



Samaritans digital: present and future

Research summary of a study of trust and
empathy in online support

INTRODUCTION

The idea that the 'future is digital' is well established, and Samaritans - like almost every other major private, public or voluntary sector organisation - has invested time and energy in working out what that might mean for its own services and operation. The Digital Futures project (Samaritans, 2015), for instance, used a variety of approaches to explore the opportunities and challenges for emotional support and suicide prevention presented by the online environment. However, the organisation also has a digital past and present - since 1994 Samaritans has offered emotional support via email; and, in 2014, it 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.

This report summarises findings from the Emotional Distress and Digital Outreach project which has a general focus on how people experiencing emotional distress use different online spaces but also looked specifically at Samaritans' long-established email service and aspects of its more recent attempts to engage with the online world. The research was conducted by Dr Julie Brownlie and Dr Frances Shaw at Edinburgh University from 2015-2017 and is part of a larger project, A Shared Space and a Space for Sharing project, which explores the role of trust and empathy online for people in extreme circumstances.

The study involved surveys of both users of the email service and Samaritans volunteers and a range of qualitative interviews.

GENERAL PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF THE EMAIL SERVICE

- The survey findings suggest that those using email are often experiencing relatively severe emotional distress and not using email for 'less urgent' support: two thirds of those surveyed (68%) indicated that they had been 'feeling suicidal' on the last occasion that they initiated contact with Samaritans via email. By contrast, relatively few said that they had been prompted to email by situational life worries, for example, about employment/housing or money/debt.
- The attractions of email include practicality and confidentiality; but the most common reasons given by users (mentioned by 29%) is that they simply find it easier to write than to talk about their emotions. Some younger users also prefer the anonymity offered by email, and the avoidance of anxiety about being overheard on the phone.

Writing helps slow thoughts down as well as provide a record. (Lydia, user)

When suicidal my cognitive function diminishes, and I can't always articulate where I am at with speech. (Christine, user)

- Expectations of exactly what the service will deliver were relatively modest; but expectations of *how* it should do that are linked to overall views of Samaritans' brand and ethos, including expectations of confidentiality, emotional support, and non-judgement.
- Trust in the organisation to respect confidentiality, anonymity and self-determination is generally high and only a very small minority (2-3%) of users appeared to actively *distrust* the organisation in these respects.

- Most volunteers are happy providing support via email, and view it more positively than text messaging (though less positively than telephone-based support). Most believe that the overall standard of email support is ‘fairly good’ (57%) or ‘very good’ (18%).
- There was little serious criticism of the email service by either users or volunteers. But specific areas users did criticise included the length of time before receiving a reply, ambiguity around ‘Jo’ and lack of continuity and consistency in the form or tone of responses.

I found it difficult not knowing however whether or not I was talking to the same person [...] It wouldn't necessarily be a problem for me if it was a different person, but I'd have preferred to know. (User, survey responses)

- On specific measures of empathy, such as feeling understood or listened to, and not being judged, the overall picture was also broadly positive. In relation to one measure – the extent to which replies felt personal – there was slightly more evidence of a critical response, with 16% of users agreeing and 10% agreeing strongly that ‘the replies didn't feel very personal’. That said, a majority of users still *disagreed* with the statement.

TRUST AND EMPATHY IN EMAIL BASED SUPPORT

- The concepts of trust and empathy are fundamental to how Samaritans operates but have been little studied or understood. The qualitative elements of the research allowed these issues to be explored.
- Trust in Samaritans has both organisational and interpersonal aspects. The organisation comes with a hugely significant background warrant for ‘trustworthiness’, based on its reputation and charitable status, which can be transferred – temporarily at least – to its volunteers.

‘It's like trying to remember when I found out about Kellogg's cornflakes, they're just there!’ (George, user).

- In the absence of familiarity - users do not know individual volunteers – a key mechanism for building trust in other contexts – *consistency*, rather than simple continuity, of response takes on particular importance.
- Significant inconsistencies in the tone or substance of replies, particularly perceived failures of empathy in the face of highly emotional disclosures on the part of users, can severely 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.

Sometimes I feel they achieve [empathy and kindness] and it feels like they care. However other times I have had very blunt emails.[...] So I have had good and bad experiences. (Kayla, user)

- The relationship between trust and empathy is fluid and complex. Trust can be a precursor to sharing and to empathic interaction; but perceived *failures* of empathy can be highly damaging to trust.
- Users and volunteers struggled to define empathy, but tended to describe it as involving an act of *imagination* about the feelings and circumstances of another. As such, it can – and does – flow both ways. It can also be seen as generating an *understanding* of the position of the other.

- Users tended to experience empathy as involving replies that are *personal* – either in the sense that they are tailored to their needs and emotions, or in the sense that they ‘give something’ of the volunteer at the other end. This emerged as an important issue in qualitative interviews with users, but was also an area in which the survey findings suggest that the email service performs relatively less well.
- Volunteers, for their part, tended to distinguish between ‘intellectual’ empathy and empathy that ‘comes from the heart’.
- Some of the ways in which volunteers ‘do’ empathy in email responses include reflecting, questioning and use of particular words and tone. While these approaches are familiar in telephone-based support, there are challenges for volunteers about how to apply them in asynchronous, written communications.
- Other challenging aspects of empathy in the context of email relate to what it means to listen, to allow for and interpret silence, and to take and give time.

I wish there was some way in doing emails that we could say, like we do on the phone, “uh huh” or “mmm” or “wow” or whatever, just a kind of “tell me more” kind of noise. Just “I’m still here, I’m still listening.” It’s not as easy to do that on email, whereas on the phone it is. You’re still there, you’re still listening, even if you’re saying nothing at all they know you’re still there. Whereas we’ve got this urge to say something, and to say something meaningful and useful on the emails. (Vicky, volunteer)

DIGITAL FUTURES

- Online and text-based support creates digital ‘traces’ that potentially challenge the idea that Samaritans is not a record-based organisation and simply deals with what users bring ‘on the day’. This is most pronounced in relation to email, where there may be access to an extended ‘back story’; but in relation to Instant Messaging, too, users may have expectations of continuity that are different to those that apply in the phone service.
- Different forms of communication -online and offline - construct emotional distance and control in different ways. All written communication removes the body, and embodied emotion, from the exchange; but non-synchronous forms such as email also involve greater distance and control than more synchronous channels, such as IM and text.
- While some users will be attracted to IM or online peer support, in part because of its immediacy, email is likely to remain an important channel for those who choose it because of *its* particular communicative possibilities.
- The politics of outreach are more contentious online than offline, and there are particular risks associated with any strategy that could be seen as involving ‘emotional surveillance’ and/or the deployment of technological solutions such as algorithms for the identification of distress on social media.
- Samaritans has a powerful ‘warrant’ for trust, bound up with the organisation’s known values. But if the organisation or its volunteers are seen to act in ways that are not consistent with these – for example, by failing to demonstrate empathy or to respect notions of self-determination – the impact on trust could be very significant.
- The internet challenges preconceptions about what a ‘safe space’ looks like and involves different understandings of safety, some of which may be in tension with each other. In particular, notions of feeling safe *to* and being safe *from* can overlap and conflict. For instance, feeling safe to express suicidal thoughts without intervention may conflict with others’ need to feel safe from harmful content and with a general sense of responsibility we may feel to respond to those in emotional distress. These tensions can become

especially acute once organisations create or move into public or semi-public spaces and actively start to facilitate interaction between users.

- There are considerable resource implications for organisations considering a global online role and presence.
- The age profile of Samaritans' current volunteer pool raises issues about their comfort with – and interest in – providing support via new channels (such as text and IM) which are widely used by the younger people who account for a large proportion of all callers.
- This raises questions about the staffing of different support channels, and whether there is a case for wholly 'digital shifts' or recruitment aimed specifically at individuals interested in working with particular forms of communication.

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CARRIED OUT

The research was a mixed methods study drawing on both quantitative methods and a range of qualitative methods.

Online surveys of users and volunteers: In order to identify potential qualitative interviewees and to generate some population-level data, we carried out two online screening surveys using the Bristol Online Survey (BOS) tool: one of users of the email service, recruited via a footer attachment on emails to users; and the other of Samaritans volunteers, recruited via an email, sent out from head office, explaining what the research would involve.¹ In total, 317 eligible users,² and 1,865 volunteers, completed the survey.

Data collection for the quantitative surveys took place in March and April 2015.

Qualitative interviews: As part of the survey, we asked participants if they would be willing to be contacted to take part in a follow-up interview, and a stratified sample³ of those who agreed was subsequently invited to do so. Most interviews were conducted by phone or email, though a small number were carried out face-to-face, by Skype or by instant messaging (see Table 2:1). Nine user-participants also agreed to share with the research team their email communication with Samaritans. These threads were either given directly to the researchers, or participants gave Samaritans permission to share the threads. In consultation with Samaritans we identified for interview nine key organisational stakeholders in the email and digital service development.

We carried out semi-structured qualitative interviews to enable research participants to put their experiences and beliefs in their own words in relation to both the email service and Samaritans' future digital development.⁴

All but two of the qualitative interviews were conducted between May and August 2015, with the remainder conducted by email in October 2015.

Organisational ethnography: While a full organisational ethnography was outside the scope of the project, we combined branch visits, documentary analysis of key organisational

¹ Survey tools used are available on request from the research team.

² Although the invitation to participate made clear that, for ethical reasons, we would not include anyone aged under 18, around 50 younger people attempted to complete the questionnaire and were screened out at the first question.

³ The key dimensions of stratification were age, gender, attitude towards the email service, experience of methods of contact other than email, and use of social media.

⁴ The thematic interview guide is available on request from the research team.

materials, and observation of training in order to collect ethnographic information about Samaritans and the cultural and organisational context within which the email service is situated.

Specifically this involved 2 orientation visits to a Samaritans branch, and observation of the new integrated phone/written word training for new volunteers (8 sessions) at one site. As part of this element of the study, we also interviewed one trainer (Stakeholder 9), and two trainees, several months after completion of training. This allowed us to explore their experience of the transition to full volunteer duties.

Data analysis: We qualitatively coded interview transcripts, email strings and notes from ethnographic fieldwork using NVivo software and worked across different types of data to identify emergent themes and patterns.

The project received ethical approval from three ethics committees.⁵

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⁵ Samaritans ethics review, the School of Social and Political Science ethics panel at the University of Edinburgh and the Ministry of Defence ethics committee (MODREC)