Results of ICCM questionnaire on networking through collaborative work and a Virtual Research Environment

Feedback on ICCM activities were gathered through a questionnaire which was distributed to members towards the end of the project life (Aug/Sept 2011). Out of the 16 responses received, there was strong agreement that the ICCM offered members (students and early career researchers) opportunities to network at an international level with researchers working on methods in critical security studies (70% strongly agree, 20 % agree). Indeed, one member noted "The ICCM allowed me to interact with highly prolific academics from all over the world - from Edinburgh to Sidney, from Rio de Janeiro to Stockholm. Many of the professional and personal contacts established through the collaboratory remain active and are now part of my work network." The ICCM emphasis on collaboration as a method of work was considered productive in this regard. According to one member, "The collaborative work in ICCM makes network come out of actual co-work and mutual knowledge rather than networking for the sake of networking". The ICCM has also offered opportunities to be involved in organizing events such as panels, workshops, and conferences relating to the work carried out in the ICCM (63% strongly agree, 31% agree).

In this context, the ICCM virtual research environment (VRE) was found to have been useful in enabling more sustained and intensive collaboration beyond the three face-to-face workshops (44% strongly agree, 50% agree). It was regarded as useful for sharing information and exchanging ideas on new ways of researching. In particular, members found the VRE useful for international debating (particularly through the forums), following the work carried out in the other clusters as well as in offering resources through the ICCM digital library. Indeed, another member noted, "Reading online discussions was very insightful to understand debates in the field". According to a third member, the VRE was "the real learning opportunity during ICCM". It was noted too that members had been very productive: "members wrote an equivalent of 600 pages on the blogs within a year. Some of the discussions were quite vivid and lively." The VRE was also considered to be a very useful resource for postgraduate teaching.

On the other hand, the VRE as a tool for international collaboration was also seen as an experimental form of collaboration still in development. Many members found collaborating through the VRE "technologically cumbersome". Moreover, it was felt that the VRE did not wholly respond to the demands of collaborative working. Members supplemented the VRE with two publicly available tools, Skype and Googledocs, which were found to have been more useful in this regard. Though the VRE wiki was considered useful, it was also held to be, in the words of one member, "too clunky – especially in the way it relies on basic HTML knowledge". It was also suggested to develop a system whereby readers would be able to track the cluster's activities. Suggestions were also made with regards to enabling different posting formats (videos, audio, text, different text arrangement, e.g. 'onenote' or 'evernote'). Such improvements, according to one member, would "give more aesthetic freedom to the discussion and allow more complex arguments to be developed". Despite these technological and collaborative challenges, one member concluded, "the use of such devices for collaboration in social sciences needs to be explored further".

The value of the VRE for sustaining the network and collaborations was also strongly acknowledged during the Training School. Possibilities to improve the VRE were discussed. It was acknowledged that although there are several more flexible and user-friendly tools available, the challenge is to design a VRE that integrates all of them in one virtual environment. Most members felt that it was paramount that the collaboratory exists in one integrated VRE. If not, then the collaboratory would not come together as a whole and lose its identity. As the responses to the questionnaire and the discussion during the training school confirmed, VREs are a challenging new method of developing networking and collaborative research that however offers great promise and is essential to support the transformation of networking into a collaboratory.

Overall, the ICCM was understood as having been productive not only in developing (and understanding) methods but also in doing so collaboratively. As one member noted: "the overall ICCM initiative is one of the rare sites I know where *collaborative* research methods are not only being discussed but also effectively tested and implemented. For this reason, I think it should be preserved and extended."