



“Who is here to learn?”

The role of the New Media Knowledge
network in the digital media sector

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Executive summary

This research on New Media Knowledge (NMK) has two purposes. First, it explores how organisations learn through NMK and use that knowledge for commercial purposes. By doing so – and this is the second purpose – this research unfolds the role of NMK in the field of digital media.

NMK is a knowledge and business development network (KBDN), which provides a range of digital media services including: events and conferences, courses and consultancy and online communication, i.e. a newsletter and website (www.nmk.co.uk), which is an information bank consisting of articles, reports and opinion pieces. The purpose of NMK is to improve organisations' bottom line. Thus, NMK has four key objectives. It aims to:

- stimulate innovation
- help realising market opportunities
- advance productivity
- shape strategic management

The underpinning idea of NMK is that organisations can develop their knowledge base and competitive edge through active participation and learning from others. The NMK works across different sectors having four audiences: digital media professionals, which are the "heartland" of NMK; people who need digital media knowledge in their work; people who wish to employ digital media professionals and people who have skills gaps in digital media.

NMK has been in existence since 1997. It is hosted by the University of Westminster (London) and based at WestmARC (the department of Applied Research and Consultancy) and it currently employs one full-time¹ and three part-time members of staff. Affiliation with the university enables NMK's independent status and impartial approach to the digital media industry.

The key characteristic of NMK is its 'intelligent centre'. The intelligent centre refers to two things: first, it is about NMK's knowledge capacity. To provide high quality services a constant development of the knowledge base and increased understanding of the digital media sector is necessary. The success of this knowledge capacity is tested by practitioners: they use NMK only when it adds value to their own work. The second feature of the intelligent centre is its collective memory. This means, that there is a record of knowledge; activities (e.g. events and articles online) are based on the previous NMK events; outcomes from debates, and ideas from practitioners. Thus, the intelligent centre is not just about the 'here and now' interplay between NMK and organisations, but, it is also about building up a collective memory.

Key findings

In this case study research learning is approached as a social phenomenon, hence the main focus is on NMK events. The data were collected through face-to-face semi-

¹ Ian Delaney has been NMK Editor since 2007.

structured interviews, blogs, participant observation and an online survey.

The role of NMK

- NMK brings the 'cottage' industry together through providing a trusted no-man's land where people can act as catalysts for each other, thus enhancing organisations' innovation capacity.
- By bringing people together to discuss, debate and harness critical thinking NMK strengthens the public sphere of the digital media industry. Consequently, this 'coming together' helps the industry to develop and gain competitive advantage.
- NMK's independent status enables it to raise controversial issues. Similarly, NMK furthers collaboration rather than competition in the field.
- NMK participants benchmark their own level of competence through NMK and, at the same time, become accountable to other NMK participants. Thus, the community develops an informal quality assurance – a system of checks and balances - which helps organisations to improve their performance.

Learning through NMK

- The research identified six different dimensions of learning through the network. Trust is a pre-condition for

being involved with NMK – and thus, a pre-condition for learning².

- Learning through NMK is demand driven consisting of six dimensions:
 - I) know-what & know-how
 - II) peer-to-peer learning and learning from leaders
 - III) learning assessed by the marketplace
 - IV) learning as identity building
 - V) learning through shared realities
 - VI) learning beyond organisational structures

Know-what & know-how

The first dimension, know-what & know-how are intertwined aspects of knowledge and essentially all learning is rooted in these two elements. Know-what refers to a theoretical side whereas know-how is about putting the theory into practice. Digital media is very much about learning by doing (know-how) but concepts (know-what) are also important.

It was found that being able to *conceptualise knowledge* is beneficial to organisations. For example, putting a label to different working methods and providing customers with clearly articulated models and concepts increases the company's credibility and is likely to give competitive advantage.

Peer-to-peer learning and learning from leaders

The second dimension explores peer-to-peer learning and learning from leaders. There

² Trust is tested in four ways. Further exploration, see p.14.

are always leading persons who point in new directions, but peer-to-peer learning has a key role in NMK. Peer-to-peer learning is described through the action learning framework³. The network provides a platform for people to come together, share knowledge and experiences and exchange opinions in a non-hierarchical environment. Learning is a participative process. In other words, NMK offers the opportunity to collectively exercise critical thinking especially around ambiguous questions.

Learning assessed by the marketplace

The third dimension describes how learning outcomes are difficult to measure in isolation, i.e. they cannot be evaluated in a traditional sense. This is due to the nature of learning: learning objectives are not prescribed, because the content of the events is defined by demand; it is constructed by participants. Hence, learning reflects both the present trends and future "horizon scanning". In addition, learning is a non-linear process where different pieces of knowledge are drawn from various sources. However, learning outcomes are assessed by the marketplace: *learning is tested in the marketplace* where the lack of knowledge is likely to be disadvantageous to the organisation.

Learning as identity building

The next dimension refers to learning as learning to be. Learning is an integral part of our identity building; through learning,

we aim to make sense of the world and want to be recognised in a way that is accepted by other members of our profession. NMK provides a forum for this recognition.

Learning through shared realities

NMK participants are 'self-selected' forming a loose community, where they can share experiences. By doing so, NMK participants share their realities. Through these participative processes, participants make sure that a high level of competence is achieved. The relationship becomes two-fold: *people both contribute to the network and they become accountable to it. They both belong and position themselves in the discourse. This means that the community forms its own informal accreditation system; an internal system of checks and balances.*

Learning beyond organisational structures

The sixth dimension focuses on learning and networking beyond organisational structures. Being involved with NMK is always a combination of learning and networking. Learning is at times planned, but can also be unplanned. This unplanned learning is referred as informal learning; regardless of lack of planning, there is recognition and reflection of learning.

Moreover, NMK is a digital media hub bringing together the 'cottage' industry: freelancers, SMEs and large corporations. Consequently, it provides opportunities for networking both physically and virtually; creating what Granovetter refers as 'weak ties'. NMK serves different participants in

³ Action learning is further explained in the third chapter (p.17)

different ways, depending on their background: freelancers have an opportunity to relate to bigger organisations' mindsets'. For people working for large organisations it offers an alternative industry platform and for those who work in different sectors, it proactively provides the vital information - 'missing piece' - that they need in their respective areas.

Conclusion

By providing opportunities for professionals to get together, debate and learn from others NMK actually *strengthens the public sphere of digital media*. NMK also reflects the current phenomenon that has spread along social networking tools and is something that social network theorists Shirky and Benkler have widely researched: people have the ability to self-organise outside organisational and formal structures with the help of the internet. People attend NMK events on the basis of 'self-organising'; they come there because of their personal drive and motivation. They come to NMK events because it helps them to succeed.

Moreover, the NMK model forms a set of pedagogical principles:

- Learning goals are not prescribed, they are customised and defined by participants themselves; hence they can vary depending on organisational needs and goals
- Learning content is generated through 'peer production'

- Learning can be put into practice quickly: learning opportunities are provided in bite-size chunks, which always reflect the current trends and future horizon scanning.

These pedagogical principles offer valuable educational tools which could be adopted by other industry sectors as well as educational institutions which continuously need to develop their role in a globalising world in terms of finding new forms of university-business collaboration and enhancing the UK's innovation capacity, skills development and life long learning.

This study is structured in the following way. The first chapter introduces the background for the research; the context, methodology and the process. The second chapter is about NMK and its knowledge and business development network model. The research findings are explored in the third chapter and are further discussed in the fourth and final chapter, which also draws a study to a conclusion.

Chapter 1. Background for the research

1.1. The purpose of the research

NMK has been in existence for eleven years (established in 1997), but no research had been conducted following its launch; thus there was no research-based evidence through which to describe NMK's work.

There are two main purposes for this research. First, it explores the role of NMK in the field of digital media and second, it opens up organisations' learning processes and how these learning outcomes are used to succeed in the

Research on external, independent knowledge and business development networks and their impact is a comparatively new area of academic inquiry

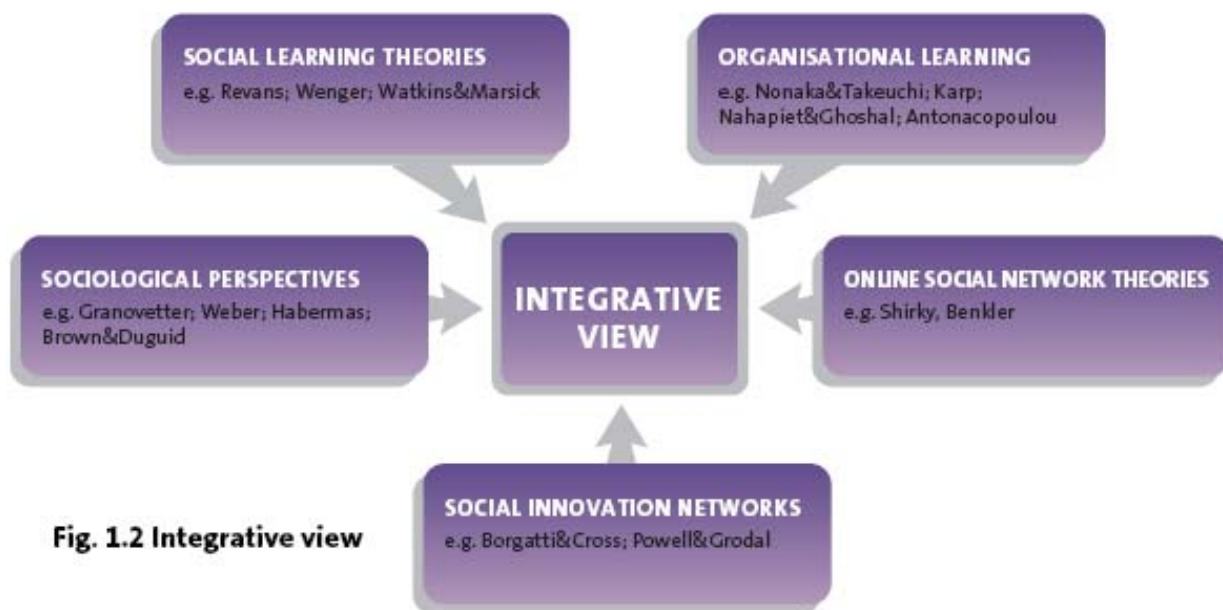


Fig. 1.2 Integrative view

marketplace.

As part of the research process feedback was collected to guide with future development. This data was analysed separately and disseminated through a presentation to the NMK team, who used it to a development plan based on the feedback.

1.2. Setting the research in the context

There are two things concerning the overarching research context that should be noted at this time. First, learning here is approached as a *social* rather than an individual process. Second, the main focus has been on NMK events, which serve as platforms for interaction.

and therefore still quite limited⁴. In order to capture the nature of the NMK model, the role of it as well as different dimensions of learning, I have used multiple frameworks and theories to get *an integrative view* of the phenomenon. Using multiple perspectives and bringing them together made it possible to capture and analyse the complexity and richness of the research focus⁵. The different perspectives are illustrated above (fig. 1.2).

Organisational learning literature provides essential knowledge of organisational dynamics in relation to organisations' external environment. Online network theories, in turn, offer useful perspective to explore the impact of the Internet and how it is changing our societies. Research on social innovation networks enables to

⁴ Powell & Grodal, 2006:58

⁵ Antonacopoulou & Chiva, 2007:288

understand the role of those networks in innovation building capacity. By introducing some sociological perspectives the research could be set in a wider context, i.e. what the implications of the findings are in terms of the digital media sector, education and learning. With the help of social learning theories it is possible analyse and interpret the data and hence, identify different learning dimensions.

1.3. Methodology

To find out the impact of NMK and examine various learning processes the most natural starting point was to collect data from NMK participants. The data collection was done through an online survey, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, participant observation and online blog posts.

The unit of analysis was prescribed very loosely in the beginning of the process; broadly, it was organisations involved with NMK. As the interviewees were 'self-selected' (they could volunteer to be interviewed through the online survey), the unit of analysis became to represent two groups: people working in digital media and people who need digital media knowledge in their own work.

The key research questions tried to find out reasons behind getting involved with NMK. Also, they were aimed at exploring the ways in which the interviewees learn. Thus, the interviews included questions such as:

- "Why do you attend/do not attend NMK events/ use the NMK online material?"
- Do you use NMK's online material?
- Can you give any examples of how you have used ideas [from NMK events] in your work?
- How do you update your knowledge/skills?

To build up a methodological backbone a case study approach and grounded theory methodology were used. Whereas grounded theory offers very practical tools to collect, analyse and theorise data, the case study framework provides a theoretical context for the research. In other words, case study tells you *where* you want to go with your research and grounded theory guides you *how* to get there¹.

1.4. The research process

The data were collected in four ways: online survey, interviews, online reports (blog posts) written by NMK participants and observation of an event by the author. In addition, I have studied NMK in a less structured way through attending several NMK events – both smaller scale events and bigger conferences – as well as one skills development course.

The online survey response rate was quite low: it resulted in 140 responses. The survey was advertised through 1) the newsletter which has 6000 subscribers all over the world, 2) the NMK's website and 3) an email sent to 1500 people in the NMK's database, i.e. people who have attended a

¹"Who is here to learn?"

NMK course in the past. Although there is some overlap between these groups, it is probable that several thousand people saw the link to the survey, but chose not to participate. The low response rate is not an uncommon issue with online surveys. The somewhat limited sample of 140 responses was, however, only one of the methods of data collection.

In total, I conducted face-to-face interviews with 11 people. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and approved by the interviewees. Alongside with the interviews, I collected blog posts written by NMK participants and I attended several events, conducting a participant observation on one of them.

1.5. Glossary

Although the study looks at the organisational performance of organisations involved with NMK, the focus is not in organisational learning *per se*. The focus is on *the interplay* between NMK and organisations. For this reason, 'learning' rather than 'organisational learning'⁶ is used in the text.

For the purpose of this study, the term 'organisation' is treated as an umbrella term used interchangeably with 'freelancer' and 'business'. Similarly, a 'practitioner' and NMK 'participant' refer to 'organisation'.

⁶ Organisational learning literature consists of various strands. For example, some authors focus on structures – e.g. Senge, de Geus - while others examine various organisational dynamics – e.g. Antonacopoulou, Rowe.

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Due to a limited space, it is not possible to comprehensively define the terms information, knowledge and learning here. However, for our purposes, it is useful to summarise the differences between them. Unlike information, knowledge requires a knower, i.e. knowledge is attached to a person. Moreover, information turning into knowledge involves a certain amount of assimilation and digestion of information.⁷ Learning, then, is about using knowledge, reflecting and positioning oneself in a relationship with knowledge⁸. In other words, learning requires an active agent who uses the knowledge; learning requires some form of action⁹.

Chapter 2. NMK

2.1. Network at the University of Westminster

NMK has been in existence since 1997. It is hosted by the University of Westminster (London) and based at WestmARC (the department of Applied Research and Consultancy) and it currently employs one full-time and three part-time members of staff. Support from the university enables NMK's independent status and impartial approach to the digital media industry. Hence, the network is not led by commercial

⁷ Brown & Duguid, 2002:119

⁸ Ibid: 126.

⁹ For further reading, *Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity* by Etienne Wenger (1998), which is also used in this research, provides a good insight in social learning theory. Also, Michael Polanyi's concept (1967) 'tacit knowledge' unfolds how people acquire knowledge and it has been widely used by educators.

interests. NMK is a knowledge and business development network (KBDN), which provides a range of digital media services including: events and conferences, courses and consultancy and online communication, i.e. a newsletter and website, which is an information bank consisting of articles, reports and opinion pieces. The underpinning idea of NMK is that organisations can develop their knowledge base and competitive advantage through active participation and learning from others. The aim is to improve organisations' bottom line through knowledge sharing.

2.2. Why NMK was set up: the landscape in the 1990s

The media landscape of the 1990s is sketched through two main perspectives – technological and discursive – which both paved the way for creating NMK in 1997. First, the 1990s was an era of phenomenal technological changes in the media industry: the emerge of the Internet meant that “traditional” media companies were trying to find new tools to survive in the volatile and rapidly changing market place. In fact, the whole industry was re-configuring itself. The new emerging online scene made it necessary for media professionals and companies to acquire new skills, understand new technological solutions and create new strategies. The Internet was also a level playing field in the 1990s, thus encouraging more entrepreneurialism than before.

Second, the academic discourse related to company strategies was increasingly interested in *knowledge* and *clustering*. They became a central theme in businesses' strategies and also the area of academic inquiry. A plethora of literature emerged to highlight the importance of learning, knowledge creation, as well as organisational learning¹⁰. A 'learning organisation' became the mantra: Geus, for example, presented that organisation should be seen as a living organism which seeks to survive and thrive and which can learn, adapt and govern itself¹¹. Similarly, clustering – collaboration with others – was considered to be vital for *competitive advantage*; a concept originated by economist Michael E. Porter¹² and nowadays referred to as Porterian concept¹³.

Reflecting both these phenomena – an enormous technological leap and knowledge creation and learning as the most valuable asset for companies – the idea of a network started to develop. Thus, NMK was set up with four main objectives:

- to facilitate innovation
- to help realising market opportunities
- to improve productivity
- to shape strategic management

¹⁰ E.g. Porter, 1985; Senge, 1990; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Geus, 1997; Pedler et al., 1997; Romme & Witteloostuijn, 1999;

¹¹ Geus, 1997

¹² Porter, 1985

¹³ NMK was developed and set up by Stephen Whaley in 1997, then the lecturer in photography, now director of WestmARC. He was highly influenced by Michael Porter's theory of clusters and competitive advantage when developing the knowledge and business development network model.

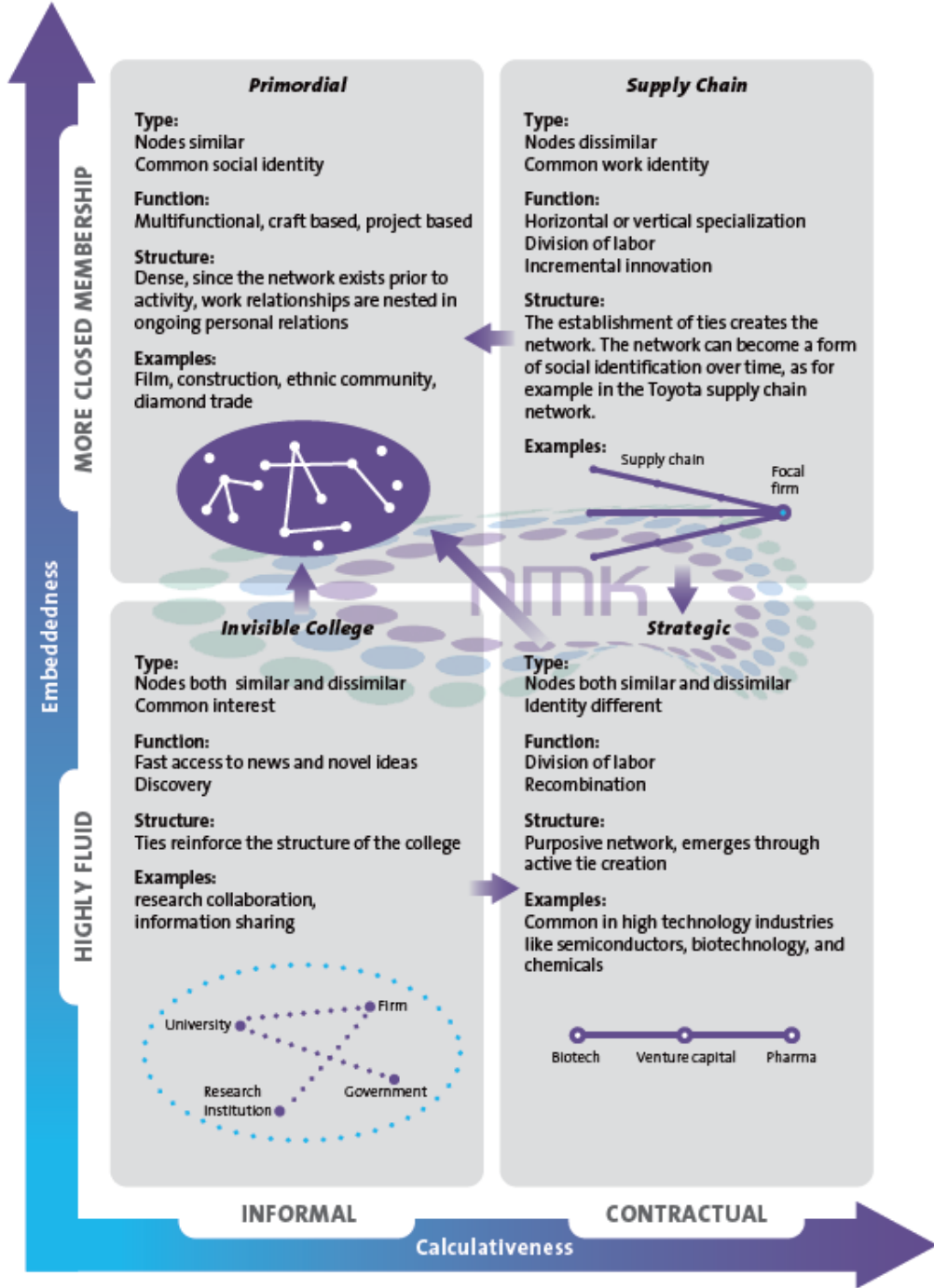


Fig. 2.3a Network typology, adapted from: Powell & Grodal, 2005

2.3. Description of a knowledge and business development network model

Various network models can be identified in the context of organisational learning and performance: interfirm networks, intrafirm networks, geographical clusters, industry specific networks etc. Powell and Grodal conceptualise these different networks through a typology (fig. 2.3a). The arrows

between the boxes illustrate how different types can evolve and take features from other network models.

NMK sits almost in the middle of the typology. It has similarities with all the models, but it is closest to the 'strategic' (a purposive network) and 'invisible college' (informal network, shared interest) boxes, less on a 'primordial' (collective identity and continuous participation) and least on a 'supply chain' (business partnerships) box¹⁴.

NMK was defined as a 'knowledge and business development network' (KBDN) in order to express the nature and objectives of the network accurately; i.e. to help organisations to broaden and deepen their

knowledge base in such a way that they would be able to improve their bottom line. The term knowledge and business development network was developed particularly to describe NMK (at a later stage, other KBDNs were established, e.g. MusicTank www.musictank.co.uk). From the beginning it was clear that the way to help organisations succeed was not through abstract concepts, theories or strategies. Instead, the underpinning idea was that

¹⁴ Powell & Grodal: 2005: 64

organisations could develop their knowledge base and competitive edge *through active participation and learning from others.*

The key characteristic of NMK is its 'intelligent centre'. The intelligent centre refers to two things: first, it is about NMK's



Fig. 2.3b

The arrow pointing from NMK to organisations refers to NMK participants taking learning outcomes back to their work. The other direction demonstrates how NMK participants bring their contribution from their respective organisations to NMK, thus contributing to its knowledge capacity. The vertical arrow illustrates how this interplay and growing knowledge capacity are recorded; there is a collective memory of knowledge which is also an impetus for further actions.

intellectual capital. Intellectual capital refers to "...the knowledge and knowing capability of a social collectivity, such as an organisation, intellectual community or

professional practice"¹⁵. In other words, NMK has to have enough knowledge capacity in its own right so that it is able to provide good quality services. This intelligent centre is both tested and contributed to by NMK participants: if they do not find engagement with NMK valuable and if it is not considered to add value to their work, it is likely that they cease to invest their time to NMK. Participants need to trust NMK. I further explore trust in the third chapter (p.14). On the other hand, participants contribute to the network's intellectual capital through their ideas and knowledge sharing.

Second, the intelligent centre refers to building up collective memory. This is done by recording knowledge. Not only activities are details of activities (e.g. events, articles, reports) are stored online, but, future work is based on previous work; events, reports, outcomes from debates and ideas from practitioners. Thus, the intelligent centre is not just about the 'here and now' interplay between NMK and organisations; it is also about building up a collective memory.

2.3. Operational methods of NMK

The operational methods of NMK can be divided in three main categories: 1) events and conferences 2) courses and seminars 3) online communication.

The first category, events and conferences, which is also the main focus of this research, aims to bring together

¹⁵ Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998:245

professionals from and around the digital media sectors to share knowledge and have a debate on the topic.

The second group, courses and workshops, aim to improve skills set. For example, learning how to write for the web is a necessary skill for anyone who writes online.

The third category is the online platform. NMK's website is an interactive information bank with its articles, news and comments.

The newsletter is a regular news digest. The website serves as a first port of call for all NMK participants and for those outside its geographical catchment to attend events, it serves as a main tool. Online communication works as a virtual world platform for discussion and knowledge exchange.

2.4. NMK audiences

From its inception NMK's goal has been to work across different sectors.

There are four, partly overlapping audiences/target groups that can be identified (fig. 2.4.). First group are professionals working in the field of digital media. It comprises a broad spectrum of web designers, developers and consultants. This can be called the "heartland" of NMK. The second group are professionals who in some way specialise in digital media as part of their work, e.g. lawyers and marketing people. The third group are people who

need digital media services, e.g. companies who wish to employ digital media professionals. The last group refers to people who have skills gaps and need to improve their skills base.

Put in figures, NMK audiences consist of about 6000 newsletter subscribers and events and courses that reach nearly two thousand people every year.

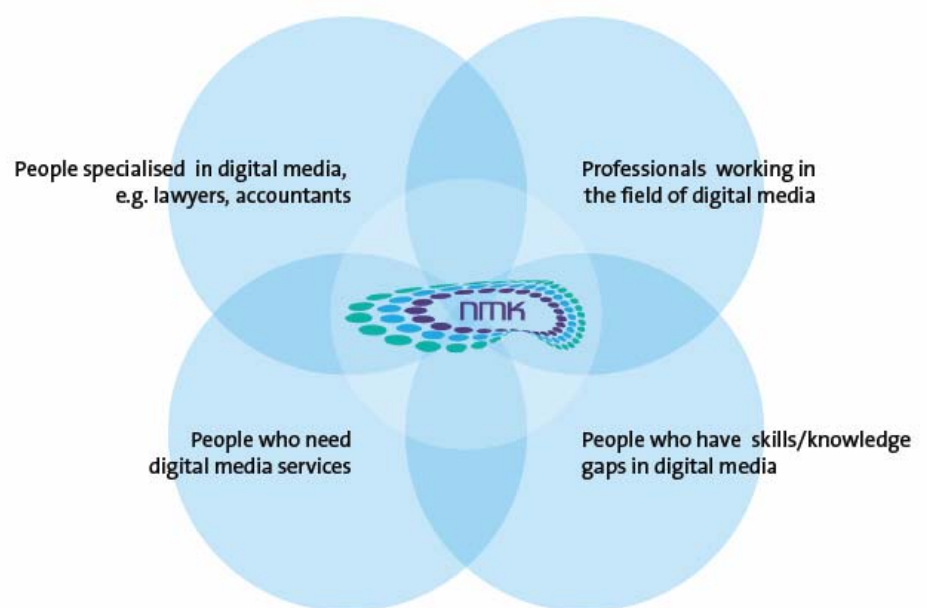


Fig. 2.4 NMK audiences

"Who is here to learn?"

Chapter 3. NMK, learning and the digital media sector

Trust is an essential element and a precondition for engagement with NMK. The network has to prove its significance and capability of adding value to its participants.

Trust manifests itself in four different ways:

1. **Time investment:** People need to feel that the time they invest in NMK, e.g. attending an event, is likely to be *beneficial* to them.

"There's sort of trust that people are more likely to be likeminded so I can have trust that I'm not wasting my time when talking to them." IT Consultant, freelancer

2. **The value placed in knowledge gained:** people need to trust that the network can offer them useful knowledge. To maintain people's trust, NMK has to prove that it can provide cutting edge services.

"The main thing for me in terms of NMK is knowing that you're in an environment where you're at the cutting edge of whatever it is they are talking about, and that I'm learning from that." Marketing Manager, Osborne Clarke

3. **Value for money:** Trust also refers to a financial aspect: it was felt amongst the interviewees that NMK does not try to "rip you off". The main interest is not commercial; it is truly focused upon issues around digital media.

"You know that they [NMK] are not trying to make money out of you so all they are interested in is building skills and getting people to meet." Managing Director, Fresh Enterprise

4. **Independent status:** NMK's independent status refers to two points: it is considered to be an organisation which is able to raise 'difficult' questions...

"NMK has opportunity to ask the uncomfortable questions that many others can't." Chairman, Digital Outlook

...and, it furthers collaboration rather than competition.

"The fact that NMK doesn't seem to have any commercial interest in the success of what they do means that they can afford to be a little more independent and foster the spirit of collaboration rather than competition." Managing Director, Fresh Enterprise

Learning through NMK has six dimensions: I) know-what & know-how II) peer-to-peer learning and learning from leaders III) non-measurable learning? IV) learning as identity building V) shared realities VI) learning beyond organisational structures.

I. Know-what & know-how

The first dimension of learning is the concept pair of *know-what* and *know-how*. Know-what and know-how refer to different aspects of knowledge. The former (know-what) refers to theoretical knowledge, whereas the latter is based on experience

and practice¹⁶. For example, reading a book on web design gives a lot of theoretical information (know-what), but it does not mean that one can design a web page without practicing and actually doing it (know-how).

"...[Even] if you were able to download every single piece of information ['know-what'] that you hold in your brain on that subject today, by tomorrow, some new situation may have arisen and it's your experience ['know-how'] that will enable you to successfully use that situation to your advantage". New Business Development Consultant, freelancer

Thus, when we talk about knowledge and learning, it is essentially based on the combination of these two. In Michael Polanyi's terms, these two concepts translate into explicit and tacit knowledge. Whereas explicit knowledge can be clearly articulated ('know-what'), tacit knowledge (know-how) is more difficult to communicate; it means "to know more than we can tell"¹⁷. Tacit knowledge is about understanding, making connections and creating meanings. In NMK's case, explicit knowledge can be about skills development, or acquiring new information through newsletters.

"There are skills base courses that we've used NMK over time...For example...one of the early stages of building our marketing team we had someone on a 'how to manage communities' course...[When] building our creative team, we also had somebody on 'how to manage complex projects' course." Chairman, Digital Outlook

"The newsletters are helpful because when something appears in your inbox, then you have a quick scan through it, and if something jumps out at you then you'll go off to the website and have a read at it". Solicitor

The intertwined nature of know-what and know-how is apparent when looking at NMK events. The events are interactive raising questions and generating debate around a chosen topic. A good example is the NMK event "Designers and Developers"¹⁸, which focused on the issue of collaboration between designers and developers around two different approaches: agile and waterfall. At the beginning of the event there was a presentation introducing both techniques and ensuring everybody in the room had enough theoretical background (know-what) of the two working methods.

Interestingly, the majority of the audience had previous experience (know-how) of those methods, but hardly any had theoretical knowledge (know-what) about the concepts.

"[W]hat it managed to do for me was put a label on the work that we actually do. Because we do actually practice what was talked about; we do practice agile development and waterfall development and I didn't know they were called different things. So that has been quite useful in terms of not only speaking to clients but also taking it back to our development teams and saying this is the attitude to have. This is the focus that we need to have." MD, Fresh Enterprise

The ability to name these techniques and talk about them on a theoretical level is

¹⁶ Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998:246

¹⁷ Polanyi, 1967:18

¹⁸ URL: <http://www.nmk.co.uk/article/2008/2/12/beers-innovation-developers-and-designers>

important. It gives stronger foundations to organisational practices, and importantly, it is about the business performance: being able to conceptualise different alternatives to clients gives more credibility and competitive advantage to the organisation.

II. Peer-to-peer learning and learning from leaders

At the beginning of the 20th century, German sociologist Max Weber wrote widely on power, state and politics; e.g. how state is built upon a "relation of men dominating men"¹⁹.

He then posed the question of who dominates whom and on what basis, i.e. what the justification for ruling is. One of his conclusions was a "charismatic domination"; some people are given authority based on their charisma. These leaders are highly devoted to their work, they are looked up at, followed and obeyed by others. They provide charismatic leadership and are allowed to dominate because others "believe in him"²⁰.

In 2008 Clay Shirky, an academic and network theorist, uses the word 'post-hierarchical paradise' in the context of social networking tools. The internet has enabled a lateral 'coming together' which is becoming an increasingly powerful way of strengthening the public sphere²¹.

The world has changed greatly since Weber's days and organisational learning literature places less and less value on the illusion of a charismatic leader; some authors would even wish to bury the myth of "the heroic and visionary leader championing all organisational change initiatives"²². It is true that organisations have become less hierarchical, having *peer-to-peer* teams and networks to deliver the work. This, however, does not mean that leaders have somehow become less important. Leaders are needed as persons who scan the horizon and exercise strategic thinking. For our purposes, Weber's and Shirky's opposite approaches are useful metaphors to provide a context to understanding *learning from leaders and peer-to-peer learning*.

While most of the learning through NMK events can be labelled as peer-to-peer learning, it is not only that for two reasons. First, NMK has four different audiences, all of which have a different relationship with digital media. For some audiences digital media forms only a small part of their work. Hence, they use the network to learn from industry experts.

"...what I find particularly with NMK events which I quite like is the fact that it is a very specific type of audience compared to all the other events that I go to. It's quite 'techie'. Sometimes it takes me a while to understand what they are saying, and I

¹⁹ Weber. 1919. In Gerth, H.H. & Mills, C Wright (transl.&ed.) 1946. From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology. pp. 77-128.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Shirky, 2008:23. Shirky uses the term 'posthierarchical paradise in a reverse way: "Though some of the early utopianism around new

communications tools suggested that we were heading into some sort of posthierarchical paradise, that's not what's happening now, and it's not what's going to happen."

²² Karp, 2004:349

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quite like that – I like being in an environment where it's full of real enthusiasts who really know what they are talking about. It's kind of pushing the envelope a bit in terms of what I know and the people I would normally speak to." Marketing Manager, Osborne Clarke

Second, even amongst one audience there are always leading figures that are looked up at because of their experience, knowledge and success.

"...some of the leading lights...certainly added to the discussion with examples of their own insight...I think NMK did a great job to pull the PR crowd together and this shows there is an appetite to learn, which was the main point of the event after all." Lloyd Gofton, blog post²³

Five characteristics from Action learning (AL) theory provide a useful framework to describe peer-to-peer learning.

First, AL emphasises the collective nature of learning, it requires, as Weinstein²⁴ states, "a group of people" who get together to learn. Second, action learning is learning from others. In Revans's words: "Action learning suggests that we may best master whatsoever unknown challenge appears, by working with others who seek to triumph in the same way"²⁵.

"...being typically outspoken, I pitched in and we talked about issues I certainly found interesting." Director, eShopWorks

Learning from others facing similar issues, the third characteristic, is a non-hierarchical way of learning. It means that the traditional teacher-student hierarchy does

not exist; participants are all equals standing on the same line. This non-hierarchy reflects the nature of the digital media sector: there is no one correct way of doing things, it is always a matter of choosing and using different alternatives.

"NMK events are interactive; the less speaking from the podium you have and the more speaking about a topic around tables, everyone benefits more from that...there are always people in the audience who know more than the people on the platform speaking and that's just the way it is these days." IT Consultant

Fourth, action learning is interested in posing novel questions in circumstances when "nobody knows what to do next"²⁶.

"Going to an event is great because it's always useful to talk to people who are in a similar state to you and maybe doing very different stuff. I think the whole issue with digital media is it's such a new concept that people are always slightly poking around in the dark a little bit." PR Consultant, freelancer

Finally, action learning emphasises the importance of asking questions as an essential part of a learning process.

"It was good to hear different experiences from different people, all questioning the same things." Digital Media Consultant, Lansons Communications

The author had an opportunity to witness the importance of asking questions when I attended the NMK event 'Designers and Developers', which is also discussed elsewhere in this research. I went there to observe the event and wrote a narrative of it as part of the triangulation process, (i.e.

²³

http://www.liberatemediatypepad.com/liberate_media/2007/11/social-media-fr.html [accessed: 13/05/08]

²⁴ Weinstein, 1999:3

²⁵ Revans in Weinstein, 1999:28

²⁶ Revans, 1997:5

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multiple ways of gathering evidence). In that particular event, the participants changed the course of the event through their questioning.

...the panellists introduce themselves in turns after which Laura [the Chair] takes the first question from the pile of cards that she has prepared. The idea is to go through the questions from the cards and get panellists' views on them. After the first round a hand from the audience raises up and a person 1 asks a question. There is a brief discussion between the person 1 and some panellists, while a second hand is raised.

...And this is how the debate evolves. New persons join the discussion and the original format, i.e. going through the question cards, is discarded.. Sometimes people are commenting and whether it is a comment or a question one thing is common: people share their own experiences and tell examples and anecdotes from real life. Laughter follows from many comments.
Narrative by the author, 12th February 2008

The boundaries between the panel and the audience were blurred from the beginning. Not only the audience change the course of the event, but, they also influenced the *content*. They decided what they wanted to know, hear, share, question and learn. The chair and the panel thus became more like facilitators of the discussion instead of producing content to the participants. Overall, to me, the event appeared as an organised collective discussion.

The network provides a platform for people to get together and ask questions and share experiences. NMK provides a platform for people to get together and ask questions and share experiences. In organisational learning literature "high quality questioning"

is recognised as a vital part of creating organisational success²⁷.

III. Learning assessed by the marketplace

Learning is a verb, not a noun²⁸. It is a constant and continuous process and it is very fast-paced, especially in the field of digital media. Ironically then, (or just because of the ubiquitous nature of it!), it is often *difficult to assess in a traditional sense*.

The use of different sources – networks, events, blogs, newsletters, magazines, websites etc. – makes learning challenging to measure. Learning takes often place in bite-size chunks; NMK events are typical examples of these: events do not require much time and learning is quick to digest. Furthermore, often participants' *learning goals are not articulated*. This is logical as the content of NMK events is constructed collectively on the spot. Consequently then, learning outcomes can only derive from the content. Put in a different way: content is driven by *demand*.

Additionally, learning is *a non-linear process*. Therefore, it is difficult to identify what exactly is antecedent and what is causal. In other words, it is difficult to define a moment of learning or cut it off from everything else: learning does not happen in a vacuum. Some authors even write that attempts to locate a place and

²⁷ Garratt 1997:19

²⁸ Rowe, 2008:48

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moment of learning would be merely “post hoc rationalizations of particular parties, who wish to represent particular incidents as successful stories”²⁹.

It is often the case that NMK participants need to learn about things which relate to their work - both directly and *indirectly* - because the lack of knowledge is likely to be disadvantageous to their organisational success. Learning thus becomes assessed by the marketplace.

“It is [social media development discussed at one NMK event] something I can talk about...And I now need to demonstrate to most clients that I know about this new, but rapidly growing area of media, marketing and the internet.” PR Consultant, freelancer

IV. Learning as identity building

Learning refers not only to learning about something, it also refers to *learning to be*³⁰. When learning is seen as learning to be - an integral part of our identity and identity building, it follows that learning is not just a rational process, it involves our feelings as well. We learn both emotionally and rationally³¹. Listening to other people’s ideas and using them to make our own unique distillations is rooted in our distinctive existence.

“I expect, not to learn more in the way of keeping ahead of the game. I expect to learn about what other people are thinking about and what other people are concerned about.” IT Consultant

Put differently, we aim *to make sense of the world*. Making sense of the world is about ideas, passions and beliefs; it is about our value system. Learning then, is about deepening our understanding of the world and understanding our place in the world. How we are in the world has to make sense to us. This making sense of the world has a ‘feel-good’ angle embedded in it.

“I was able to feel good about myself, to contribute towards something here in London...this is the new media industry and I’m able, not only to have an opinion but, to express it and to be heard.” Digital Media Consultant, Lansons Communications

Our identities are not static entities, we continuously build them up through our actions and in dialogue with others. We build up our own identity through learning. Wenger describes this ‘negotiation of meaning’: “The meaningfulness of our engagement in the world is not a state of affairs, but a continual process of renewed negotiation”.³²

In a professional context, a career plays a very important role in one’s life. Even up to the point that a career can be seen as “an organising principle of existence”³³. Naturally then, through learning and a profession we develop our capability to act in ways that are socially recognised and accepted³⁴. Clay Shirky writes that: “[a] profession becomes, for its members, a way of understanding their world”³⁵. Learning greatly defines how the individual sees the

²⁹ Stringer, 1990 in Rowe, 2008:45

³⁰ Bruner, 1996 in Brown & Guldud, 2001

³¹ Karp, 2004:350

³² Wenger, E.

³³ Grey, Christopher, 2005:120

³⁴ Brown&Duguid, 2001: 200

³⁵ Shirky, 2008:58

world and, the other way around; how the world sees the individual.

Making sense of the world essentially means there has to be a *dialogue* between participants. In fact, there is not just one dialogue going on; quite the contrary, there are several parallel dialogues through which viewpoints are being agreed and challenged. These "multiple discussions, where everyone gets to contribute as equals" refer both to the actual number of discussions, and, to the *perception* which is different and unique for each participant. There is no synthesis or unique voice as an outcome of a discussion; it is the co-existence of different views³⁶. In other words, multiple discussions generate multiple outcomes. Everybody perceives and participates in a discussion in a diverse way based on their expectations, thoughts, knowledge, former experiences and so on. As a result, everybody takes different things from the discussion and uses them in their work differently.

V. Shared realities

One interviewee described the digital media industry as 'cottage' industry: a group of professionals grow into an agency and at some point a leading person leaves and sets up his/her own business. And this same cycle starts keeps repeating itself. This means that the industry is fragmented; there are little islands everywhere, the

majority being micro or small businesses (1-50 employees).

Another interviewee said that people increasingly come together to execute a specific project instead of establishing companies. The main thing is to get the work done.

Yet, people have an innate need to belong, to be part of a community. In fact, as social learning theorist Wenger writes, we belong to several 'communities of practice': family, hobby clubs, circle of friends, working environment etc³⁷. It is through these multiple communities that people build up their identities. Once a group of people get together, they are - not only sharing their reality but also - constructing it through their interaction. "Professionals see the world through a lens created by other members of their profession"³⁸. In other words, reality is never a given, it is always constructed through human communication. Sharing and constructing reality is a dynamic flow. This flow entails "collective sensibility"³⁹. Put another way, our knowledge, learning and thus identity are embedded and shaped by the surrounding social environment and at the same time they shape and construct that environment, it is a process of constant co-authoring of a story⁴⁰.

If a network is a closed community, there is a danger that it may generate "collective blindness" as a by-product of collective

³⁶ Gherardi&Nicolini, 2002:420

³⁷ Wenger, 1998:6

³⁸ Shirky: 2008:58

³⁹ Rowe, 2008:42

⁴⁰ Karp, 2004:351

knowledge sharing⁴¹. In NMK's case this is not possible, because it is not a carefully guarded membership community; rather, it is an open community attracting people from many different sectors and thus having a constant flow of different ideas.

Being engaged with a community means that we also become accountable to it⁴². A community and its identity are thus maintained through a participative process. Through collective processes participants themselves ensure that a certain level of competence is achieved. The quality of event is measured through attendees.

"Last night I spoke at NMK's Clients in the Wild event. It was broadly about how PRs can, could and should use social media. Nice event Ian, and a cracking quality crowd. The audience was a who's who of the UK PR blogosphere."
Drew Benvie, blog post⁴³

Belonging to the "self-selected" community also means that there is a sense of pride involved. People want to be recognised as part of a particular professional community and the network provides them an opportunity for this recognition.

"...it was certainly an enlightening evening for a number of reasons.... Ian Delaney and the NMK team put on an interesting panel discussion...There were some pressing questions put to the panel by the great and good of the PR industry that were in attendance..."
Lloyd Gofton, blog post⁴⁴

Also, being part of the community is a way to test that one is not too far "behind the curve". Put another way, learning is both about belonging and positioning ourselves in a discourse⁴⁵.

"...last summer I went to the digital media summit [NMK Forum 07]. That was fantastic. It was very interesting that I decided to go to it, because I was only recently working for myself and it was a really good, sort of, kick up for me...it also gave me confidence, that actually, I wasn't too far behind the curve in terms what was happening at the leading of some of the digital media..." New Media Business Consultant, Freelancer

"The reason we were at the agile event is because that's the way over the last couple of years we've evolved to work to, and actually keep in line with the way the technology and the current requirements evolve..." Director, eShopWorks

Through commonly exercised critical thinking participants both contribute to the community, and also work as each others' checks and balances. This means that the appraisal, which in a traditional teacher-student learning situation is external, i.e. done by the teacher, becomes a dialogue between an individual and the NMK community; on one side there are "the great and good" and the community's critical thinking, on the other side there is an individual with his/her own reflection and positioning 'on the curve'. The quality assurance comes from within. The community forms its own checks and balances. The system of checks and

⁴¹ Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998:245

⁴² Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002:421

⁴³ URL:
<http://theblogconsultancy.typepad.com/techpr/2007/11/wrong-elephant.html> [accessed: 15/01/08]

⁴⁴

http://www.liberatemediatypepad.com/liberate_media/2007/11/social-media-fr.html

⁴⁵ Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002:421

balances is what Shirky calls the “internal consistency of professional judgement”⁴⁶.

The idea of community, however, in no way means that it is harmonious by definition. Quite the contrary, a community can hold a lot of disagreements. It is not the consensus that brings people together, rather, it is the meaningfulness and interest around the same issues. Bruno Latour, a French sociologist of science, writes that people do not assemble to agree but to discuss “divisive matters of concern”⁴⁷. In his view, it is the way to safeguard plurality. Tensions are not necessarily purely products of conflict or power over others, tensions can also be “attractions to different possibilities”⁴⁸.

Action learning theory uses the terms *puzzles* and *dilemmas* to make a distinction between two different kinds of questions. Puzzles are questions which have one, clear solution; manuals, for example, provide this type of information. Dilemmas, instead, (also called problems or opportunities) are defined as something to which there are no right or wrong answers. It is likely that agreement over the subject matter can not be achieved⁴⁹. In fact, quite often there is a greater need to be controversial than consensual.

“I spoke to a couple of seasoned online-savvy PR bods afterwards [Clients in the wild event], and they didn't feel they'd learnt anything. Education wasn't the objective. What we wanted to stimulate was

a debate about where PR goes from here - and I particularly wanted to put forward reasonably well-argued challenges only to be smacked down by a room full of vociferous PR people. It didn't happen. There was no fight back.” Will McInnes, blog post⁵⁰

It seems that smaller scale, informal events allow more diverse discussion and space for controversies as opposed to large, formal events which might be a hindrance for expressing radical views and as a result, the discussion becomes a set of agreements; a “homogenised experience” as one interviewer called it.

“Also the speakers you [NMK] had on that occasion were remarkably open and honest about what they felt and they were expressing opinions; they were not afraid to be controversial. That meant that people in the audience were able to speak out and give their opinions. It was more digested and more concentrated which was good.” Digital Media Consultant, Lansons Communications

VI. Learning beyond organisational structures

NMK provides a platform outside organisational structures for people to get together, network, have a debate and learn. The concepts of ‘Ba’ and Strength of Weak Ties (SWT) are helpful to further explore these aspects.

‘Ba’ refers to a common space for collective knowledge creation and sharing

⁴⁶ Shirky, 2008:58

⁴⁷ Latour: 2005

⁴⁸ Antonacopoulou & Chiva: 2007:285

⁴⁹ Revans, 1997:10

⁵⁰

<http://blog.willmcinnes.co.uk/blog/2007/11/world-has-chang.html>

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(Nonaka&Konno, 1998)⁵¹. 'Ba' was originated by a Japanese philosopher Nishida and later adapted by a scholar called Ikujiro Nonaka, who wanted to develop a model to describe how knowledge is created in a company. The concept of Strength of Weak Ties, instead, dates back to 1973 and is about loose relationships as opposed to close relationships. Granovetter presented that 'friends of friends' provide us both with new information and new contacts which we would not come across through our strong ties, i.e. close friends or a family⁵². Granovetter conducted research on how people find work and it turned out that weak ties are indeed more beneficial in that process than strong ties: "Those to whom one is closest are likely to have the greatest overlap in contact with those one already knows, so that the information to which they are privy is likely to be much the same as that which one already has"⁵³.

In NMK's context, Weak Ties is about networking, creating contacts and finding new clients and collaborators.

"Our creative director [was]...met through NMK. So that's a very tangible example how contacts in NMK have impact on our business in a very positive way...there's often contacts made through meeting people at events, where, even if it doesn't lead to people joining our business, it leads to other forms of relationship; whether they're working on projects or things like that." Chairman, Digital Outlook

In a broader sense weak ties allow us to widen our mental landscape; they can

strengthen plurality and diversity of thought. As one of the interviewees said:

"There is no point in me sharing my knowledge with somebody who has the same experience as me." Marketing Consultant, PCR

Put differently, networking enhances *innovation capacity*. Silicon Valley is probably the most renowned example of how networks have played a crucial role in innovation capability and economic success⁵⁴. In general, the value of networks is acknowledged in organisations and networks are regarded a "locus of innovation" for organisations. Together networks and innovation can form a virtuous cycle⁵⁵.

"[W]e're not there to make friends, we're there to make contacts. We're there to learn but only learn information that is going to help us perform our job better...Unless there is a practical application, it's not relevant to our business." MD, Fresh Enterprise

For participants, NMK is not just about networking or just about learning; it is always a combination of those two. Even if people come to events only to create new contacts, they end up learning as well. 'Ba' and Strength of Weak Ties are thus intertwined.

"...actually learning was secondary to the network. However, it was actually more successful learning rather than as a networking exercise even though I didn't come into it with that in mind." MD, Fresh Enterprise

⁵¹ Nonaka & Konno, 1998

⁵² Granovetter, 1973

⁵³ Granovetter, 1983: 205 (org. 1974)

⁵⁴ E.g.Chong-Moon Lee et al. (eds.) 2000 The silicon valley edge: a habitat for innovation and entrepreneurship

⁵⁵ Powell & Grodal, 2006:67

Learning theorists call this type of unanticipated learning *Informal learning*: it refers to learning that is not necessarily designed, planned or expected⁵⁶. Regardless of this non-planning, there is – as the interviewee remarks – recognition and reflection of learning.

Although NMK events provide an opportunity to get to know new people, people also value the community aspect of it.

“There is a continuity of relationships across those events. So it’s not just to see who’s at the events, it’s actually a network.” IT Consultant

More importantly, NMK provides a platform to get together beyond organisational structures.

“Being a neutral meeting point feels very positive: people can act as a catalyst for each other.” Chairman, Digital Outlook

It is necessary to analyse two points about being “a catalyst for each other”. First, it emphasises the *reciprocal* nature of the self-selected group of people. People are both knowledge recipients and providers; the network operates – although not explicitly – in a “gentleman’s agreement” principle⁵⁷. Second, a network can provide a trusted no-man’s land outside organisational premises. The political nature of learning has been less studied in organisational learning literature⁵⁸, but organisations are inevitably exposed to questions of power, tensions and

equality versus inequality. This is not to say that organisations have a lot of tensions, but, at least, the network platform can offer an alternative “catalyst” for the everyday one. With regards to freelancers, it is sometimes the only catalyst. As one interviewee said, networks are important – not only to meet other people but – in helping to cope with “boredom of working on my own at home”.

Moreover, NMK is considered to be a meeting point, which gathers people across the ‘cottage’ industry reaching also to other sectors. It brings people together whether they are freelancers or work for a large organisation.

“...I was very impressed by the range of people that attended because there were people from big agencies and yet, there were freelancers like me. It’s all very easy for a group of freelancers to get in a room...whereas actually having a mix of people is very important to put perspective on things...as a freelancer it is very important no to get out of the mindset of the bigger agency and the big ideas.” PR Consultant, freelancer

On the other hand, for people who are employed by large organisations the network offers another window for industry. One interviewee also pointed out one crucial difference between NMK and her company: for her, NMK is *proactive* because it offers information that she would not find out about otherwise, whereas her company’s marketing team *reactively* provides her with information she asks for.

It [NMK] provides me with that kind of missing piece of what is going on in the

⁵⁶ Watkins & Marsick, 1992:292

⁵⁷ Gielen et al. 2003

⁵⁸ Antonacopoulou, 2007:285

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industry; I get all my legal knowledge from the firm.” Solicitor

‘Ba’ - a space for knowledge sharing – and SWT (Strength of Weak Ties) can also take place virtually. A good example is the NMK event ‘Clients in the wild’, which focused on PR industry and its future along social networking tools. After the event, many of the attendees wrote blog posts about the event. These articles 1) were informative; they served as a news piece making the event more public 2) commented on the event, highlighting viewpoints that had been valuable to the blogger and giving them an opportunity to ‘have their say’ 3) generated wider and deeper reflection of the industry. As a result, these blog posts generated a huge amount of comments; not only from the other event attendees, but also from people who had not been present at the event.

“Sadly I missed being on Ian’s NMK panel for ‘Clients in the Wild’, as I just had over 200 staples taken out after an op. But it seems the discussion and subsequent blog by Will McInnes has created a stir – causing several blogging PRs some deeper introspection...here are my thoughts...”
Katy Howell, blog post⁵⁹

The debate that had started at an event continued online and attracted new people to join the discussion, thus creating a second generation discussion.

⁵⁹ <http://blog.immediatefuture.co.uk/pr-will-embrace-the-social-media-change-i-hope/>

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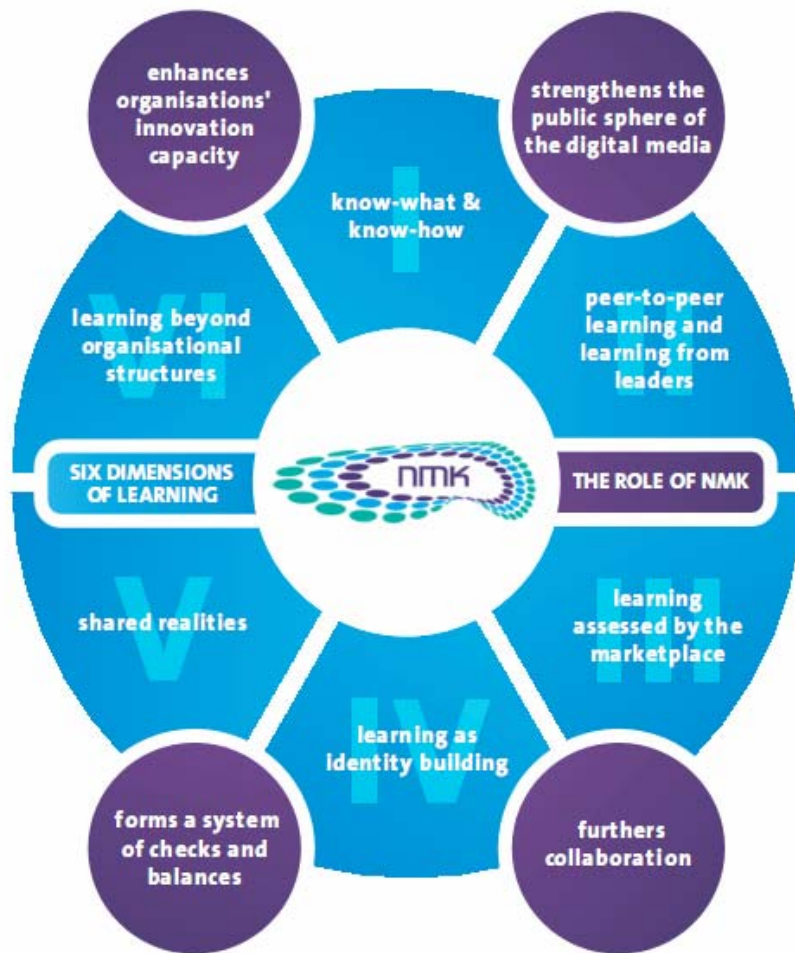
Conclusion

NMK and its role in the digital media have been explored by identifying how organisations learn through the network and how they use those ideas and knowledge for their organisational advantage.

The findings show how NMK brings the ‘cottage’ industry together through providing a trusted no-man’s land where people can act as catalysts for each other. Moreover, NMK participants benchmark their own level of competence through NMK and, at the same time, become accountable to other NMK participants. Thus, the community develops an informal quality assurance – a system of checks and balances. Both of these operational methods help organisations to improve their performance and enhance innovation capacity.

Moreover, enabling this ‘coming together’ NMK strengthens the public sphere of the digital media industry. Public sphere is a concept the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas (b.1929) has widely researched. Indeed, one would compare NMK with English coffee houses in the 18th century, where people could gather and have discussion of ‘matters of importance’. Habermas identified three main characteristics from these debates: inclusivity, domain of common concern and disregard of status⁶⁰, which can all be found in NMK’s events and in the way they harness participants’ critical thinking.

⁶⁰ Habermas, Jürgen, 1991, org. 1962



Taking a contemporary view, NMK belongs to the picture what network theorists Benkler and Shirky are interested in: people's ability to self-organise outside organisational and formal structures with the help of the internet.

*"The practical freedom of individuals to act and associate freely...free from the constraints of formal relations of contract or stable organizations – allows individual action in ad hoc, informal association to emerge as a new global mover. It frees the ability of people to act in response to all their motivations."*⁶¹

Although NMK itself put considerable effort into organising events, people come to NMK events on the basis of 'self-organising'; they come there because of their internal drive

⁶¹ Benkler, 2006: 355

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and motivation. They use NMK because it helps them to succeed.

In terms of education NMK provides some valuable *pedagogical principles*: 1) learning in bite-size chunks 2) demand-driven learning 3) harnessing collective intelligence and 4) an internal quality assurance. Similar to Web 2.0, people have more autonomy to influence the content and 'customise' it for their own purposes. Put differently, the content is generated through "peer production"⁶². Increased autonomy also means that

people are well positioned to make sense of the world; to define their relationship with the surrounding social environment in their own terms.

Universities' role is changing and there is a greater call for skills development⁶³, enhancing the UK' innovation capacity⁶⁴ and finding new forms of collaboration between universities and businesses⁶⁵ with a special emphasis on IT sector⁶⁶. These new requirements demand new, flexible mechanisms, where NMK's pedagogical principles could prove to be very helpful.

⁶² Benkler, 2006:355

⁶³ Leitch review, 2006.

⁶⁴ Sainsbury review, 2007.

⁶⁵ Lambert review, 2003.

⁶⁶ Developing the future. 2007.

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usefulness of the research becomes unclear and untested" (Ibid:223).

ⁱ This research is based on grounded theory which maintains that we have to ground our analysis in *data* not our "preconceived logically deducted hypotheses" (Charmaz, 2006:5). Although there is always a certain starting point for research, the process requires staying sensitive and keeping one's mind open to new possible directions along the project (Ibid:17). Barney Glaser, one of the two originators of grounded theory, points out that it is essential to: "study your emerging data" and in all its simplicity proved to be an excellent rule of thumb (In Charmaz, 2006:47, orig. Glaser, 1978).

As for the case study method, it focuses, not on discovering something, but rather, on constructing "a clearer" and "a more sophisticated reality" of the case (Stake, 1995:101). It is essential to approach and interpret the case from various directions, which together build a multifaceted and multilayered picture of the phenomenon. This is called *methodological triangulation* (Ibid:114). Moreover, the "clearer" reality does not mean that contradictions would not emerge. Quite the opposite, it is likely that viewpoints vary and are sometimes even contradictory; it is one of the aims of case study to try to safeguard these *multiple realities*.

Furthermore, case study research aims to understand the research subject in its uniqueness as well as possible. In Stake's words: "The real business of case study is particularisation, not generalisation" (Ibid:8). Particularisation does not preclude generalisation. Our case - NMK - is a particular example, but at the same time, the reader can learn from this particular case and draw a link to other cases, other networks and learning in general, as well as to his/her own experiences, thus building up greater knowledge base and understanding. Flyvbjerg rightly remarks that "the force of example" is undervalued whereas the "formal generalization is overrated as a source of scientific development" (Flyvbjerg, 2006:228).

For a researcher, the case study method is also about getting to know the case comprehensively. In practice it means being in the field and getting close to the subject rather than trying to distance oneself from it. According to Flyvbjerg, the closeness to the case is important in developing a subtle view of reality. For example, interpreting human behaviour meaningfully can only be based on human interaction. The closeness to the case precludes us from getting stuck in "ritual academic blind alleys where the effect and

"Who is here to learn?"

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