ProMeet™

Workshop Question:

What might new RSA networks do and how might they deliver?

RSA Networks: a few thoughts before the workshop...

Over the course of 2007, a series of conversations with Fellows has revealed a perceived gap: between your desire to engage with the RSA to bring about positive social change, and the opportunities afforded to do so. Time and again you have told us that you would like to find more meaningful ways of working together. And while many of you have high praise for our full and varied programme of lectures and projects, you also said that you want to find a way of moving from being an audience to being participants and collaborators.

The change of leadership this time last year presented an opportunity to respond to these views. The RSA networks project, which began earlier this year, has been designed to open up this conversation to as many people as possible and address some fundamental questions:

Do Fellows really want a deeper kind of engagement with the RSA?

What is it that Fellows would like to change about the interactions between themselves and the organisation?

These are $64 million questions, but over the course of this project we hope to be able to answer them with a greater degree of confidence and clarity. The event you are attending on the 22nd November is a chance for us to work together on addressing these issues and will be founded on the key question: **what might new RSA networks do and how might they deliver?**

The day has been designed so that you, the Fellows, shape the agenda. We are using 'open space' techniques so that you can organise yourselves around the issues that excite and interest you.

In that spirit, this paper is intended to stimulate your thinking before participating in the session. It's not a blueprint, or a position statement, and that is very important. If Fellows are to move from the periphery to the centre of the organisation, then it is essential that as Fellows, you are fully engaged at every step of the process, as collaborators and co-creators along with the staff of the organisation. So please treat the thinking here as a springboard for your own views and ideas: challenge it, develop it and add to it.

Put simply, the RSA is ready and willing to commit to a new partnership with Fellows—if that is what Fellows want. But we cannot and should not make this transformation unless it is led and shaped by the collective energy, appetite and wisdom of the Fellowship.

What do you want out of the 22nd?

Of course, many of you are already involved in a wide range of projects and networks both professionally and personally. So we need to think about what value the RSA can add to these initiatives.

With such a diverse range of people coming, it's inevitable that people will all get different things out of the day. But what is it you would like to achieve? Is it:

- Discovering a new project to get involved in?
- Proposing a project and finding some collaborators?
- Developing thinking around how RSA networks might work in the future?
- New contacts?
- Good conversation?

For the team at the RSA charged with looking after this project, this event is a real opportunity to work with Fellows to understand more about where your passions lie, the level and extent of engagement you are looking for, and how ambitious we as a group want to be.

What should the RSA look and feel like in two years' time?

Imagine the RSA in two years time, if the RSA Networks project has been successful. What would it look like and how would it work? We don't have a fixed idea yet ourselves, as the modus operandi that we are exploring through this project depends so much on the energy and commitment of the Fellowship.

That said, whatever happens, we are absolutely committed to opening up the Fellowship, enabling it to operate as a more connected, navigable, powerful and self-organising network. As some of you already know from your involvement in its development, we are creating a sophisticated yet accessible networking platform to enable Fellows to connect and collaborate with each other in new ways. We will be sharing an early prototype of this platform with you on the 22nd.

It will feel a little like the newly launched Innovation Exchange for the third sector (http://innovation-exchange.org/), a marketplace for new ideas, a space where Fellows can post new project ideas and a chance to tap into the collective wisdom and connections of a diverse and thoughtful group of people. In other words, the Fellowship will become more 'searchable', more visible and more accessible.

Through this, we hope that the Fellowship begins to understand itself as a complex, innovative network, powered through online tools as well as offline get-togethers, buzzing with ideas. Judging from the traffic on the RSA Networks blog (http://mtblog.typepad.com/rsa_networks/), this is an aspiration that many of you share too.

We also know that in order to strengthen the connections between busy Fellows, we can help by offering tools and techniques for those of you wishing to do work together as a network. Tools might include 'routemaps' or 'guidebooks', designed to share learning around popular Fellows' causes, for example how to influence planning decisions in your local area. These could be published online, so that Fellows can work together to improve them.

But what if Fellows want to go further? What if you want more than just a better way of connecting with other Fellows? Below, we offer up a few thoughts we've had about how the RSA could change to bring about a deeper level of engagement with Fellows.

These are big changes and ones that we could only make with energy and commitment from Fellows. So, what do you think? What other suggestions do you have?

RSA staff as facilitators and brokers

Above and beyond the online resources outlined above, we could create a 'field team' of regional facilitators, sometimes Fellows themselves; sometimes staff, whose primary role is to support, challenge and develop emergent networks. This team would be ably supported by core staff at RSA headquarters, whose primary role would be to provide research support and a form of 'concierge' or brokerage service. That brokerage service would connect networks together if they had not already done so themselves, as well as building partnerships between networks and other key institutions and organisations.

The RSA as a Fellow-led 'clearing house' for ideas, and co-created projects

Much as it is now, but perhaps more explicitly, the content of the RSA's research programme could be shaped to reflect the concerns and enthusiasms of the Fellowship, tapping into the energy and commitment amongst Fellows for action.

Fellows could be involved as co-designers and project team members in areas identified by Fellows as priorities for RSA work.

We could see Fellows forming 'self-organised' networks; networks which are connected to more substantial resources (such as funding, venues, or expertise); or even networks which formed the basis of a RSA research programme.

Fellows could generate ideas for new projects at regular national and regional network symposia, working together with RSA staff to decide how to prioritise the allocation of resources and support.

Getting started: what do we want to work on?

As part of the process of booking your place for the event on the 22nd, we asked you all what issues really mattered to you, and what you really care about. We did this because we know that one essential and powerful dimension of what we call 'civic innovation' is its voluntary and spontaneous nature. People's passion and motivations are what matter. Without those things, we'd have nothing.

Fellows' interests were broad and wide-ranging. Popular themes included education and skills for the 21st century, social justice and human rights, civic participation and social responsibility, the environment and sustainable living, young people's social and cultural needs, and regeneration.

As well as the questions we asked all of you, we have also been gathering up many ideas from across the Fellowship about projects that you'd like to do. To provide you with some food for thought about issues you might like to work on with others, we've listed a few of them below. Do any of these resonate with you? What other projects would you like to propose to other Fellows on the 22nd?

Ten possibilities?

- Building on the success of the Opening Minds curriculum, could the RSA connect Fellows in the creative and cultural sector with Fellows working in business and education to design a new kind of skills development programme for creative and social entrepreneurship? Could the RSA support this work by connecting it to other influential organisations and people working on this agenda internationally?

- Could the RSA support the Fellowship in a number of market towns to re-imagine their high streets, through a participatory process of engagement and discussion, coupled with partnerships that promise the translation of that discussion into real change? Could the lessons we learn be documented in a 'guidebook' for other Fellows in other towns to use themselves?

- Could the RSA Carbon team and Fellows in the Wales and West Region host a major on and off line public debate about the proposed Severn Barrage (arguably the biggest issue in the region for the decade to come)? In an already polarised debate, our aim would be to ensure that the discussion is based upon the best science, genuinely engages with the public, and works towards as much consensus as possible.

- Could the South West region bring together Fellows to challenge current thinking on strategies for reducing reoffending, working with local prisons to build a vision based upon this, rather than managing those already imprisoned? By working with the RSA Prisons project team, could these Fellows create a blueprint for a new approach to offender management and incarceration? By working with local businesses, could Fellows develop a new model of giving former offenders meaningful skills and employment?

- Could Fellows come together to form an activist investment fund? The RSA's Tomorrow's Investor project is beginning an investigation of the effects of the "imperfect delegation" of ownership responsibility to pension fund managers, investment fund managers and the like. Could Fellows form a network of trust in which information is shared and discussed? Or could they go further and take a more active role in the companies they own, albeit indirectly?

- Could the RSA Education team and Fellows in a town work with local schools, the youth service and other partners to hold a high profile attitude-shifting debate about how young people can get on better together, driving violence out of their relationships? If this process generated new ideas and policies, could we scale up from this experiment to a model that could be adopted by government and other areas?

- Could the Nottingham Fellows be supported in pursuing the idea of a Speakers Corner (a local space for people to openly debate topical issues) and if they succeed could we use that learning so that other groups around the country could replicate it? Imagine RSA Speakers Corners in twenty cities across the UK!

- Could all the Fellows working within small and medium sized enterprises come together to explore how these organisations can make a positive contribution to the climate change agenda? So often the debate is centred on the largest multinationals, but identifying and then tackling the many barriers that SMEs face when trying to operate sustainably – environmentally and financially – could make a massive difference overall.

- Could a group of Fellows work together with drug users and people suffering from debilitating mental health issues, to model a new, person-centred, community-led approach to recovery? Could these Fellows receive training and support from the organisations who are pioneering this model, so that they become advocates, as well as increasing the capacity of such organisations to take on and challenge the standard approach to dealing with these issues?

- Could our leading Fellows from the worlds of publishing, journalism, music and the arts come together to reflect on the challenges presented to their industries by the advance of the internet and the democratisation of art in all its forms? Could this network begin to shape a new understanding of what constitutes 'intellectual property' in this context, and test and develop new, more sustainable business models that are fit for purpose in the 21st century?

But what possibilities do you see?

Many of you are already involved in initiatives or jobs in these areas. So what is it that you could do with the RSA that goes beyond that? How can you engage in these issues in new and exciting ways via the RSA? How can the organisation help you to do so?

A further challenge for us to address is whether we have a shared vision of what constitutes 'innovation'. It's a slippery term, and one person's innovation may be another person's ancient history. Since the start of the RSA networks project, we have been thinking about different kinds of innovation. Some innovation may be about finding a new way of tackling a given problem more effectively – for example, building the kinds of skills people need to be successful in the 21st century.

Other innovations may demand that we redefine the problem entirely in the first place – for example, seeing social care as being less about 'treatment' and more about enabling people to lead the kind of life they aspire to. What does innovation mean to you? Is it about challenging a set of givens? Is it about reframing the problem – and therefore the range of solutions?

However, with that caveat, we believe that the RSA is in an incredibly powerful position to generate innovation. A growing body of research indicates that innovation is likely to emerge from collaboration – and more significantly, collaboration across boundaries – something that our huge and diverse Fellowship could do on an impressive scale if we can create the right conditions. What else needs to be in place to unlock this massive potential?

What would a 'network of civic innovation' look like?

As we move towards the 22nd, many Fellows have asked what the Fellowship as a 'network for civic innovation' would actually look like in practice. The truth is, we will need to build this picture together: it depends how much time, energy and commitment Fellows wish to give to the RSA and each other.

As mentioned earlier, at the very least we want to do more to meet Fellows' desires to make stronger, deeper connections with one another. But if the appetite is there to deepen the connection between the Fellowship and the organisation – to form networks around projects that challenge existing thinking – we will need to build our vision up from some important principles about networked models of change. So what are the implications of that?

First and foremost, we know that a networked model of change is about much more than 'networking' alone. Networks need both processes and content. Extensive research about such models – in technology, education and elsewhere – shows that really powerful networks have the following assets and qualities:

*   A well-articulated and shared set of goals, and a plan for how to meet those goals.
*   All members feel able and encouraged to participate – which in turn requires accessible, open channels of communication online and offline.
*   All network members perceive themselves to have an active role in doing work - between meetings and dialogue – so that the network does not become a talking shop.
*   A good balance of network leadership (sometimes shared by people) and facilitation that is designed to maintain momentum and provide challenge.

So, to make this model come alive, the Fellows involved in networks will themselves need to do a good deal of the work. However it is also true that if this is where the RSA networks project takes us, it will have implications for the staff roles at the RSA as well.

The period following the event is a real opportunity to test out and explore what both Fellows and staff will need to do to support any networks that emerge from the work we will be doing together on the 22nd.

However, what matters most at this early stage of RSA Networks project, is to understand how ambitious you, the Fellows, wish to be. We want to bring you all together on the 22nd, as a fascinating, active, interested group of Fellows who have expressed a desire to get more involved.

We have designed the day to put you in charge: the facilitation technique that will be used means that you will be setting the agenda.

So: over to you. We hope you are looking forward to it as much as we are.

RSA Networks Team, Friday 16th November