of people, people who have no experience in social change who are just
getting started learning how to organize a meeting, write a press release and
expect them to immediately know how and be able to reach the most alienated,
marginalized populations in their 50-mile, hundred-mile region.” (Interview,
January 3, 2013)

It is interesting to note that Sarah’s comment assumes that marginalized
populations will not be the ones attending the Transition meetings, which perhaps
supports Carolyne’s suggestion that the discourse of Transition is not necessarily
accessible to people who do not have the resources to participate. Sarah said that as a
trainer she spends so much of her time reorienting and training people “who know
nothing about community gathering, who look up to people who are very
individualistic…who are good at meeting deadlines and raising money and controlling
things…” and teach them new skills in community building.

“I’m trying to reorient their whole lives away from oil dependency to grasp how
severe the climate crisis is, to learn how to play and have fun, to make decisions
together. That’s a lot—to learn outreach and to do it on a very big scale. But most
of them if they do it on the small scale as Transition suggests, they’re going to get
most of the same color faces. You have to really work at an urban region or with a
city you have to have a big scale to start to get the diversity. In a place like
Amherst it’s very easy for a community to be so busy just trying to reach out to
their friends and neighbors and churches that’s all they get to.” (Interview,
January 3, 2013)

**Transition Amherst and Diversity: A local context**

The demographics of Transition Amherst were consistent with the demographics
of the town of Amherst. The majority of participants were predominantly white and of
Northern or Western European descent. Of the dozen people who came to meetings
regularly, Jasmine Paul was the only Latina. In terms of age, at 36-years-old, I was the
youngest participant, aside from Jasmine and Jarod’s two daughters, who were five and
nine and were often present at the beginning of the meetings, and the 3-month-stint of the
two Amherst College interns. Fiona, Jarod, Jasmine, and Sarah were in their 40s, Cindy was in her fifties, Kat was in her early 60s and Kevin Smart, Roger Reed, and Dr. Pete were in their late 60s and 70s respectfully. Every participant had a college degree and aside from myself, owned his/her own home. It is interesting to note that there was not one single participant who was born and raised in Amherst. All of the members of Transition Amherst had moved to Amherst at some point in their adulthood, and all of them identified as a “local.” Perhaps this suggests that people who were born and raised in Amherst may have been born into their own informal familial infrastructures of resiliency that exist as separate networks outside of recognized social movement models. Or perhaps that the networks of communication about the Transition model are better able to reach those who have chosen to move to the community, as opposed to those who were born into it.

Members generally agreed that it would be nice to “move beyond the choir,” particularly with regard to the class of participants in Transition Amherst activities and events, however, there was never any sustained coordinated effort to do this. Kat noted that one reason the Great Unleashing event was important to her was because it represented an opportunity to engage more diverse segments of the community.

“Well that’s what I perceived we were trying to do through the Great Unleashing: try and bring the current active groups in Amherst together so that we could all see each other as working together. But we’re all the same people. And that’s one thing—when you talk about the unrealized potential of the Transition movement in this area is to move beyond the choir. It feels like if one could articulate it right and present it right and do it right that somehow folks who weren’t already convinced might see a way that they could intersect with it. I was thinking how can I talk to my neighbor? My working class neighbors and people who might vote for Republicans and stuff like that.” (Interview, January 17, 2013)
Fiona Nims, a Lecturer who teaches Spanish, brought up the notion of reaching out to more diverse segments of Amherst at several meetings. She suggested that the lack of effort around engaging “beyond the choir” was an issue of lack of time and the fact that it wasn’t a shared priority of the group.

“We had talked about reaching out to a different demographic and we didn’t have the time to do that. There weren’t enough people in the group to do it and I don’t think we all shared that value, frankly. For some people the attitude was whoever comes, comes. I can agree with that but I also wanted different kinds of people to come because I think you want to appeal to the largest base possible…I mean are we going to leave the housing complexes in the shadows when things happen. It’s like okay, when the time comes you’ll just have to make do. Not that it’s our job to educate people, but we have to assume they have something to contribute. I mean that’s why I don’t think we did the job we could have with the outreach.” (Interview, November 8, 2012)

Fiona expressed concerns about what happens to underserved and marginalized communities when they are not a part of a dominant narrative of support in a community.

“I just know what happens with other groups across America…with indigenous populations. I’m not trying to romanticize that. We have to get onto other people’s radars. We have to go to them and then they’ll come and I think this takes a long time. Maybe we were naïve or arrogant to think I’m not sure what…that we didn’t have to do that work…” (Interview, November 8, 2013)

Fiona and Kat did suggest during several meetings that there might be opportunities for Transition Amherst to collaborate with the Amherst Survival Center, a long-running nonprofit that services families and individuals who are struggling to make ends meet. Free services include a food pantry, soup kitchen, drop-in health clinic, and a free store. According to the website, the center serves over three thousand people each year: “People are here to share their material resources, information, concerns and frustrations. No one is turned away.” (Amherstsurvival.org)

Although a possible collaboration was discussed, during the time of this research, no such project was ever developed.
The question of class

Hector had a much more laissez faire approach to engaging more of the community and he acknowledged that his perspective was informed by his financial stability and his spiritual outlook. He perceived himself as one part of a larger system working toward local resiliency, and believed that if people wanted to be involved with Transition Amherst they would be and if they didn’t, that was fine too.

“I have the luxury to not have to act out of urgency and I have the luxury to not have to fear that I can’t provide for my children. I have the luxury that a lot of other people don’t. I don’t think there are any “shoulds” [re: participating in Transition Amherst.] I look at the world as a big school for humans, maybe for other souls. I’m here because ultimately it’s little pieces of the universe who are getting to know themselves. So I’m just a little piece of that one. When I’m the whole one, I can’t get to know myself because there is no encouragement, no way to do it. But when I’m separated into little pieces then I’m separate from you so I can look at you and know you and through that start to know myself. Sometimes it’s really extremely painful but if I look at it from not a physical-needs perspective but a spiritual-needs perspective than it’s a different meaning.” (Interview, December 10, 2012)

Kevin Smart concurred with Hector that it is indeed the freedom to “not have to act out of urgency” that allows people to participate in Transition more fully. The concept (and irony) of time as a valuable resource cannot be overstated. At the same time that participants are fueled into action by an awareness of an impending global crisis, they are participating in a movement that requires them to have the time to plan and coordinate activities aimed at circumventing and managing the crises. It becomes difficult to participate if the resource of time (directly connected to economic, social, and emotional infrastructures of support) is not available to participants. As a lawyer currently looking for work, without any family in the area, Kevin Smart noted that he did not have the capacity to fully participate in Transition Amherst.
“They have the energy to participate because they have those resources. The people who were active were wealthy people, financially and socially wealthy. Because my own place in the world is much more at risk and much more fragile, I don’t have the material and social resources to take a more active role. They’re [members of Transition Amherst] not worried about going to the doctor, they’re not worried about where their next meal is going to come from, they’re not worried about what if they’re car breaks down... They all have strong social skills. They’re all partnered, they have families. In other words their infrastructure is taken care of. They’ve got this extra stuff to give. I don’t have this infrastructure.” (Interview, November 27, 2012)

Kevin suggested that as long as the Transition movement prioritizes creating community resiliency by helping people to prepare for crisis rather than building infrastructures of support for people who are already in crisis, then it will remain a “rich person’s movement.”

**Age: Does it matter and what does it signify?**

Although no quantitative studies have been conducted to determine the median age of participants in the Transition movement, empirical evidence (gathered from a regional Transition gatherings, interviews with Transition participants, and observations from Transition events recorded online and in books) suggests that the age of members of Transition Amherst were consistent with the average age of participants in other Transition towns. As noted earlier, the majority were between the ages of 50 to 70, with Fiona, Jasmine, and Jarod in their 40s.

Roger Reed suggested that because “older” people are at a different stage of life they may have a greater capacity to participate in Transition relative to younger people who are still spending most of their time trying to figure out how to have a successful career and support themselves. He said:
“Not to disparage the younger generations, but when you’re in your early years of life you’re trying to figure out what to do to keep yourself alive and growing. We’re looking for stability in the early part of our lives in a different way than we’re looking for stability when we’re older.” (Interview, December 6, 2012)

He also suggested that older people may have a deeper connection to the planet after realizing that they are the ones who “caused all the problems we are facing.”

“Older people have a broader perspective on what’s going on in the world and what the challenges are. My generation and the generation before me and just after me are the ones who created this problem we’re having now with the climate because of our faith in technology and because of our lack of foresight in what the consequences would be for what we were doing to make our lives more comfortable. So I think just out of a sense of guilt and responsibility we’re perhaps waking up a little bit sooner than a younger generation.” (Interview, December 6, 2012)

Cindy said that she understood why young people would not be inclined to participate in a local Transition initiative. Even though Amherst is a college town, students do not necessarily consider themselves “locals” and would not want to invest their time and energy in an initiative they knew they would be leaving soon. She said:

“Students are transitional. I wouldn’t have gotten involved in a really long-term grassroots effort in the towns I went to college in. I didn’t feel like a local. I never rooted myself in any of those communities.” (Interview, December 13, 2012)

Several students in Amherst, however, did get involved in a Transition initiative, however it was designed and coordinated by students. In the spring of 2011, Rhea Harris, a senior at Hampshire College helped to start what she hopes will be the first Transition College in the United States. Similar to Transition Amherst, Transition Hampshire meets every two weeks. Thus far they have a dedicated Transition house where student residents can learn about and live more sustainably, and a course devoted to Transition themes. Currently, they are participating in campus-wide discussions with other Hampshire sustainability initiatives about what environmentalism should look like, and
how all of the environmentally focused groups on campus might work together better, an
issue, according to Rhea, that does not get enough organizational attention.

Rhea said that her Transition initiative at Hampshire has been trying to figure out
a way to make the group sustainable even though participants’ time at Hampshire is
temporary. She said that Transition fills a need for a material connection to place that is
missing in young people’s virtually connected lives. Rhea attended several Transition
Amherst meetings but there was no formal communication between Transition Amherst
and Transition Hampshire. She said:

“I think that a lot of people underestimate how much youth desire a connection to
place. I mean everything we do is online, we communicate, we talk on phones,
everything’s virtual. There is no connection to place any more and I think
Transition fulfills that. I mean it was great to be able to go to someone’s house for
a Transition Amherst meeting and talk about what their kid did in school that day.
It reminded me of going to Middle School and growing up on a farm and all of
that stuff. It’s really hard in a college environment especially to foster that
because you’re not even here the whole year.” (Interview, February 7, 2013)

Rhea attributed the lack of communication between Transition Amherst and
Transition Hampshire to an issue of organization. She said because she assumed a
leadership role within the group, she volunteered to go Transition Amherst meetings.
There was never any organized discussion over how to connect the two groups.

“That Transition Hampshire is still really trying to find it’s place and what it means and
how do we grow our movement on campus and to really solidify our place. Right
now it’s really up in the air in terms of what we’re doing and what we look like.”
(Interview, February 7, 2013)

Rhea said the most interesting part about attending Transition Amherst meetings
was being able to observe how difficult it is to communicate effectively and make
decisions even “when you are old.” She had just started college when she attended her first Transition Amherst meeting.

“I was 18 when I had just come from high school and was in college trying to organize people my own age so it was interesting to work with people older than me still having the same discussions that I was having at college. I was like ‘Oh wow I thought people would have worked this out by now.’ (Laughter.) I feel like in organizing work it’s always ‘Should we do that’ or ‘I don’t know who to talk to and you didn’t do this last week’ or ‘Oh you’re going on too long will you just shut up.’ (Interview, February 7, 2013)

Rosa Pratt, a student at Amherst College, interned with Transition Amherst during the spring of 2012. She said that she had been expecting a group with more of a hierarchical structure, and although she appreciated the informality, she said she thought the group would have benefited more from a leader with entrepreneurial skills.

“Someone with some business experience would first off be something of a guiding hand that keeps the group focused and on task and constantly working towards some kind of objective. They would also have a lot more knowledge about how to do outreach/advertisement and the kinds of resources that are available to small local organizations to help promote awareness.” (Email, February 5, 2013)

Such a person might also help the initiative appeal to a more diverse demographic, according to Rosa. She noted that in her experience Transition appeals to a specific kind of person.

“I don't like to stereotype, but in my experience it's very usually liberal White upper middle-class individuals either of college age (again, I hate stereotyping but a Hampshire student typically comes to mind) or in their 40s-60s that are most interested in sustainability initiatives. Based on conversations I've had with a number of my friends, they simply don't see such things as of great importance when stacked against their own personal priorities - as if to say they would much prefer the convenience of buying cheap unhealthy foods and driving a car to the hassle of relying on a bike or paying more for healthier locally grown produce. Many people I know also see such things as secondary to "more pressing" social
issues, such as poverty, education, etc. that need to be fixed before we can start worrying about the resilience of our community. Personally I see all of these things as very closely intertwined, so one can’t really prioritize one over the other, but apparently my view is somewhat unusual for someone of my background and demographic.” (Email, February 5, 2013)

Rosa suggested that Transition Amherst should prioritize collaborating with other local initiatives “which could be mutually beneficial, especially if doing so helps relay how the Transition Movement relates to other social justice agendas.”

Heidi Flour, one of the founders of the Field Academy, an innovative alternative high school based on outdoor activities around the country, attended the New England Regional Transition Gathering in October of 2012. She said that the Transition model has a few barriers with regard to attracting a more youthful demographic, namely that youth experience an oversaturation with conflicting messages from the media and lack analytical skills to make sense of them.

“There are competing media messages that youth are receiving right now. One tells them they are responsible to no one but themselves. This dovetails with the fact that they are receiving so many inputs all the time from technology telling them that the economy is in crisis, the icecaps are melting, war, poverty school shootings, etc. but nothing in their daily education is actually talking about it. In fact, they're learning things that they perceive to have no relevance to the world. So on a lot of levels there's just sort of this "screw you" attitude towards adults -- for handing them a problem that no one knows how to solve, and for sticking them in schools that are boring them to tears and giving them no tools to cope.” (Email, February 6, 2013)

Heidi said that these messages are complicated by popular culture messages that make environmental and social change issues “trendy.”

“There’s a lot of greenwashing that never actually asks students to question a) the dominant paradigm they exist in or b) their role in as consumers. It allows students to buy a t-shirt or post on facebook rather than actually dig into the issues and/or create something new. (Email, February 6, 2013)
Heidi suggested that Transition will be more appealing to young people when schools approach education with an emphasis on the interconnectedness of all of the systems that constitute and inform our social and cultural environment, and the role that they might play in constructing something new.

“I see youth most engaged when they are asked to vision and create new realities - - whether that's reimagining school, designing a garden space, skate park, etc. To me, it feels like a question of figuring out what spaces and pieces of their community they feel connected to and passionate about, and then asking them how they might reimagine them. Most youth that I have talked with seem to feel really disconnected from their town or their community as a whole. Youth have a huge amount to contribute - clarity of vision, energy, passion, and inspiration.” (Email, February 6, 2013)

A diversity of people must be accompanied with diverse ways of connecting: Some suggestions

Jarod suggested that Transition members who are interested in engaging broader parts of the community, including more youth, minorities, and underserved populations, need to look at what first attracted people to participate in Transition. He noted that the elements that attracted members to both Transition New Haven and Transition Amherst were very similar and suggested that members need to think about a diversity not only in terms of people, but in terms of the ways in which people connect with others. He said:

“In my experiences, what’s initially drawn people-- it’s been introspective and in some sense academic, sitting and talking instead of doing. We all sort of have our own networks and neither one of these groups have had networks into the communities that we’re talking about. It makes me think that a diversity of ways of connecting with people that are vastly different from the connections that brought initiating groups together is needed to expand it. My default idea keeps coming back to well, let’s just have more block parties.” (Interview, December 12, 2012)

Jarod suggested that people need a fun reason for people to come out and get to know each other and this needs to be a part of Transition beyond the working groups.
“You need a common denominator where people want to be there anyway for myriad of reasons and then the discussions happen and groups will form to do their big issues and little issues. Perhaps we’ve just been missing the good strategic party planners.” (Interview, December 12, 2012)

Jarod’s suggestion is consistent with environmental author Sharon Astyk, who offers perhaps one of the most constructive set of tips for how Transition initiatives might appeal to a greater segment of their community. She notes that the first the priority must be to create an event that will be fun for people: “Most people do not hire babysitters/come out on a freezing/raining/frying (insert your climate here) evening after work unless they are going to have some fun. There is a comparatively limited number of people who think watching documentaries about oil extraction or climate change is fun.

Want to get people out? Throw a party. Offer beer. Have a local food tasting and cooking class. Get someone to show you how to do something fun and useful. Dance. Have music. Offer babysitting. Do something FUN. In the INTERSTICES of fun, tell them about climate change or peak oil.”

Her second suggestion is to use what she calls the Church Model, not in terms of religion, but in terms of sustainability. She notes that way more people join churches than environmental groups, and that historically, energized movements die out much more quickly than institutions like Churches. “When you go to a Church (or synagogue or whatever) you are offered something. There’s babysitting and Sunday school for the kids, often social networking for the parents, cookies and wine afterwards, a chance to meet people in the community, quiet and pretty music. After you go for a while, you might be asked to contribute to support the church or you might be asked to sit on the building committee, but no one says ‘Hey, come join us for the building committee
meeting and discuss the failures of our roofing, and then stay for the service.’ You get the good stuff FIRST. How many times have I seen a Transition group leader pass around to new people a chance to sign up for the equivalent of the Building committee BEFORE they’ve had any other positive experiences.”

Astyk also supports Kevin Smart’s comments with regard to the current discursive framing of the Transition movement which suggests that it is a model to help a community prepare for crisis, but it does not offer anything directly in the way of somebody already in crisis. Thus the expectation for participation is that members will already have the resources to do so. (IE: the time to meet, a car to get to the meetings, etc.) “For the people who are already dealing with the consequences of volatile energy prices, climate change and economic insecurity, asking them to get together to use their time and resources to help build resilience to something that hasn’t happened yet is a bad idea – and kind of insulting. If you don’t have anything to offer people who are already struggling with these issues, they will not come.”

Astyk argues that as long as the movement is framed as preparing for some abstract future collapse, “folks who don’t like thinking about bad things and folks who already have plenty of bad things in their lives will stay home.” A Transition initiative must offer positive resources to people in the community who currently need help.

She also suggests that members spend less time coming to an agreement on how an issue is framed and more time working on what they have in common. “Do you have to agree on the REASONS why we need local food? Nope, you absolutely do not. If your neighbor is storing food for the rapture, the ones down the street because folks in their neighborhood are already going hungry and they expect it will only get worse and
you are doing it because of climate-change induced drought, well, you’ve got a coalition, if you can keep the focus where it needs to be.”

Finally, she emphasizes the necessity for charismatic leadership and the need for an initiative to nurture and support leaders as they initiate engagement and dialogue with others, especially people who might not otherwise participate in a Transition initiative.

**Conclusion**

Although there are currently no quantitative studies regarding the demographic of the Transition movement in terms of race, age and class, the perception among participants, community members and academics is that the majority of participants are white, educated and middle to upper middle class. Participants in Transition Amherst are consistent with this perception. Although Amherst is home to more than 40,000 students and the Amherst Survival Center services more than 3000 people in need with food, clothing, and companionship, very little sustained effort was made to engage with these segments of the Amherst population. Most members did express a desire to “move beyond the choir” of participants but attributed the lack of sustained communication to a lack of time and a lack of prioritizing this activity as a focus. Several members felt that the Transition initiative was opened to whomever wanted to participate, but did not necessarily have an obligation to engage with every part of the community. Actor Network Theory has been a particularly useful analytical lens for understanding not how different material actors (people) and immaterial (discursive framing, time, culture(s), class, occupation) which exist in relation to each other, make up a Transition network that cannot necessarily serve or constitute an entire community.
Although the Transition model emphasizes the values of diversity and inclusivity, throughout this project, language like “inclusivity” and “outreach” was rejected by several people of color who found the assumptions on which such words are predicated to be offensive. I suggest perhaps that a different discursive framing might be more effective in generating dialogue with people who might not otherwise be attracted to such an initiative. For example, as Carolyne Stayton suggests, attending the events of other groups in the community and starting a dialogue from there, or focus on cultivating “bridge” people who might be connected to many segments of the community might be more effective. Sharon Astyk and Rosa Pratt, the Amherst College student, suggest a similar idea with their emphasis on the importance of charismatic leadership in drawing and sustaining diverse participation. Sarah Lyme noted, however, that it is important to recognize how much time it takes to nurture such connections, especially when many people in a Transition initiative are just learning how to work together to plan and coordinate events and activities.

Finally, both Jarod and Sharon Astyk echo a central theme of the Transition movement by suggesting the importance of throwing a party in order to attract and sustain a wider segment of the community, especially if something of value is being offered to somebody who needs it: Food, drink, clothing, etc. Parties are opportunities for community members to get to know each other better, and opportunities to nurture communication infrastructures of support in the context of community resiliency. I began this research shortly after Transition Amherst hosted a meet-and-greet party in an effort to attract more people to the group. Aside from the Great Unleashing, this was the only
party-focused effort to engage more people, and with no structure in place for follow-up, little was done to continue the dialogues that began there.
CHAPTER 11

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION, TECHNOLOGY, AND TRANSITION

An emerging body of research has focused on the influence of the Internet in coordinating and mobilizing social movements. (Castells 1996, Juris 2004, Garett, Bennett, della Porta and Mosca 2005, Fisher and Boekkoi 2010, etc.) Such research analyzes the potential for the Internet to serve as a participatory, non hierarchical, and diversely networked space for social movement organization. (Bennett et. al. 2008, Reese et. al. 2011). Wellman (2002), noting the multiple layers of networks made possible by the Internet, suggests that it provides “a ramp” onto the global information highway at the same time that it strengthens local links within neighborhoods and households. “For all its global access, the Internet reinforces stay at homes. Glocalization occurs, both because the Internet makes it easy to contact many neighbors, and because fixed, wired Internet connections tether users to home and office desks.” (p 14) This chapter seeks to use Actor Network Theory to explore the role of the Internet as an actor in relation to the other actors that constitute the Transition Network.

Data from this research suggests that the Transition movement supports glocalization processes by strategically using digital technology, specifically the Internet for two primary reasons: 1) To transmit information (Transition methods, practices, guidelines, values, personal stories) on multiple levels to aid local Transition town initiatives, and 2) To maintain control of its branding and sustain its legitimacy and authority as a global movement toward community resiliency.

Building upon the premise that the Transition movement was able to achieve its
rapid global growth largely because of its sophisticated online presence, this chapter explores first the ways in which the Transition movement used digital technology, specifically its Transition Network, the online hub of the movement and other social media such as facebook and twitter to accomplish the former and the latter. Secondly, it seeks to understand if, when, and how and in what ways Transition Amherst used the online Transition Network to support its own activities. Although research indicates that the Internet may be displacing geographically-bounded participation in and obligation to singular, spacially-based communities with a “networked individualism” (Wellman, 2002) whereby people are now participating in multiple networks with a responsibility only to him/herself, little research has been done to explore the paradox of how social movements like Transition which are premised on encouraging others to return to the materiality of an embodied place, commit to the physically local, live in connection with and beholden to your neighbors—are using technology to do that. Indeed, Transition builds upon and has developed alongside similar social movements that have been mobilized in part due to digital technology and social media, like the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Arab Spring, both of which used digital media to communicate and coordinate their actions. The emerging social movements share primary characteristics in relation to their communication online: 1) They have been and are mobilized and coordinated online, yet remain decentralized and participatory, 2) They suggest that they are not just trying to achieve new goals but rather shift the processes by which the goals are reached, (namely by building support around ideas rather than individual leaders, something which is made possible by the non-hierarchical structure of the Internet), 3) They have cultivated numerous actor networks that recognize the necessary relationship
between the physical public sphere and the virtual public sphere with regard to mobilizing action.

Yet Transition separates itself from other social movements by framing itself as nonpolitical. Thus while members of different factions of Occupy and the Arab Spring might use social media to coordinate large-scale protest demonstrations, the Transition movement is using the same digital communication infrastructures to publicize a blog about global activities on International Permaculture Day (April 29, 2012, Transition Network Facebook page). Both communications might be interpreted as a kind of “protest” of capitalism, and both invite local, (embodied) participation, however, participating in the former connects the physical body to the physical protest of a system, while participating in the latter connects the physical body to creating an alternative to that system. Since the Transition movement’s activities are not necessarily bounded to specific times and places (each initiative coordinates its own events and activities), its online communication tools can serve as a global resource and support structure, from which each initiative might pick and choose relative to its own needs, on its own time.

Pasek and Romer (2009) note that it’s important to understand and differentiate not just the type of digital medium (social media, website, blog, etc.) but the purpose behind the message. They suggest six general purposes behind the use of information technology: Informational, (raise awareness, transmission of facts, information, and values) communicative, (share stories, experiences, let people know how and when to mobilize) recreational, social, (chat rooms, facebook, twitter) product consumption, and financial management.
The Transition movement is particularly adept in its use of information technology regarding the first two: raising awareness around peak oil and climate change and communicating the possibilities for positive social change when communities take small steps toward becoming more resilient.

The virtual home of Transition is its comprehensive and frequently updated website www.transitionnetwork.org. The site is visually pleasing and easy to navigate with a series of changing pictures and an information bar where users might access the most recent Transition “News” including the top stories (it is unclear who or how a “top” story is determined) and blogs from on-site bloggers, and, re-published blogs from Transition Voice, This Low Carbon Life, Resilience.org's news feed and Transition US. Visitors can also click on the “Community” link where they can access initiatives, people, projects, events, a general forum where anybody can post a topic to discuss, social media, Transition by theme, and Transition “on one big map.” Visitors who click on the “Support” link can find out what a transition initiative is, how to become official, how to build your local economy, how to work on inner transition (personal resilience), education (resources for schools), conflict advice, initiative website advice, and access researcher queries and articles. An additional “Resources” link provides more information on the ingredients of Transition, translations of Transition texts, and finally, a branding section that aids initiatives with graphic designs of Transition labels. The website’s “Training” link offers information about the movement’s trainers and courses that support Transition initiatives in adopting the model and methods. Currently the movement conducts trainings in more than 20 countries. Finally, the “Books and films”
link offers visitors access to the dozens of books, movies, and videos written by and for participants in Transition initiatives.


The site is a dynamic hub and its primary purpose is information transmission. The Forum section under the community link does allow for people to post and comment on topics by category. The most popular ones included the “General” category, “Researchers,” “Web and Comms” and the “Themes:” the most popular of which were energy and food. However, the main purpose of the site is to explain the Transition movement and provide visitors to the site with an opportunity to search through various initiatives around the world and access the resources and support for starting one’s own Transition town initiative.

Connecting the global to the local: The role of digital communication

As noted earlier, there is no other environmental movement whose informational hub is as comprehensive, organized, and multi-layered, especially in the context of digital media. In addition to a frequently updated website, Transition maintains an active presence on social media. Its Twitter account, has 9,735 followers and anywhere from two to half a dozen tweets a day. At the time of this writing, more than 160 Transition initiatives have their own Twitter accounts. The Transition Network’s Facebook page has 7,252 “likes” and is updated with new posts one every few days. The Transition Network
has a channel on youtube, a group on Ning, a Flickr group, and a LinkedIn group. Although social media holds the promise of more horizontal interactivity that is participatory and non-hierarchical, (Castells 1996) it is worth emphasizing that for the Transition movement, social media is primarily used for one-way information transmission—(updates on initiatives, climate change studies, recently-published books, job opportunities, etc.). Although a comprehensive study was not possible, a basic qualitative analysis of the social media sites suggests that updates, tweets, etc. come only from “The Transition Network” with very little sustained interaction via comments, retweets, etc. Although blogs from other initiatives are published on the Network, it is still at the discretion of staff of the Transition Network, a group of around ten people who work out of a small office in Totnes, England. Another example: At a Question and Answer session with Rob Hopkins at a screening for Transition’s second documentary “In Transition 2.0,” Ben Brangwyn, (co-founder of Transition Network), shared some of the tweets from other initiatives who were also screening the documentary on the same night. Ben read tweets from England and New Zealand, each praising the “global Transition movement.” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reICcRnY5Fs) By publicly reading Twitter feeds at an event which is then posted on YouTube, the Transition movement is accomplishing several notable feats: 1) Establishing itself as competent with and adept at using social media and technology, 2) Using social media to project Transition’s global reach and impact, 3) Achieving the former and the latter while maintaining control over the Transition brand by having a person who works for Transition select which tweets should be made public.
This generally top-down approach to communication maintains a unified voice for the movement, and controls the message and the branding even as proponents suggest that it is at its core participatory and grassroots. In this instance, Transition functions less as a rhizome, with a more arbolic, hierarchical strategy. It’s important to note that use of potentially democratizing tools like social media does not necessarily democratize all parts of a movement, but rather may in fact do just the opposite, when used strategically as a way to brand itself under a unified voice. It is also important to note that by pointing this out, I do not mean to imply or suggest that this is necessarily a bad idea. Indeed, it might be argued that Transition has been able to grow so rapidly because the movement has at its helm people who are intent on controlling the brand and unifying the voice of the values of the movement, if not the applied practice of it.

**Building communication infrastructures to support glocal information flows**

The Transition movement used its digital communication primarily to transmit values and serve as a support structure for cultural and behavior changes that support community resiliency. On macro (Transition Network) and micro (Transition Amherst) levels, the websites and social media were used as the communication medium for posting information about upcoming events and activities, raising awareness, and publishing the stories and experiences of people involved in the movement.

The *Transition Companion* suggests that short digital films and online photo galleries such as Flickr and Picasa, have been among the biggest successes in terms of raising awareness about what an initiative is doing, making a record of its activities, and “getting it out to lots of people.” (p 208)

Hector: You could see that it (the movement) is *organized* online but really it is more like a support structure that happens. So for example, Transition US doesn’t
coordinate Transition Amherst; it gives us support to do our own thing better. You know the coordination is not the coordination of the whole movement, it’s providing the support and the inspiration and examples from other initiatives so that I don’t have to do it in the dark, and also providing some of the support for publishing the information. (Interview, December 10, 2012)

The Transition movement supports local Transition towns with the communication infrastructures necessary to connect a local initiative with the global hub in various ways on its website. For example, its “social media” link under the Community tab section provides a way for local initiatives to hyperlink a “Transition Stories” badge to its website so that local initiatives can access Transition “stories” from all over the UK; Local initiatives can also embed ‘widgets’ onto their sites that reflect the latest news, events and projects of the Transition movement. The live widgets on the local website show the latest items in the topical section chosen as the widget and the item titles link back to pages on the Transition Network website.

For initiatives that are just starting out, the Transition Network offers a comprehensive checklist for how to begin to create an online presence beginning with a basic web presence, blogs, and newsletter, and offer suggestions for different web services, including whether or not a “techie” is needed. The Transition Companion notes:

“Websites should be light and flexible, not big burly cumbersome beasts that scare everyone, including the beleaguered techie who volunteered early on and then found him or herself struggling to deliver something far too complicated that no one really understands. Your site must be understandable and usable by more than one person, preferably not a techie too.” (p 212)

The Transition Network negotiates the tension between advocating for an online presence with the movement’s central call to cultivate and nurture neighbor-to-neighbor
communication with a mix of humor (illustrated in the above quote) and a clear explanation of how social media can support face-to-face relationships, not supplant it.

Facebook, Twitter and Ning (and Youtube and Flickr for videos and photos) have exploded in popularity in the last few years...They are very powerful tools, and great fun if you like that sort of thing (many don’t). Transition Initiatives have used them to grow their memberships, co-ordinate events, connect with other initiatives, share ideas and make friends and much more. They use Social Networks in a mix, along with other media including mailing lists, their own websites, Youtube, Flickr and much more. The best way to see if you enjoy using them, and get value from their use, is to give them a try. It can’t hurt. Transition Network has a presence in most of the Social Networks and we like to do that Social Networking thing, but deep down we feel that the best place to do 'social networking' is with your neighbours. Doing it online is good, but shouldn't take priority over doing it locally. (transitionnetwork.org/web-options-transition-initiatives)

**Transition Amherst and digital technology: A local context**

The most frequently employed method of digital technology for Transition Amherst was email. Transition Amherst used two email addresses, one was for the “steering group” members only, and the other was a general email that went out to anybody who had ever written their name on a sign-up sheet at a Transition Amherst event, over 300 people. A variety of emails were sent by all members to both addresses on a weekly basis. Emails to the general listserv advertised upcoming Transition-related events, articles, books, and rarely received a reply. Emails to the smaller group were used primarily to share minute notes from the meeting, and to finalize decisions such as the wording of the mission statement and/or who would bring which supplies to an event. The latter often involved numerous emails from many members.

The construction and development of a website was a priority for the Amherst group through the time of this research. “Updates on the website” was an item on the agenda of every single meeting even when the majority of the group’s efforts and
attention were focused on planning the Great Unleashing.

Hector Lasix, a computer programmer, volunteered to develop the website using the WordPress blog template. Jarod, Jasmine, and myself volunteered to be on a subcommittee that would support Hector in his effort via design and editorial suggestions. The website subcommittee met once and we each discussed the designs of other Transition town websites and elements that we could adapt for our own design. I also researched dozens of local sustainability initiatives that Transition Amherst could link to through a “Resources” tab on the website, thus helping to position Transition Amherst as a network of support for other organizations. Although feedback on the website was always requested at Transition Amherst meetings, there were never any in depth comments or suggestions, aside from general support for its development. Hector did spend a considerable amount of time teaching members the steps to uploading material to the site, including the password. Transitionamherst.org went live in the spring of 2012 with a homepage that promotes the initiative’s collectively written mission statement: *Our purpose is to foster vibrant and resilient community—in the face of rising energy-prices, climate change, and economic instability—by empowering one another to share our skills and gifts, and create a better life for all*, in addition to more specific practical accomplishments of the group (such as the reskilling workshops and the film series.) Additional links offer website visitors the opportunity to find out more about events (past and upcoming) and blogs written about the projects, (which are not regularly updated) local resources, and working groups. As noted earlier, all of the group members have access to the website and can post if they wish, however, Hector remained the primary person who manages the content and posts the materials.
That Hector, who is known in his neighborhood as a “survivalist” because he lives almost entirely off the grid, with no car, a rainwater recycling system for his water, solar panels for heat, and a garden where he grows much of his food, is also the “technology development” person for Transition Amherst, is worth noting. He understands his position at the intersection of prehistoric “survival” and modern “technology” as somebody who has the capacity to use online communication to educate others about how to “live the best that they can.” Thus, he is perhaps a living metaphor for the larger movement’s relationship with technology. Hector said:

“I enjoy the technology but I’m also a responsible homemaker in a rustic way so I do that as best as I can. The website is really useful for announcements so that people know it even if they don’t have an email or remember where it was. I can really use it for reference so when I do something I can document it there, and there are all these links that people can use who are looking for more information. Also if somebody asks me “[Hector] can you publish this so that people know about it in our community,” that’s a way for people to know.” (Interview, December 10, 2012)

Hector did emphasize however, that while computers may be useful for information transmission and facilitating face-to-face connections, they should never replace or supersede human interpersonal communication because they are ultimately material symbols of human growth, and not sustainable.

Hector: I never gave up my computer job. But I know that computers will not play a role in averting the collapse. They will just go away because they are a symbol of human growth. They killed off what was there and what was there in my opinion was better which was the stories of our grandfathers told to our fathers or in a home around a woodstove. That’s really a multiage human connection. (Interview, December 10, 2012)

Hector also noted that in the context of online information transmission, there would always be a gap between watching it on a screen and the embodied experience of
actually doing it. Information on the Internet might educate a person about how to, for example, survive by raising and killing chickens, but the act of actually doing it is not something that can be experienced physically by watching a video about it online. Thus while somebody might read about a Transition initiative’s effort to create a local food economy, there is still a gap that the Internet cannot bridge between the intellectual knowledge gained from watching and the embodied experience of actually doing it.

Hector: It’s very different to know that we have to produce our food locally from killing a chicken. Being there and extinguishing a life, for me it’s anguish, it’s an emotional upheaval. When you read up on the Internet about local food production, you think great, somebody else will do it and then I get the chicken and then I get the vegetables but when you have to do it yourself it’s different and that’s not something you can get from the Internet. (Interview, December 10, 2012)

Although members of Transition Amherst prioritized the development of the website it was unclear how often and/or for what reason people actually visited the site. Part of the reason it was unclear is that during the course of this research members would visit the site at Hector’s request for feedback. It’s not known if and when people would go of their own volition. The majority of members did not find out about the Transition movement or Transition Amherst from online communication, but rather via word-of-mouth from their friends. This may also be a testament to the average age of the group, the majority of whom did not grow up with the Internet.

For example, Rosa, the Amherst College student who interned with Transition Amherst noted that her biggest contribution to the group was helping to build it a social media platform. Rosa created the Transition Amherst Facebook page because she said it would make the group more accessible to young people. She said:
My generation's grown up in a world characterized by technology and rapid transfers of information, thus I feel like we as a collective are best suited for utilizing platforms like the Internet, multimedia and social networking, which are essential for spreading awareness, and particularly as college students we tend to have extremely broad social networks spanning states and even countries that should be utilized. In this regard I think that the Facebook page was definitely the biggest contribution Ophelia [the other Amherst College intern] and I made to the group. (Email, Feb. 5, 2013)

The Transition Amherst Facebook page has 95 “Likes” and was last updated on October 18, 2012, nearly five months after Rosa’s internship ended with Transition Amherst.

Rhea Harris a student at Hampshire College who helped to form Transition Hampshire, a college-based Transition initiative also noted the value of technology in connecting her efforts to a global community of people working on the same kinds of projects.

“I think there is definitely an inherent value to the technology. I mean we live in a place where we can go and see things people are creating on the other side of the world but we don’t know what their values are or what they’re feeling or how they fit into the global system of things and Transition enables us to see that. It allows us to see “Oh there are those people over there who care about the same things I do and they are doing what’s right for their community and I’m doing right by mine and we can make that basic connection.” (Interview, February 7, 2013)

Rhea also noted that while technology has contributed to the emergence of several recent global social movements, technology also enables people to see how these movements are different from one another. She said that many of her friends are very involved in Occupy and don’t understand why she is so committed to Transition. She said:
“I think I definitely feel like I’ve had so many conversation with friends who say ‘What are you doing with Transition, come down to New York with me to Occupy and protest,’ and yeah I’d love to but I want to see everyone included not just people who are immediately drawn to things like Occupy. With Transition, you can also just grab so many people who might not outright agree with your politics but who agree with your values. There’s a need for people to come together not just in one place and at one time but we could have all these different people doing things toward one purpose.” (Interview, February 7, 2013)

**Offline/online a false binary?**

It is important to note that the success of these emergent social movements do not necessarily depend on their capacity to be active online. This is why it does not necessarily matter how many Twitter followers the Transition or Occupy movements have. I argue and have argued before (Polk, 2013) that what matters in terms of organization and effectiveness is how well the movements have been able to facilitate the relationship between online and offline activities: in other words, have these online communication infrastructures made it easier for people to meet up in person and coordinate successful activities and events that lead to greater community resiliency on the ground? Certainly for Occupy, the movement initially garnered media attention as a result of the visual spectacle of the tent camps set up in parks and the numbers of people demonstrating on Wall Street. That these physical actions were coordinated online is only as relevant as the numbers of physical bodies who actually show up to participate.

Although Occupy is mobilized online, Kevin Smart noted, social capital in the movement is achieved only by being physically present at the demonstrations. He said:

“...I would go to the Occupy meetings but I didn’t like those either. The problem with those is they espouse more violence than I again have the cultural value for. You have to go out there to have any credibility in the Occupy movement. You had to go to the demonstrations, be out there on the front lines. I don’t have the
resources to do that so I would have no credibility in the movement.” (Interview, November 27, 2012)

For Transition Amherst, the online communication infrastructures have been less significant with regard to mobilizing action in the physical public sphere. On a macro level, as Hector noted, the Transition Network has provided access to support for different projects, including the building of a website. However, on a micro level, members said they did not frequent the Transition Network frequently, and still seemed to prefer the materiality of the books and first-hand-experience of people as a resource.

For example, one of the more popular Transition Amherst activities was a book club and potluck that focused on the Transition Companion. The group met for about an hour before each bimonthly meeting to participate in an informal discussion facilitated by Hector. The meetings were an opportunity for members to bond, share experiences and ask questions. Each person had a book with them, suggesting perhaps that the materiality of the pages, the physical presence of the book was still meaningful to members, and a way for people to connect more deeply, even though all of the content was accessible online.

Jarod Paul noted that in this age of digital communication, one must have a relational view of the digital public sphere and the physical public sphere in the context of how well it facilitates connections. He said:

“You can’t have one without the other. You can talk about which is more effective, which one has more variance, which tool is more effective in which context. But you need a contribution of all. An aspiration which I see is making the connections. How do we do that effectively? I think our culture is poor in this and it’s sort of set up as a problem and an aspiration without a prescriptive solution. (Interview, December 12, 2012)
In addition to making connections, George Heart, a former member of Transition Amherst and sustainability professor at UMass, suggested that the Transition movement must also be about cultivating a sense of place. He found a way to negotiate the relationship between the offline and online spheres by asking his students to find their “place” in Amherst. He asked them to pick a physical location and “celebrate it.” He then made a web page for his students and set up a blog with pictures so that the students could put it up online and share it with others.

“Even though they are only here for four years, students can still have a sense of place. You know, they were all over the town. It was impressive that every student had a place. And it wasn’t Antonio’s, you know. It was a tree they liked to go sit under. It was a place they could be alone and just be. It was always outdoors. Four years your gonna be here, you’ve still gotta have a sense of place.” (Interview, February 6, 2013)

**On Leadership, Technology, and Social Movements**

Zeynep Tufekci (2011) points out that many commentators have related the diffuse, “leaderless” nature of recent social movements like the Arab Spring with the prominent role social-media-enabled peer-to-peer networks played in these movements. Such peer-to-peer networks are focused on actions and causes, not on specific leaders, and allow for an anonymity that makes it potentially easier to organize subversive political action. Similarly, Occupy participants mark this lack of leadership as a political value, a part of its identity, and it’s ultimate goal of having greater distribution of wealth, opportunities and resources. Indeed the very first sentence which describes the movement on its website, occupywallstreet.org reads: “Occupy Wall Street is a leaderless resistance movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions.”
Such distribution requires a flattening of hierarchies and a dismantling of the notion of “leader” as a lone hierarchical figure of authority. This flattening of hierarchies is made possible with technology that can mobilize masses and coordinate diffuse networks not dependent upon a singular leader. Tufekci (2011) notes: “How it operates and makes decisions are synonymous with its very identity and survival. Occupy is the change that its members seek.” Thus decisions are (supposed to be) made collectively, using consensus-based processes and handmade posters hang from makeshift stages at Occupy events that read “No Leaders!” (Kuttner, 2011)

I suggest that the Transition movement shares the same desires for a more participatory democracy, a flattening of traditional hierarchies, and seeks, like Occupy, to be the change its participants seek, not necessarily by demanding change from institutional structures, but rather through its collective actions toward community resiliency. I also argue however, that the valorizing of the leaderlessness of these movements is ultimately to its detriment. The Transition movement’s comments on leadership are rare and confusing: simultaneously resisting the word “leader,” while acknowledging the need for one(s). For example on January 27, 2013, The Transition Network posted the following status update on its facebook page:

“I'm quite allergic to the term “leader” but I'll make an exception in the case of this paragraph from a book called 'Resilience: why things bounce back'. Kinda encapsulates how we're trying to work in Transition.

‘When we found a resilient community or organisation, we almost always also found a very particular species of leader at, or near its core. Whether old or young, male or female, these translational leaders play a critical role, frequently behind the scenes, connecting constituencies, and weaving various networks, perspectives, knowledge systems, and agendas into a coherent whole. In the process, these leaders promote adaptive governance - the ability of a constellation of formal institutions and informal networks to collaborate in response to a crisis’.
Those mycorrhiza can teach us a thing or two, eh?”

By posting the above as a status update on the movement’s preeminent social media site, the movement is shaping a particular actor/network discourse around “leadership” while also suggesting perhaps that the word is to generally be avoided as should all potential allergens. The excerpt that follows, while offering an interesting metaphor for promoting adaptive governance in the pursuit of collaboration, suggests no specific or clarifying guidelines for how one might actually pursue the task as a “leader.” Nine comments followed the status update, one of which requested an alternative to the word “leader,” to which the Transition Network responded that they were “working on it.”

Marshall Ganz (2010) defines “Leadership” as accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty. Leaders accept responsibility not only for their individual “part” of the work, but also for the collective “whole.” Leaders can create conditions interpersonally, structurally, and/or procedurally. (p 1) According to Ganz:

“Leading in social movements requires learning to manage the core tensions at the heart of what theologian Walter Brueggemann calls the “prophetic imagination”: a combination of criticality (experience of the worlds pain) with hope (experience of the worlds possibility), avoiding being numbed by despair or deluded by optimism. A deep desire for change must be coupled with the capacity to make change. Structures must be created that create the space within which growth, creativity, and action can flourish, without slipping into the chaos of structurelessness, and leaders must be recruited, trained, and developed on a scale required to build the relationships, sustain the motivation, do the strategizing, and carry out the action required to achieve success.” (p 4)

The challenge, according to Ganz, is to cast a net widely enough to recruit others to do this work, create the capacity to train them, and offer the coaching to support their
development. (p 7) Recent social movements like the Arab Spring and Occupy suggest that digital technology has the potential to facilitate the casting of the net and the necessary recruitment for global social movements like Transition, however, initiatives must prioritize the creation of the structures within which leaders might be developed and encouraged to build the interpersonal face to face relationships on the ground. This does not mean that an initiative must conform to a prescriptive definition of an authoritarian figure as leader. On the contrary, I suggest that an initiative determine the leadership needs within the context of its goals and then prioritize the cultivation and development of the people who can help lead the group in accomplishing them. Until this is a priority, global social movements facilitated online, run the risk of suffering from a lack of organization, poor internal and external communication, and somebody to hold others accountable for their actions, as was the case with Transition Amherst.

**Conclusion**

A textual analysis of the Transition Movement’s online activities including its website and social media outlets suggests that the role of digital technology (specifically the Internet) as an actor in the Transition Network, serves two primary purposes: Information transmission and global branding. Regarding the former, the Transition Network website (the stem of the rhizome) and its various social media outlets (the rhizome’s shoots and roots) provide a comprehensive and multilayered source of information for local Transition initiatives who want to learn more about Transition methods, practices, guidelines, values, personal stories. Regarding the latter, a global digital hub controlled by a small group of people employed by the Transition Network in
Totnes England, allows the movement to maintain control of its branding and sustain its legitimacy and authority as a relatively “unified” global movement toward community resiliency.

Although Transition builds upon and has developed alongside similar social movements that have been mobilized in part due to digital technology and social media, like the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Arab Spring, Transition distinguishes itself from the others by framing itself as nonpolitical. Since the Transition movement’s activities are not necessarily bounded to specific times and places (each initiative coordinates its own events and activities), its online communication tools can serve as a global resource and support structure, from which each initiative might pick and choose relative to its own needs.

Although the construction of a website was a priority for the Transition Amherst group, it is unclear how often members visited the site. All members had access to the password to upload content to the site, however, Hector remained the primary person who designed the site and posted content. The majority of members said they found out about Transition Amherst from somebody they knew, not from an online source, however, everybody had visited the Transition Network site at some point. Transition activity online was not referred to or discussed at meetings, which, as noted earlier may be a reflection of the group’s age range, none of whom grew up with the Internet. Indeed, Rosa Pratt, the Amherst College student who DID grow up with the Internet said her greatest contribution was creating the Facebook page for Transition Amherst, which she felt was a priority for helping the initiative to communicate better with young people.
Finally, I suggest that there is an important (albeit tenuous) connection to be made between the digital facilitation of social movements like Occupy, the Arab Spring and Transition and the “leaderless” ethos that inform an important part of their identities. Online networks can be used to facilitate communication around actions and causes, not on specific leaders, and allow for an anonymity that makes it potentially easier to organize subversive political action. Networks provide the opportunity for an initial flattening of hierarchies and a dismantling of the notion of “leader” as a lone hierarchical figure of authority, a shared goal of movements that seek a more participatory, equitable and just democracy.

I also argue however, based on the poor communication and unresolved tensions within Transition Amherst, that strong leadership development is crucial to sustaining a long-term movement, and the valorizing of the leaderlessness of these initiatives is ultimately to its detriment. This is not to suggest that traditional hierarchical figures of authority need be in place for an initiative to work, on the contrary, it should be a priority to create the space and the structures necessary to select and train collaborative and skilled leader(s) who can nurture the strengths of the group, aid in successful facilitation, hold others accountable, and continue to cultivate relationships online and offline that will ultimately strengthen and sustain the movement.
CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted earlier this study builds upon previous work in communication for sustainable social change and contributes the first long-term ethnographic analysis of a Transition Town, one of 2000 initiatives that form the Transition Network, a fast-growing global social movement that uses permaculture principles to create more resilient communities. From a development communication perspective grounded in Actor Network Theory, my analysis has focused on the connections between the actors (material and immaterial) and the ways in which they work together both as part of a local Transition Town and as part of the larger Transition movement. Although I focused each chapter on a different actor, each one is deeply related to, informed and underscored by the other, which will be discussed further in this concluding chapter. This work also contributes to communication research by building upon Scott-Cato and Hillier’s (2008) ideas about Transition’s rhizomatic potential to create sustainable social change within a community. Citing Colman (2005) they note that the rhizome maps a process of networked, relational and transversal thought that can challenge and transform structures of fixed and static thought into a ‘milieu of perpetual transformation.’ I have argued that this metaphor can be applied to many levels of Transition Amherst, both the structure of the initiatives, in the ways participants connect and relate to each other, and to the Transition movement itself, which must remain flexible and adaptable to each community’s needs as it begins to build resiliency and develop communication processes with other groups, organizations, town councils, universities, etc. if they are going to
have a successful impact. Unfortunately, my data suggests that the rhizomatic potential of the movement is often threatened if not trumped by unclear communication processes and a lack of sustained democratic leadership, both of which will be explored more deeply in this chapter, which includes findings and recommendations based on themes that emerged on macro and micro levels of the Transition movement.

The first part of this conclusion will discuss two general themes that are connected to and informed by each chapter: The concept of time as a finite and relative resource, and the development of communication processes between local community members and other social change organizations with regard to building a Transition initiative. The second part of this chapter will summarize the findings of each chapter and offer recommendations.

**Part I**

The Transition movement is a growing “social experiment on a massive scale.” (Transitionnetwork.org) According to the Transition Network there are more than 2000 initiatives in 35 countries that are working to transition their communities away from a dependence on fossil fuels and peak oil to a more sustainable and resilient way of living. The participatory development model is built upon the assumption that each member of the community has a gift to contribute and/or a skill to share that will improve the community in some way. Participants in a Transition town initiative follow the guidelines and resources of the model to learn how to create the space for those gifts to be shared and to work together in different stages of the “transition” to resiliency. (Transitionnetwork.org)
I spent a little over a year as a participant and ethnographer in Transition Amherst, in an effort to better understand the ways in which a popular global social movement is adapted in a local context and to consider the ways the thoughts, feelings, ideas and suggestions of a local Transition participants might contribute something of value to the global movement. My research questions concerned themselves with how participants understand both the processes and products of the movement, specifically the appeal of the community-centered narrative of Transition; the ways in which participants understood the impact of their initiative; the multiscalar role of culture in informing the movement on micro and macro levels; the factors that enable and constrain the sustainability of a Transition town; the communication of “diversity” and “inclusion” in an initiative, and finally the relationship between technology, social movements and Transition. Each chapter’s theme, however, played a role in the other chapters. For example, the culture of a Transition town will undoubtedly play a role in the initiatives attitudes about diversity and its capacity to engage a wider range of people. Some of the impacts of the group will be directly dependent upon the groups sustainability or rather, capacity to complete long-term projects.

Thus I mark the conclusion of this study with the same disclaimer that the Transition movement includes as part of its description. “We truly don’t know if this will work…” From a global perspective, as noted earlier, one of the limits to this dissertation is that the Transition movement is indeed a global social experiment in its infancy. While it is impossible to know if it will “work” long-term, it has emerged as an opportunity for positive social change at an important moment in history, at a time when the world is undergoing a series of global crises—including the crumbling of unsustainable economic
systems, growing civil unrest, and devastation wrought by climate change—and a digital revolution that is facilitating global information flows with a breadth and speed never seen before. Although it aligns itself with and builds upon past and present environmental social environmental movements, it makes itself distinct (and arguably popular) by focusing on solutions that develop community resilience, rather than the problems that are causing harm and distress to a community.

Did it work/is it working in Amherst? Yes and no. The initiative, by being connected to a global movement, contributed its support to an ideology already adopted by the town (illustrated in its numerous sustainability efforts initiated by the schools, the town and independent groups,) and perhaps would have had a greater impact had there been fewer such groups already working in the town, and had Transition Amherst conducted a comprehensive inventory of resiliency needs not being fulfilled by other organizations in the community and then worked in a strategic way to fill those gaps. One way the Transition movement might have done this is by using a strategy similar to the participatory technology assessments employed in the European Union. Similar to the intentions of the Transition movement, the central argument is indeed rhizomatic and consistent with Transition: “experts” are not the only people who have something to contribute with regard to the impacts and uses of technology. Sclove (2010) argues that over the past two decades, such participatory assessments have played a role in stimulating a number of European nations, the European Union or both to undertake strategic planning and concrete activities related to adapting to global warming; to increase political awareness and develop industry strategies for entering new markets and creating jobs in green technologies, (e.g., in the energy sector); etc. (p 11)
Although the Transition movement advocates a staunchly apolitical approach, further research into Transition might include a comparative analysis with this participatory approach. For example both Transition and the European Public Technology Assessments use consensus based processes to build the network among all actors in the society, with the intention of empowering those who ordinarily would not have a voice, however, the latter’s process, which includes two preparatory weekends with a facilitator and, on the basis of the lay participants questions, an expert panel that includes scientific and technical experts, and knowledgeable representatives of stakeholders, as well as a four day conference, is much more organized and rigorous than the Transition movement’s, at least in the case of Transition Amherst. The primary difference in the use of the consensus based models, however is that in the case of Transition Amherst, consensus was used as a way to equalize the playing field and take away the notion of “expert” whereas in the case of the European Technological Assessments, experts and facilitators were a crucial part of the communication network. Sclove (p 54) suggests: “A consensus conference brings together a demographically diverse and balanced group of laypeople. The process shows great and unaccustomed respect for these people and for the dignity inherent in their role as citizens. It does this in part by offering lay panelists extensive organizational and staff support, as well as the opportunity to interact on terms of mutual respect with distinguished experts and to perform a public service in a very public setting…” Sclove also makes the important point that “if experts are individually and collectively incapable of discovering and articulating the common good, a fully representative group of lay people likewise cannot do it all by themselves. In order to tackle the complex kinds of topics addressed,
laypeople need an opportunity to learn from or with experts. Hence if pTA (public Technology Assessments) entails demoting experts somewhat from their accustomed exalted and highly empowered status, it continues to honor them as essential contributors of knowledge and insight.” (p 55)

Such a process might serve to enrich the Transition movement on several levels. First, it would help aid in a potential-needs assessment of an entire community in the context of creating resiliency. It would ensure that a diverse range of voices were heard and representative of all demographics of the community. Finally, it might also contribute to the development of a more organized internal decision-making structure within the group, and serve as a kind of check-point that would assuage feelings of disrespect that may arise based on personality and power differences within the group.

The remaining conclusions in this chapter come with the caveat that there can be no genuine conclusion separated from the fact that the movement, like any actor network, is constantly evolving. For example, one of the main findings of this study is that the Transition movement did not place a high priority on cultivating strong and consistent leadership and perhaps as a consequence, Transition Amherst also did not prioritize it, which negatively impacted the initiative’s sustainability. The May 2013 Transition US newsletter, however, featured an ad for an upcoming Transition Training: A three-day leadership workshop: The Art of Participatory Leadership: Building Resilient Community and Creating Change. The workshop promises that participants will experience and practice a set of simple yet powerful processes for building community, facilitating powerful conversations, building strong partnerships and leading change. (Transition US). I note this example to bring attention to the fact that the intention of this
project was to provide findings and insights that might be used to improve the model and perhaps fill gaps in areas that could be stronger. That such gaps are already being addressed is a positive development and indicative of the fact that my critiques and recommendations result from a specific research period and their relevance is contextual and subject to change, and are perhaps already being noted by others in the field.

**Time as a finite and relative resource during a global crisis**

An unreconciled paradox occurred during the course of this research that was never communicated by the group but rather expressed numerous times during interviews and one-on-one conversations. At times it seemed to be the most central question of this project: *How does a diverse community reconcile the amount of time it takes to conduct a massive cultural and social transformation into a Transition Town with the immediate, impending urgency of the global crises facing us?* It was indeed the sense of urgency that motivated, in part, all of the members of Transition Amherst to join the group, and yet each member had a different sense of how much time each activity would take, how much time he/she had to invest in the group; how much time was needed to become a successful Transition town, and so on. None of these disparate ideas were ever communicated collectively within the group, and perhaps most importantly, no distinction was ever made between the amount of time it takes to *prepare* for a crisis and the amount of time it takes to recover from a crisis that is or has just happened. I suggest that doing so might have aided in the management and organization of people’s expectations. It also would have brought attention to the idea of time as a kind of social capital that directly impacts the capacity for different members of the group to
participate, to claim power within the group, and communicate effectively with each other.

For example, both Kevin Smart, who was searching for a job during the course of this research period and Fiona Nims, who was negotiating major life changes with single parenthood, noted that they did not always feel like they were as much a part of the group as others because they did not have the same capacity to participate or the same amount of time available to contribute. Thus they did not feel they could “vote” on decisions with the same authority that others in the group had, nor did they always feel comfortable voicing their opinions.

While the movement attempts to be participatory and structured around the assumption that “each member has a gift to contribute to the project of creating community resiliency” (Transition Network) one must also consider time as the foundation from which such participation is enabled and/or constrained.

All members of Transition Amherst consistently noted during meetings and interviews how busy they were with other priorities and commitments. Jasmine, for example, suggested that the biweekly meetings had to be strictly business-like because there “was so much to be done in a two-hour meeting every other month.” She said:

“I think the biggest problem that everybody has with Transition is that everybody has a life; they are doing everything else that needs to happen and so everybody’s so busy that unless you have enough people willing to help even a little bit than these big daunting tasks can’t actually happen…That’s the spirit right, basically you need to have enough people so that if I’m sick or I move or something else happens that the initiative doesn’t die it just continues on.” (Interview, December 19, 2012)

The commonly expressed feeling of being really “busy” may suggest that the people who become involved with Transition are perhaps already committed and

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obligated to their community in various ways. Roger Reed, for example served on the board of a green financing organization, Kat served on the environmental committee on her church, Hector worked with various groups that supporting bicycling. Despite these other commitments, there was no communication around how much time each person had to invest in Transition Amherst, how much time should be spent organizing Transition activities, how much time should be spent building relationships between group members and other local organizations, and how much time should be spent developing group processes versus organizing actions. Many in Transition Amherst expressed frustration at how long it took for decisions to be made, and yet frustration was also expressed at the lack of collectively-agreed upon decision-making process, a process that some felt took too long to develop.

The Transition model might help to better support local initiatives with guidelines that focused on time frames for achieving goals. If the group knew, for example, that on average Transition initiatives spent the first month focusing on group processes, then Transition Amherst might have been able to use that as a guide and a way to manage expectations. Although it should be noted that each initiative is different and each one likely requires a different time line, it would be helpful to have a framework for how long such processes typically take, and a way of prioritizing such processes in the context of the group’s sustainability. The Transition Network’s list of ingredients aids in the bigger picture of developing community resiliency, however a sense of time and an acknowledgment of its value as a resource is not prioritized in its guidelines. This would do much to ease tensions between the people in the group who wanted more group processing and others who wanted more practical action and would also help to set up
infrastructures of celebration so that members might reward each other for what they have accomplished rather than feel tense about how much time it took, which was often the case with Transition Amherst.

Conceptualizing and communicating the value of time as a finite resource is a feat made more complex when there is no leader to help the group negotiate the organization of time; to distinguish, for example, between the time needed to prepare for a crisis and the time needed to react to and recover from a crisis that is currently happening, such as building structures of support around Kevin Smart as he searched for a job, or organizing a food train for Dr. Pete when he was hospitalized with an ulcer, neither of which happened. Finally, and relatedly, Transition Amherst might have focused more generally on building bridges between those in the community who do not have as much time to participate in the former as a result of the latter.

Jarod Paul noted that there is a distinction between a genuine crisis and a slow emergency. While the Transition movement is perhaps geared toward helping communities deal with the slow emergency, a recognition of the distinction might help participants to negotiate how they were going to prioritize the time they had.

Jarod: A sense of crisis has two things that make direct action happen more easily: It’s short-term and its universally shared, versus all of these versions of a slow emergency which I think are and will be manifesting themselves as people going into poverty and an increasing “us or them” as those who aren’t yet in poverty are less willing to share with those who are. I think the slowness could lead to a separation of the halves and have nots. So how do we all gain the benefits of a universally shared crisis when all of us are not going through it in the same way? (Interview, December 12, 2012)

A successful Transition initiative must consider that each community contains members who live on a scale somewhere between the global slow emergency and the
immediate crises and the relationship this scale has to the time required to create an effective and sustainable Transition town. I suggest this consideration begins with communication on micro and macro levels within the Transition movement that focuses on understanding the concept of time as a finite resource not unlike oil, and prioritizing leadership that can negotiate and manage expectations around its access and use.

**Building external and internal relationships a key to resiliency**

The March 2013 Transition Network newsletter contained a link to an article in *The Atlantic* called “Resilience is About Relationships, Not Just Infrastructure.” The article cites a growing body of research that suggests that the people who have the strongest likelihood of surviving severe consequences of climate change such as superstorms, hurricanes and tornadoes live in neighborhoods with strong social ties and networks. Goodyear notes: “The social ties of a neighborhood – the kind of relationships that are nurtured by trips to the corner coffee shop and chats on the sidewalk – might prove equally important when it comes to saving lives.” She cites research from sociologist Eric Klinenberg who studied the heat wave that killed more than 700 people in Chicago in 1995 with the mortality rates the highest in poor neighborhoods. Klinenberg found, however, that the neighborhoods with “sidewalks, stores, restaurants, and community organizations that bring people into contact with friends and neighbors” had the highest survival rates, many of which were also in poorer African American areas, versus those that didn’t. Others “were vulnerable not just because they were black and poor but also because their community had been abandoned.” (Goodyear, 2013)

The Transition Network arguably distributed this article in their global newsletter because it supports a central value of the movement: Strong and happy communities are
the key to local resiliency in the face of global crises. The development of such a community is dependent upon the social ties that people make with each other and with the connections organizations have to one another. Members of Transition Amherst were divided regarding how much time to spend making connections internally with each other and externally with other groups. Several members met with the town’s sustainability coordinator Stephanie Ciccarello in an effort to develop a relationship with the town. Stephanie noted in an email that, “Partnerships and collaboration between town government and the group maintains transparency and a common purpose that truly defines "community." (February 7, 2013) Members also met several times with Amherst College’s Center for Community Engagement, and often brought comments and “news” from other organizations with which they were involved to the Transition meetings. There was, however, never any strategic collaboration developed between Transition Amherst and other local organizations doing similar work other than linking to them on the Transition Amherst website and cosponsoring an event when asked to do so.

As a result of this lack of strategic collaboration, tensions arose between some community members, like George Heart, who did not want their efforts to be coopted and credited under the umbrella of Transition.

Sarah Lyme, a national Transition Trainer suggested and my findings concur that one of the biggest challenges the Transition movement faces is effective collaboration with other community-based organizations, especially in areas where there is already a lot of Transition-related activity. Transition Amherst was no exception. Although “Building Partnerships” is mentioned as the eleventh ingredient out of fourteen in the “Starting Out” stage of the model, the importance of doing so was not emphasized
enough in the model or during Transition Amherst meetings. Processes of collaboration are complicated by several factors: Local organizations are often in competition for funds, for attention, and for participants, made more complex in a college town like Amherst where a large part of the population is transient and temporary.

I think it is important to note that Transition initiatives can still be effective and productive in communities that already have a lot of sustainability activity and a culture that supports such activity. But first the initiative must consider the possibility that its role might be different than in an area where there are far less sustainability efforts. For example, attention must be paid to not duplicating or creating competing efforts, and to building alliances with other groups to determine current needs. There are few communication guidelines within the Transition movement around how to work with, support, recognize and build alliances with people who are already doing the work. One recommendation which comes out of the model’s guidelines for measuring effectiveness but could be used by initiatives as a starting point is to take an inventory of community-based organizations in the town through surveys, questionnaires and one-on-one interviews with community members to begin to dialogue around the community’s needs and possibilities of working together. Another recommendation: have members of Transition Amherst volunteer to coordinate meetups between organizations they are already involved in and Transition Amherst as a way to build stronger bridges. Members of Transition Amherst (along with other initiatives where there is already a lot of sustainability activity in town) might take an inventory of local social change organizations and then divide the list up between members who were willing to contact the organization and/or attend some of their meetings. Finally, Transition initiatives,
because they are not limited to focusing on one activity, can serve as a powerful clearinghouse for Transition-related events. An offer to promote and publicize other group’s events on the Transition listserv might aid in the development of a mutually-supportive alliance.

Transition Amherst might have been more successful had they made it a priority to communicate regularly with other organizations and develop long-term relationships with them. Such relationships might have eased tensions with others who felt their project ran the risk of being coopted by Transition and also helped members of Transition Amherst to better understand the initiative’s role in contributing to community resiliency. (IE: The group did not have to be responsible for literally transitioning their town off peak oil and fossil fuels. But they could be responsible for communicating with and building bridges between the many different sustainability groups in town, many of which have been doing Transition-related work long before the Transition model was developed.)

Detailed guidelines, that included for example, a template letter that initiatives might send to other groups in the area, or guidelines for how to begin building the communication infrastructure necessary to create these networks, taking into account, as noted earlier, that many of the groups are in competition for funding and membership, would strengthen the Transition initiative, and the larger resiliency networks of which they are a part.

Developing relationships within the group

Members of Transition Amherst were also relatively divided with how much time they wanted to spend in getting to know each other personally. Although a congenial
sense of friendship permeated the atmosphere of meetings, opportunities for personal interaction were limited to before and after the meeting and during the check-in and check-out.

Those with stronger ties to other community organizations seemed to need the personal connection less than those who joined Transition Amherst for the purpose of finding and building community. For example, Kat consistently said that she was very action-oriented and her primary concern was helping to organize activities and events, not necessarily build community. Fiona, on the other hand, saw Transition as a way for people to learn from each other, and create community by connecting more deeply around shared values. Thus another strength of the model may also be a weakness: The broad canvas it provides on which community members might (metaphorically) paint their dreams for community resiliency lends itself to a wide range of ideas, thoughts, projects and reasons to show up and contribute. Tensions arose in Transition Amherst, however, when there was no organization around how to prioritize the ideas, thoughts, and projects, and little investment in building personal relationships between members. (Some suggested the latter would take away from the much-needed time to “get things done.”) An effort to build personal relationships might have resulted in meetings that were more “fun” and an applied experience of practicing the micro version of the bigger version of a resilient community that Transition Amherst sought to create.

I suggest that the lack of time spent building personal relationships may be a significant point where Transition Amherst diverged from the global Transition model. The model is consistent in emphasizing the importance of maintaining and sustaining personal connections with other members throughout each stage of transitioning. This
might be done, according to the model, by throwing parties regularly, or just prioritizing consistent times to listen to each member discuss his/her thoughts and feelings about where the group is at and where the group is going. As a participant in Transition Amherst, I personally felt the most connected and committed to the group during the moments that emerged organically when people were connecting personally, sharing the stories of their daily lives, and their dreams for their community.

**Part II**

The second part of this conclusion will delve more deeply into findings and recommendations from each chapter of this project: The appeal of the glocal Transition narrative, measuring the impact of Transition, the role of ideology and culture, the question of sustainability, the multiscalar role of culture, diversity and inclusion, and finally the relationship between technology, social movements and the Transition movement.

**Appeal of the Glocal Narrative**

As noted earlier, in six years, the Transition movement has grown from a few initiatives in England, to more than 2000 initiatives registered with the Transition Network in more than 35 countries. I suggest that the appeal is connected to and contextualized by a very specific set of cultural and historical moments, the most prominent of which are a series of shared and impending in varying degrees, global environmental, financial and social crises that may make it appealing to certain demographics of people with the resources to participate. Data from this project also suggests that as noted earlier, the appeal(s) of the Transition narrative may indicate why
people become interested in and join their Transition towns but must be distinguished from the ways in which these appeals are actually applied and used by members on the ground and/or as a means to keep people involved with the initiative.

Just as the crises are global and multilayered and interconnected, so too does the Transition movement try to make its many responses, which I suspect is its greatest appeal: Anybody searching for a positive way to respond to the unsustainability of their world is invited to join the Transition movement by starting their own Transition initiative or joining one that is already formed.

Indeed the emphasis on the utopian ideal of a “community coming together in the face of crisis” was a mobilizing and romantic narrative that appealed to members of Transition Amherst consistent with the model’s own commentary: “But what we are convinced of is this if we wait for the governments, it’ll be too little, too late; if we act as individuals, it’ll be too little, but if we act as communities, it might just be enough, just in time.” (Transitionnetwork.org)

Such mobilizing narratives are successful in part because they connect the well-being of a person to the well being of a community, intentionally not focusing on the negative impacts of climate change and resource depletion, but rather emphasizing the need to work and live happily together. Although the Transition movement concerns itself primarily with environmental issues, the community-focused narrative is potentially broad and vast enough to appeal to a wider range of people in a community. All members of Transition Amherst indicated that they were drawn to the initiative because of the positive community based response.
Indeed Jasmine suggested that an even stronger community-centered appeal in the United States might focus on building community as a way to ameliorate an increasingly violent gun culture. My interview with her occurred a few weeks after the Sandy Hook School massacre, where 20 children and six adults were fatally shot by a disturbed 20-year-old, and less than six years after the Virginia Tech massacre where a senior student killed 32 people and wounded 17 others. She noted that in her community in Colombia, school shootings were unheard of, largely because of the community-based structures of support and connection that preemptively recognized when somebody was potentially dangerous and supported the family of that person while he or she was either removed from the community or received the help he/she needed. By focusing the resiliency narrative on building community in the face of relevant (and relatively) shared crises, the Transition movement has the potential to continue to appeal to larger numbers of people.

Two additional themes emerged from the data that focused primarily on interviews with and observations of members of Transition Amherst that were consistent with comments from national and global Transition hubs: A ubiquitous and active presence through diverse media channels that successfully brands Transition as a rapidly growing and effective social movement; and a foundation that poses a plausible alternative to capitalism, based on the values of permaculture: earth share, people share, fair share. The former appeals operate in conjunction with each other to provide an overall strategy for attracting large numbers of people to the Transition movement, however, it is important again to note that “large” numbers of people must not necessarily be equated with “diverse” numbers.
The movement’s staunch apolitical stance may potentially make it appealing to as wide a variety of people as possible, however, this may come at the expense of alienating vulnerable populations in a community who are already in crisis. The movement would do well to incorporate a more contextual and tactical understanding of resistance in situations that demanded it while supporting those Transition towns who seek to take a political stand regarding an issue which may adversely affect a vulnerable part of the community.

Measuring Impact

Although the model does provide some guidelines for how to begin to measure the impact of the efforts of a Transition initiative, and encourages initiatives to begin the process early on, doing so was not a priority for Transition Amherst. Thus, my findings result from a participatory, grass roots approach by focusing on the thoughts, feelings, opinions and ideas of members of Transition Amherst regarding what their perception of the initiative’s impact. Most members defined “successful” impact as that which generated deeper dialogue, education, and support within the community for living more sustainably. Satisfaction was expressed with events that were perceived to be well attended, although the numbers of people were always relevant to each event. For example, a reskilling workshop on winter bicycling that had more than a dozen people in attendance was lauded as a success. Hosting a table at the annual Transition Amherst Sustainability Festival where more than 100 people signed the sign-up sheet was deemed to be a similar success.

Data suggests that members shared both disappointment and satisfaction with the overall impact of Transition Amherst and this was sometimes because of, but more often,
in spite of the way in which the initiating group functioned. In general, members referred to the practical manifestations including the reskilling workshops, movie nights, and town walks; the capacity for Transition to serve as a communication network between similarly-aligned groups and activities; the neighbor-to-neighbor activities, the personal learning, and the planning and implementation of the Great Unleashing as categories under which the role and impact of Transition Amherst might be better understood, however there was little communicated interest in developing a way to measure how much of an impact each event had.

The town of Amherst has dozens of local organizations devoted to various sustainability missions for the town. Thus perhaps the greatest potential impact of an initiative like Transition was its capacity to function as a network between all of the groups. Transition Amherst might have achieved a more notable impact overall had the group made the cultivation of such a network a central priority and set its goals around developing and sustaining it.

As noted earlier, one of the limitations to this dissertation is that there is no objective way to measure a community’s resiliency. Transition Amherst prioritized its agenda items which included the afore-mentioned categories, and not the development of indicators to determine the extent to which they were impacting the town.

**The Role of Ideology and Culture**

The Transition model builds upon post Marxist theories for achieving sustainable social change as it seeks an ideological mobilization for communities away from the unsustainable consequences of capitalism and towards greater sustainability, resiliency.
and happiness in collective community building. The movement is able to do this by taking a local cultural approach to environmental problems that suggests that communities must work together based on their own needs to shift the values in order to create sustainable solutions to the problems of peak oil and climate change.

Unfortunately, in local practice the theories did not always translate successfully. Many members of Transition Amherst lamented that the group, while working on supporting a cultural shift for the larger community did not have a stronger social connection with one another, nor was an emphasis placed on community building within Transition Amherst, even though it was a shared value expressed for the larger community. Members found it difficult to reconcile the model’s cultural ethos that “meetings be fun and feel more like a party” (Transition Network) with the practical and sometimes tedious process of accomplishing tasks and organizing activities and events. Members of Transition Amherst tended to lean toward the latter at the expense of the former.

More specific guidelines from the Transition model that emphasize that the cultural shift an initiative seeks to create in the community might also be practiced in the initiating group, could help support members in their initiatives. For example, the model might encourage members to perceive the act of building relationships as a kind of labor that accomplishes a primary task of a Transition town, as opposed to distracting from the labor of more important tasks like organizing events. The process of valuing both forms of labor is complicated by the fact that some members were not looking to build relationships; they were looking to organize a workshop on bicycles. However, more specific guidelines from the Transition model might emphasize that the work will be
more productive and ultimately more sustainable with the foundation of connection between members, and a culture that supports the personal care, the second part of the permaculture principles. While the model does emphasize the importance of “having fun” as part of the culture of the group, it does not emphasize how to negotiate the relationship between personal connections and activity organizing or the need to prioritize the former in order to make the latter as effective as possible.

It is interesting to note that taking a local cultural approach may work to the detriment of the group in certain instances. Jasmine suggested, for example, that many members of Transition Amherst had a difficult time shifting their own cultural sensibilities even as they expressed a longing for greater connection. The idea of potlucks and other social gatherings, although met with a positive reaction, were not a priority for the group and did not occur with any frequency. Some members suggested that it may be easier for cultures of support to emerge in the face of an immediate crisis, which may reinforce the finding that members of Transition Amherst were part of the community that had the resources to prepare for crises but were not necessarily in crisis.

Jarod Paul said:

“I’ve mostly lived in suburbia throughout my life and it’s an isolating experience and I think of tiny little towns in Costa Rica where I’ve lived where nobody can afford to do that. They have a practical need for their neighbors and therefore get together.” (Interview, December 12, 2012)

While some members did express satisfaction with the relationships that developed between members while working on projects, there was never a sense that this was a priority, as the focus was almost always on the projects themselves—reskilling workshops, movie nights, and community events, etc.
Finally, from a global culture perspective, the Transition movement, although still in its infancy, has been vulnerable to critiques of colonialism in its effort to create a globalizing (perma)culture of shared values. Such values—living harmoniously and respectfully with the earth, using resources sustainably—borrow heavily from indigenous cultures, yet are (perhaps unintentionally) framed as developed from within the Transition movement. I suggest that such critiques of colonialism will continue to be launched against the Transition movement so long as it does not communicate effectively the extent to which it has borrowed and reframed older indigenous values, perhaps better contextualizing itself amid the long historical trajectory of cultures of sustainability and the networks they produce. One way the model might communicate this better is through its diverse trainers, who are largely responsible for translating the model to a local, cultural context.

**Are Transition Towns Sustainable?**

Although measuring the long-term viability of a local Transition initiative is difficult, numerous factors do contribute to and inform its ability to succeed long-term in a community. The Transition Network makes it clear that at this point, seven years out, there is as yet no Transition Town that is officially done with “transitioning.” Further research of the movement might make note if and when a town declares itself so.

At the time of this writing, Transition activity was still occurring in Amherst under the guise of the Transition Amherst Council of Working Groups which included similar activities that the initiating group was coordinating, however, the majority of the members of the Transition Amherst initiating group had stopped attending. Findings indicate that Transition Amherst did suffer from four of the five following factors noted
in the Transition model that negatively impact an initiative’s momentum: 1) Members fail
to plan for the future; 2) there are no new participants over time; 3) unaddressed
problems create tensions between members of the group; 4) members feel that there is too
much “processing” and not enough “doing” and finally 5) funding to support the
continued development of projects runs out. Data also suggests that the most significant
impact on Transition Amherst momentum was the lack of consistent and stable leadership
within the group. Such leadership would have enabled an effective facilitation of
meetings, where a consistent consensus process was defined and agreed upon; balance
could be negotiated between time spent on planning actions and developing group
processes; and time spent discussing the groups projects and building deeper connections
with one another based on the values that brought them to the group in the first place. The
Transition model provides governance tools for running effective meetings, however, it
does not offer resources for supporting effective leaders that can create the democratic
space for all voices to be heard, while also holding others accountable to and responsible
for their actions connected to the Transition initiative.

**Diversity and Inclusion in Transition**

A common perception among participants, community members and academics is
that the majority of participants in the Transition movement are white, educated and
middle to upper middle class. Participants in Transition Amherst are consistent with this
perception, and findings from this project are consistent with and build upon past
research on diversity in the Transition movement. (Cohen, 2010, Astyk 2013). First,
although the model emphasizes the importance of “diversity and inclusion” in building an
initiative, the structure is appealing to a segment of the population with the resources and
structures of support to participate in an initiative that is centered on *preparing* for crisis, while not necessarily emphasizing or prioritizing those already *in* crisis, many of whom do not have the capacity to or interest in participating. (Astyk, 2013) Although Amherst is home to more than 40,000 students and the Amherst Survival Center services more than 3,000 people in need with food, clothing, and companionship, very little sustained effort was made to engage with these segments of the Amherst population. Most members did express a desire to “move beyond the choir” of participants but attributed the lack of sustained communication to a lack of time and a lack of prioritizing this activity as a focus.

It is not clear if and how many members of a population need to participate in a Transition initiative in order for a community to be resilient. I want to be careful not to subscribe to the same language I am attempting to critique by implying that Transition Amherst needs to work on “including others.” Indeed, several members felt that Transition Amherst was open to whomever wanted to participate, but the initiative did not necessarily have an obligation to engage with every part of the community. The priority, in other words, was doing the work, not spending the time making the work appealing to others.

It is important to note that terms like “inclusivity” and “outreach” in the context of Transition were rejected by several people of color who found the assumptions on which such words are predicated to be offensive. A different discursive framing might be more effective in generating dialogue with people who might not otherwise be attracted to such an initiative. For example, a narrative that recognized and encouraged learning from informal networks of sustainability that may occur as a result of economic necessity
and not necessarily by choice, might serve to build better bridges with more diverse populations in the community. For example, Transition Amherst might invite somebody from the community, who out of financial necessity, cans and freezes all of his/her garden produce for the winter. The initiative might invite people who do not have the resources to purchase a car to talk about alternative transportation models.

A second recommendation for a more engaging narrative: Tie the efforts to financial concerns. This finding supports previous research. (Connors and MacDonald, 2010) Jarod Paul noted that a more diverse range of participants were likely to come to Transition workshops in both Transition Amherst and Transition New Haven if they felt that they were going to learn something like winterizing their windows for example, that would save them money in the long term. Similarly, a Transition initiative in Greyton South Africa, widely lauded by the Transition Network for its many successes, was recently featured in a German TV documentary. The people who were part of the initiative tied each project to a financial incentive—from students growing their own food at school to save families money spent buying their own vegetables, to installing solar panels in schools that will not only allow the school to save money on electricity but to eventually sell the electricity and use the profits to hire more teachers and supplies for students. (http://www.transitionnetwork.org/news/2013-05-07/transition-town-greyton-south-africa-tv)

A third recommendation: following up on Astyk’s (2013) suggestions regarding following the church model and Jarod Paul’s ideas (that build upon the Transition movements’) regarding throwing more parties, Transition Amherst could throw more social gatherings that offer resources to people who may not otherwise be inclined to
come: A babysitter on hand perhaps to watch children, or a meal that everybody shares, designated time to spent getting to know one another. The gesture might signify an awareness that not everybody has the resources available to participate in Transition, at the same that it creates the shared space for people to enjoy one another. As Astyk (2013) notes, “Many people who want to change the system have the luxury of being able to do so while working within the system. Support those who can’t and you will draw more people.”

Building upon Carolyne Stayton, executive director of Transition US suggestion, members of Transition Amherst might volunteer to form a subgroup that could attend the events of other groups in the community and start a dialogue from there, or focus on dialoging with “bridge” people who might be connected to many segments of the community.

Finally, the Transition movement frames itself as advocating a local cultural approach to transitioning away from fossil fuels and peak oil use. Thus each community must take its own grassroots participatory approach. I suggest, however, that is a rather impossible feat, as each town is undoubtedly made up of many cultures and classes of people. Connors and MacDonald (2010) ask: Does the cultural blindness required for mass “inclusivity” ultimately render the movement irrelevant to the mass support that it requires for it to be truly inclusive? I argue that a better discursive framing might acknowledge that each community is constituted by a variety of cultures and classes, many of which are already contributing to community resiliency. An effort on behalf of the movement to communicate this might serve to better engage those who
might not otherwise participate, if not assuage some of the critiques in the context of diversity.

**Digital Technology and Transition**

Although the Transition movement has arguably spread at the speed and rate it has due to its vast online presence, it is worth noting that from a local context, no members of Transition Amherst found out about the Transition movement via online sources. All members said that they heard about the movement and the local initiative via friends, after which they went to the website to learn more. I suggest this is a testament to and reflection of the general age of the group, none of whom grew up with the Internet, but it also suggests that digital technology does not replace or supercede interpersonal communication, but rather might serve to support it. These findings are consistent with the ways in which people in Egypt were mobilized in the uprising. Although the vast majority of population did not have access to the Internet, the people who did used social media to coordinate and mobilize actions and then spread it from neighborhood to neighborhood through the interpersonal connections of the community. (Polk 2013)

A textual analysis of the Transition Movement’s online activities including its website and social media outlets suggests that the movement’s use of digital technology, specifically the Internet serves two primary purposes: Generally one-way information transmission about the methods, practices, guidelines, and values of the Transition movement and as a vehicle for global branding under a unified voice.

Although Transition builds upon and has developed alongside similar social movements that have been mobilized in part due to digital technology and social media, like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, Transition distinguishes itself from the
others by framing itself as nonpolitical. Since the Transition movement’s activities are not necessarily bounded to specific times and places (each initiative coordinates its own events and activities), its online communication tools can serve as a global resource and support structure, from which each initiative might pick and choose relative to its own needs.

In general, members of Transition Amherst were ambivalent about digital technology, preferring a book club to discuss the movement’s most recent publication rather than accessing it online; prioritizing the development of a website, yet leaving primary control over the design and posting of content to one person, despite having access and the ability to contribute to the website. The group did use email as a primary way to communicate, especially when it was necessary to make deadline-driven decisions that were decided during meetings. But again, the digital communication did not necessarily take the place of interpersonal communication; it served as a way to support it.

Finally, I suggest that there is a connection to be made between the digital facilitation of social movements like Occupy, the Arab Spring and Transition and the “leaderless” ethos that inform an important part of their identities. Online networks can be used to facilitate communication around actions and causes, not on specific leaders, and allow for an anonymity that makes it potentially easier to organize subversive political action. Networks provide the opportunity for an initial flattening of hierarchies and a dismantling of the notion of “leader” as a lone hierarchical figure of authority, a shared goal of movements like Transition that seek a more collective, participatory, and equitable democracy.
I also argue however, that the valorization of “leaderlessness” in the name of collectivity may ultimately be to the detriment of a movement like Transition and its local initiatives. Transition Amherst, modeling the larger leaderless ethos facilitated in part by Transition’s global network, did not invest in developing consistent leadership and poor communication and unresolved tensions resulted, negatively impacting the sustainability of the group. An initiative must prioritize the space and the structures necessary to select and train collaborative and skilled leader(s) who can nurture the strengths of the group, aid in successful facilitation, hold others accountable, and continue to cultivate relationships online and offline that will ultimately strengthen and sustain the movement.

Some final concluding thoughts: Heidi Flour, a member of Portland [Maine] Permaculture and the founder of the Field School articulated what many in Transition Amherst and others involved with Transition feel about the movement. I note it here in the conclusion as a way to capture the Transition movement in the context of a larger trajectory of a increasing global awareness of unsustainable practices—environmentally, economically, and socially—in this current moment:

“Do I think Transition is working? I think people's awareness is shifting - and in some places the safety net of a Transition town is probably catching a lot of people who would otherwise feel very alone. In other places, I think decentralized groups that are focused on skills and action (like Portland Permaculture) are more effective because they are allowing people to simply get their hands dirty and build new things - and the conversation and planning is happening either in service of those actions and skills or as a result of. Basically, I think it all depends on the community and its make up.” (Email, February 6, 2013)

If one were to picture the Transition movement as the stem of the rhizome and its local initiatives as the stems and shoots, the ability for the latter to grow and stay healthy, feeding into and supporting the robust stem—will be dependent upon both the local
context in which it emerges, and upon the extent to which the participants are able to adapt and (re)produce the global guidelines. Thus the relationship between the two: the shoots and branches and the stem, is constitutive of the whole but simultaneously synchronistic, both using each other to grow strong and sustainable.

The purpose of this project was to better understand this relationship by studying one shoot, Transition Amherst, the local contexts in which it emerged and the ways in which it adapted (and didn’t) the global Transition model. The community of Amherst, with its vast array of sustainability organizations and local environmental groups, community supported agriculture farms, and a mainstream ideology that supports the values of community resiliency, even as a large part of its residents are transient, presented a unique research site, primarily because its array of sustainability efforts may offer a unique foresight into the future of many communities in the context of responses to impending crises. As awareness continues to grow around climate change, and resource depletion, as civil unrest and global protests of corruption continue around the world, and as people face the challenges of financial insecurity due to unsustainable economic systems, there has been a renewed focus on the “local” with more community-based organizations, nonprofits, and local sustainability efforts. Although the Transition model has captured the imagination and interest of thousands of people around the world with its apolitical positive discursive framing, and a foundation in permaculture principles, findings from an ethnography of Transition Amherst indicate that its greatest strength will be its capacity to build upon its rhizomatic principles by positioning itself as an ally to local organizations and others who are contributing to community resiliency—informally and formally. Transition initiatives must prioritize communication and
dialogue with others who are have been and already are contributing to their community’s resiliency, including local sustainability organizations, campaigns, and the practices of independent people. This is not emphasized as a priority within the model nor was it a priority for Transition Amherst. But doing so might also effectively position Transition on a historical trajectory of community-led responses to global environmental and economic crises, which may also ease the local and global critiques of colonialism and cooptation as well as invite broader engagement with more diverse populations within a community. One way to work toward these goals is for initiatives to create the space to develop effective and collaborative leaders who will be committed to working on facilitating such connections in the community, (with the understanding that well-intentioned groups are often in competition for funds, recognition, and participants) and negotiating the various visions, plans and projects that each member has with the tensions that inevitably arise as members negotiate their relationships, the amount of time they have to contribute, and the resources accessible for accomplishing their goals.

Time, scope, and scale were the biggest limitations to this dissertation research. Further research is necessary and might delve more deeply into comparative analyses of other communication for development and social change processes that have been tested over a longer period of time. For example, additional research might include a comparative analysis of the Transition movement with the internationally renowned SKYRIVER process, a participatory communication process that uses video and film tools to enhance local participation in decision-making processes. The process was first developed by former VISTA volunteer Tim Kennedy as a way to encourage full participation of Emmonak villagers in Alaska in identifying their needs and aspirations.
while fostering local initiation of solutions and was highly successful in initiating positive
changes within the community. (Kennedy 2008) Similar to the Transition model, the
SKYRIVER process has been replicated in communities all over the world, and shares
many fundamental principles and assumptions of Transition, including an emphasis on
mobilizing the competencies of community members, instead of the resolution of an issue
as an end in itself, (p 194), and a focus on fostering the development of community
initiated solutions, not just descriptions of problems or complaints (p 198). Further
research that includes a comparative analysis of the two models is particularly important
in the context of how leadership is perceived and negotiated, as the SKYRIVER process
has a much more developed and organized leadership structure, and one that might
contribute great value to the Transition model. For example, the SKYRIVER process
refers to the necessity of a “Social Mobilizer”, (p 157) who is concerned with helping to
create an attitude change within the community being assisted and supports the capacities
and competencies of members to plan and implement their own social change process
without necessarily being dependent on the Mobilizer. The model contains mechanisms
that insure accountability of the Social Mobilizer and local leaders via the democratic
selection of community spokespersons and by community review and approval of the
spokespersons statements, and prevents the imposition of external agendas. It also
acknowledges the many layers and forms of leadership that exist within a community and
seeks to communicate the process (via the Social Mobilizer) to formal leaders in order to
obtain their approval. The Transition model does not provide any such framework for or
recognition of leadership. Further research might explore if and how the a process like
SKYRIVER might be implemented in a Transition town.
Although this is the first comprehensive ethnography of a Transition Town initiative, further research might elaborate on the themes of each chapter with a comparative analysis that considers Transition initiatives in other geographical locations. For example, another study might look more closely at the reasons people participate in Transition and the ways in which such participation is informed by their culture and class. Additional research might work on developing resiliency indicators for communities that might be compared with the impact of Transition initiatives. In terms of communication for development and social change, further research might explore the communication processes of Transition initiatives that view themselves as successful and sustainable in order to determine the qualities and characteristics that have made them so. A comparative analysis might focus on the ways in which urban and rural initiatives work and communicate with each other or perhaps focus on the similarities and differences between Transition and other grassroots social movements focused on community responses to impending global crises such as Bill McKibbon’s 350.org or to social movements in the past to better historically contextualize the Transition movement.

Finally, although much of my research findings were focused specifically on how a Transition initiative operates and functions, I suggest that any movement that taps into the importance of place as an idea simultaneously imagined and embodied at a historical moment when so much of the planet is being irrevocably damaged and our ties to place-based communities of support are being challenged and redirected by digital possibilities, is important to consider. That such a movement has spread so quickly and to so many communities suggests perhaps that the possibility of Transition must be considered not only as a response to an environmental crisis, but as a project that might fulfill a deeper
longing for a connection to place; to a geographically-bounded and carefully cultivated sense of home, and the opportunity to contribute to making it better.
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