Reviewer’s report

Title: Social richness, socio-technical tension and the virtual commissioning of NHS research.

Version: 1 Date: 6 March 2007

Reviewer: Timothy Milewa

Reviewer’s report:

Overview
This paper reflects on the relationship between a-synchronous computer-based media and interaction characteristics of virtual and face-to-face committees concerned with the commissioning of research. Particular attention is given to the influence of social factors - such as facilitation and preparatory meetings between participants - that may impact upon the utility of computer-based media. The paper is well-written, clearly related to the broader literature and should be of interest to many concerned with the use of virtual committees in the field of health and beyond. Suggested revisions centre on a rewording of parts of the methods section and clearer specification of the main research question(s) or issue(s).

Methods
Methods involve a pragmatic and appropriate combination of interviews and observation. The degree to which open coding (in the manner associated with grounded theory) was applied is, arguably, open to question in light of the paper’s a priori focus upon “social richness” or its absence (p.11). In other words the core category was in place before the open coding from which - according to standard accounts of grounded theory - categories are supposedly composed. But this section only needs minor revision - perhaps with words to the effect that, on the basis of the findings and examination of the literature, social richness was identified as a core category for the subsequent selective framing and juxtaposition of relevant additional categories and codes therein.

Findings
Echoing the comments regarding the approach to the analysis, a fusion of insights from the literature and findings from the research perhaps blurs the major thrust of the argument in the paper in places. Is the paper concerned with “the effects of asynchronous computer mediated communication when used to support group work”; exploring “how social richness can act to counter the socially impoverishing and time extending effects of asynchronous CMC” (p.1); identifying a more detailed set of factors that contribute to social richness; arguing that the results point to how best to manage such issues (p.24) or maintaining all of these positions? Any or all of these emphases are reasonable but a clearer specification of the paper’s precise focus would help readers.

Discussion
It is argued that the discussion points to the importance of good facilitation, preparatory work with participants, a “careful selection of group members and the importance of reflecting the dimensions (background, experience, personal aspirations, agendas, commitment) that make up a rich social context” (p.29). It might be useful to refer to some of the literature and arguments explored earlier in the paper in order to demonstrate that that this is rather more than a statement of the obvious.

Typos.
p.8, line 1 - “on” rather than “of”
p.18, para.1 - author name [29] missing
p.18, para. 3 - author names [32, 33] missing

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1) Greater clarity in the specification of the research issue/question (see above).
2) Limited revision of the methodological commentary along the lines indicated above.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests.

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.