

Spaces for sharing? Challenges of providing emotional support online

As the Internet becomes an ever more important part of our daily lives, organisations providing emotional support through traditional channels (such as face-to-face and telephone) are moving online, or at least anticipating the need to do so. Drawing on a recent study of online trust and empathy in the context of extreme emotional distress, this briefing aims to highlight issues that will be of interest to potential providers and users of online 'safe spaces'.

About the study

'A Shared Space and a Space for Sharing' was a research project funded as part of the EMoTICON programme, which aimed to understand issues of trust and empathy in online communication. This particular project explored these issues in the specific context of people facing potentially life-threatening circumstances of various kinds. This briefing draws on findings from the part of the study led by researchers at The University of Edinburgh, which focused on experiences of emotional distress and suicidality.

The research had two main elements: a study of the digital work of Samaritans (involving among other elements, observation of online training, a survey and interviews with both users of Samaritans email service (n=317) and volunteers (n=1865) providing emotional support), and an exploration of everyday talk about emotional distress in the existing online space of Twitter.

Samaritans email service

Although Samaritans is best known for its telephone-based emotional support, for more than twenty years it has also provided support via email, responding to some 20,000 messages a year via the composite volunteer identity of 'jo@samaritans'. As such, it provides a useful case study of some of the issues associated with online text-based support that complements existing or more conventional forms of spoken emotional support.

Key points

- This study explores some of the challenges of providing emotional support in 'safe spaces' online.
- It was based partly on research with users of, and volunteers from, Samaritans' email support service but also drew on analysis of conversations on Twitter relating to emotional distress.
- Different forms of online support offer different things and it should not be assumed that users of such spaces will always have a preference for instant messaging or other channels offering immediate response.
- Text-based, online communication poses particular challenges in terms of building and maintaining trust, and reading and writing empathy.
- These challenges need to be reflected in the way that any volunteers providing support are recruited, trained and supervised.
- Organisations need to tread carefully when entering existing online spaces. In particular, they need to be aware that different spaces have different cultures and norms of support, and that some users of such spaces may value the opportunity to express emotional distress without attracting professional attention or intervention.

Of the users of the Samaritans' email service surveyed as part of the research, 77% were female, 88% were aged under 45, and 84% identified as white. Two-thirds (67%) had first contacted Samaritans within the last year, and around half (45%) had done so within the last month. One in five (18%) suggested that their most recent contact with Samaritans was

a one-off but three-quarters (76%) indicated that it was part of a longer conversation or series of messages. It was also clear from the follow-up qualitative research that a sizeable proportion of all contacts came from individuals located outside the UK, highlighting the difficulty for organisations in maintaining a geographically-bounded remit within an online environment.

It might be assumed that individuals using email for emotional support would be experiencing problems less urgent or severe than those contacting Samaritans by telephone. But this does not appear to be the case – with 68% of the former indicating that they were feeling suicidal on the last occasion that they made contact via email.

When asked *why* they had chosen email rather than some other mode of communication most said that they simply found it easier to write about their feelings. In particular, they seemed to value the opportunity for ‘reflection through writing’ and the sense of emotional control through distance that email offers (see section below on Distance, control and emotions in online communications). This suggests that text-based communication in general offers something that more obviously ‘embodied’ forms of contact do not, and that not everyone will necessarily want to move to more immediate and synchronous methods, such as instant messaging, as they become available. Those experiencing distress may also wish to avoid forms of social media that they associate with ‘happy’ people and posts.

There was an interesting contrast between the demographics and preferences of Samaritans volunteers and those of the users who responded to the survey, who tended to be young and highly digitally literate. While neither users nor volunteers are homogeneous groups, this divergence does suggest a need to accommodate and balance the communication preferences of both.

Trusting Jo: how organisational and interpersonal trust interact online

What is the basis of trust in online emotional support? The research suggested that trust in Samaritans’ email service was multidimensional, with both organisational and interpersonal features. Individual volunteers might get a ‘warrant for trust’ from users’ familiarity with the organisational brand but this was then tested and renegotiated through contact with individual volunteers – all of whom communicate with users via the composite identity of ‘Jo’.

Background trust in Samaritans to operate and behave benevolently comes partly from simple familiarity with the ‘brand’: ‘it’s like trying to remember when I found out about Kellogg’s cornflakes, they’re just there!’ (George, user). Potential users also feel reassured by the ‘officialdom’ and ‘vaguely professional’ web pages and privacy policies and what George referred to as a ‘house style’ or Samaritans’ ‘recognisable voice’. The fact that the service is free is, for some, a marker of ‘trustworthiness’, as are the organisation’s overarching charitable status and its declared (and known) commitments to confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. There is also an important element of background trust in the technology and in Samaritans’ appropriate deployment of that.

With regards to who or what I’m trusting, it’d be foolish to say that I’m trusting in just one single link in the chain. I’m trusting the format of email to ensure the security of my confessions. I’m trusting in the security of the Samaritans databanks. I’m trusting in the discretion of the volunteers I speak to. I’m trusting in the branch’s ability to properly select and train volunteers, and maintain their equipment. I’m trusting in the entire organisation, from the highest level to the lowest. By putting trust into the Samaritans service, there are so many factors that are involved, and none of them is more important than any other.

(Steven, user interview)

But some things can threaten the maintenance of trust. The composite identity of Jo, for example, complicates the flow of trust between the organisation and individual volunteers. Some email users identified a tension between being encouraged to make a personal connection with the organisation through Jo and then being advised that emails are answered by ‘the next available volunteer’. The key concern for some other users is less the fact, or their awareness, of there being different volunteers but rather that there should be a sense of consistency in the responses they receive. This ‘through line’ or thread is something different from what might develop through a one-to-one relationship.

A key dimension of trust in practice is the maintenance of confidentiality. This is a dimension that most participants did not believe had been breached during their interactions with Samaritans. More common, though, was a sense that trust was sometimes undermined by a perceived inconsistency in the empathic tone or content between emails. Some volunteers suggest that this is more likely to happen in longer email exchanges where the original reason for contact is no longer visible:

If your reply is part of a long conversation with numerous Samaritans branches, the reason the caller contacted us originally might have disappeared from the history so it can be more difficult to empathise without that context.

(Janet, volunteer)

A degree of inconsistency can be read as authentic and ‘human’, helping the service to be perceived as not robotic or ‘Siri-like’ (James, user) and, as such, preferable to stock Samaritans phrases which can be heard as ‘a wall’ (Phoebe, user). But more substantive inconsistencies or inconsistency in tone can severely undermine trust – in part, because the feeling of having shared of oneself (or put oneself ‘on the line’) means that a lack of empathy in return can be experienced as a rejection of the self.

Significant inconsistencies in the tone or substance of replies – and, in particular, perceived failures of empathy in the face of highly emotional disclosures on the part of users – can undermine trust. In this context, the potential existence of a written ‘back story’ takes on a particular significance and distinguishes email from the ‘one call at a time’ character of the phone service (and, potentially, from a service based on instant messaging).

“Trust and empathy are fundamental to Samaritans service, and this study has reinforced how complex developing trust and empathy can be when providing emotional support through online services. The research provides a really useful insight into the differing perspectives of

volunteers and callers around what empathy means and how it is experienced during online support and enables us to better understand how to provide effective online support to people in emotional distress.”

Ruth Sutherland, Samaritans CEO

Distance, control and emotions in online communication

Although we often associate emotional disclosure with intimacy and proximity, it is partly the distance created by Samaritans' email service that allows for the ability to share. This is in line with other research on online communication which has suggested that the relative anonymity of online communication allows people to safeguard privacy while simultaneously increasing their sense of control and, therefore, openness (Walther, 1996; Taddei & Contena, 2013). But it is important to understand that different forms of communication construct distance – and the associated concept of control – in different ways.

In written communication in general, the body and voice are removed from the exchange, allowing users to exercise greater control over how their emotions are experienced physically and the extent to which that is evident to others. Written exchanges can also offer individuals a degree of analytical distance between themselves and their emotions. In other words, the gaps between communications (the silences) and the very process of 'putting into words' involves reflection, and this is often viewed as being as helpful as the content of volunteers' replies.

Of course, not all written modes of communication can replicate this analytical 'space' or sense of silence – indeed, there are reasons to think that text and instant messaging might collapse some of the distance associated with email simply because of the constraints on length and speed of replies (Instant Messaging, as its names suggests, involves 'real time' interaction, while text messaging sits somewhere between IM and email). More generally, email can be seen as offering users greater distance and greater control (over the pace and content of the exchange) than other written forms. However, IM retains some advantages of email, including the removal of the body and voice from the exchange and the ability to engage in expressive writing (Dolev-Cohen & Barak 2013). It also has some additional advantages by comparison with email, including continuity with a single volunteer during an exchange (which may help to address the issue of inconsistency of responses sometimes present with email), and a process of back-and-forth, clarification and feedback from users, as well as the ability to use the service during periods of acute distress.

Writing and reading empathy online

Although the concept of empathy is core to Samaritans' principles and practice, it is difficult to define or demonstrate – an ambiguity that is highlighted by the move to online practice.

It goes without saying that Samaritans aims to offer the same level of empathy regardless of medium; but this does not mean that the skills required to demonstrate empathy in written and spoken exchange are necessarily identical. Some of the ways in which Samaritans volunteers 'do' empathy in email responses include reflecting, questioning and use of particular words and tone. While these themes are familiar from telephone-based support, there are issues about the form they take in the context of non-immediate written communication. Listening and silence are two core areas in which training needs to be able to offer a nuanced exploration of these differences.

While the research shows, then, how organisations might be able to encourage or 'do' trust and empathy online in spaces they have constituted, it also illustrates that both trust and empathy are mediated by these different online spaces and technologies. This suggests the need for organisations to tread carefully if they choose to enter existing online spaces and to seek to understand the ways in which emotional support may already be happening and understood within those spaces. Two other elements of the research help to illustrate these sensitivities and complexities.

Understanding existing 'safe spaces'

In 2014, Samaritans made a well-publicised but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to launch Samaritans Radar – an app designed to offer people a second chance to see tweets from people they knew who might be struggling to cope. The research examined some of the reaction to this, through an analysis of blogs referring to Radar.

Although the app was generally seen as well-intentioned, it prompted significant adverse reaction from those who saw Twitter as a space in which they felt safe to express their emotions without judgement or intervention, and who saw the app as potentially intrusive and mechanistic. There were also suggestions that the app might have the perverse effect of deterring people from expressing their emotions online, to avoid the possibility of monitoring.

This highlights the dual ways in which online spaces might be thought of as safe for people experiencing severe emotional distress. The app implicitly invokes the idea of the web as a space in which individuals might be rendered safe from the risk of harm, through identification and (potentially) intervention. However, some existing users of Twitter saw it as precisely the opposite: a space in which they felt safe to express emotional



distress, without having to worry about judgement, surveillance or intervention (Brownlie, under review).

‘Empathy rituals’ and the difficulty of interpreting emotional expression online

The research also examined ‘ordinary’ interactions between Twitter users around the expression of emotional distress. Although other studies have explored emotional expression on Twitter at an aggregate level, this project analysed individual

‘conversations’. This work suggested that while individuals who have expressed emotional distress online may respond positively to supportive replies, this may be a form of ‘empathy ritual’ (Brownlie and Shaw, under review)– a way of saving face or backing away from their own expressions of vulnerability – rather than necessarily a sign of improvement in their emotional state. Again, this highlights the need to be cautious in how we read expressions of emotion online.

Key lessons for organisations

- It is important to manage expectations of online services by providing information to potential users about what to expect from different channels in terms of length of response, response times, use of questions and so on.
- The challenges of providing a geographically-bounded service need to be anticipated and recognised, along with the potential differences in the characteristics and needs of users outside the UK.
- In the absence of familiarity as a basis for trust, consistency of response takes on a particular importance.
- The future is likely to be multichannel: in other words, individuals are likely to contact organisations for emotional support in different ways, at different moments, for different reasons. Moving service users between channels is clearly a technical challenge, but it is also an emotional one for both users and volunteers.
- While it seems reasonable to assume that there is a large, and largely untapped market for emotional support provided via social apps, microblogging and social media, the continued demand for Samaritans email service suggests that there may be limits to the extent that even those groups who are most comfortable with emerging technologies (such as young people) are looking to discuss their emotions in one- to-many or many-to-many environments.
- Within any age group, individuals are looking for different things. Some may simply be looking for the reassurance that someone is ‘there’; others may value the opportunity to think things through and put things into words more than the response they subsequently receive.
- Ultimately, organisations need to steer people towards forms of support that are most likely to meet their needs. That implies a need for greater clarity about the key features, advantages and limitations of different channels, and communicating that information effectively to potential users.
- Organisations need to tread carefully when entering existing online spaces. In particular, they need to be aware that different spaces have different cultures and norms of support, and that some users of such spaces may value the opportunity to express emotional distress without attracting professional attention or intervention.

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Contact: Centre for Research on Families and Relationships*

The University of Edinburgh, 23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN • Tel: 0131 651 1832 • E-mail: crfr@ed.ac.uk • @CRFRtweets

*A consortium of the Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Highlands and Islands and Stirling.