

The Big Connect



A Media Cure for Modern Loneliness?

Summary findings of WaveLength's research into the power of media technology to alleviate loneliness



WaveLength would like to thank the following organisations for their contributions to this research:

Partner Organisations

Aapna Services
Age UK Dacorum
Blackpool Coastal Housing
Endike Community Care
Havering Women's Aid
Moving On With Life & Learning
Reach Out Care / ROCSOLID
SASH
St Mungo's
The Haven Refuge
The Who Cares? Trust

Research Team

Dr Annie Irvine
Professor Martin Webber



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For more information or for a copy of the full report please feel free to contact us info@wavelength.org.uk



About WaveLength



For many people, something as simple as a radio can be a lifeline.

WaveLength is a charity that gives media technology like TVs, radios and tablet computers to vulnerable people living in poverty to help them overcome loneliness. Our beneficiaries are made lonely by age, illness or disability, or by circumstances that make it hard to leave the house or meet new people.

We also provide media technology to other organisations including domestic violence refuges, homeless hostels, hospital wards and day care centres to help them create a sense of community for their beneficiaries.

Loneliness does not discriminate based on physical ability, age or gender. Millions of people across the UK suffer from loneliness every day. It is for this reason that loneliness has been described as the 'hidden epidemic' of our time.

Technology can provide companionship, keeping isolated people connected to the outside world and comforting them through long days and lonely nights. And while a television set is no substitute for human interaction, technology can bring people together in a way that little else can.

Staring at a blank wall does nobody any good. We work to open up a window to the world.

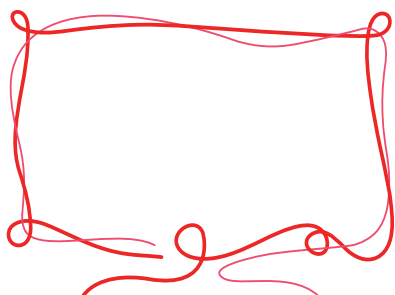
Why we conducted our research

Finding out whether media technology alleviates loneliness

Loneliness is a huge social problem in our society. It causes reduced confidence, low mood and loss of interest in life, and can be a major contributing factor to depression. Loneliness and social isolation can affect anyone – regardless of their age, their finances or even their relationship status. In fact, a poll conducted by the BBC in 2013 found that 52% of adults in London suffer from loneliness, while the Campaign to End Loneliness reported that 800,000 people in the UK are chronically lonely.

For people who are isolated, access to media technology like radios, televisions and tablet computers can provide a lifeline to the outside world. And while many of us take these items for granted, thousands of people around the country simply do not have access to them. That's where WaveLength comes in. We give media technology to people who are elderly, disabled or refugees; those with chronic physical or mental illnesses, crippling addictions or troubles with homelessness, and those building new lives after escaping domestic abuse or moving on from a childhood in care.

From the thank-you letters we receive, we have always believed that WaveLength's equipment has enormous benefits for our beneficiaries, but unfortunately public perception towards technology has shifted in recent years. Many people are concerned about The Big Disconnect; the idea that social media is actually making us more antisocial and less engaged with the people around us. That rather than connecting us to others, media technology is making us more lonely.



"What I find with the radio is I sleep better because, even though there's somebody talking in the background, it's like somebody's there."



We were concerned by these claims, so in the summer of 2015 we asked researcher Annie Irvine from the University of York to research the impact of our work providing lonely people with media technology. We wanted to know how the radios, TVs and tablet computers that we give our beneficiaries impact upon their lives; the positive impacts, the negatives, and the changes that they believed were caused by their new technology.

To do this, Annie and her team interviewed a sample of our beneficiaries from across the country. Some were individuals who had applied to us directly, while others were using technology that we had given to our partner organisations. A list of these organisations is on page one.

The people Annie interviewed were lonely and isolated for a variety of reasons: they found it hard to physically get out of the house; they'd relocated from other areas; they were separated from their families, communities or culture; they found it hard to interact with others; they'd left damaging relationships or lifestyles behind.

Through these interviews, Annie identified three ways in which WaveLength's radios, TVs and tablet computers helped those beneficiaries:

- Alleviating loneliness and other negative emotions
- Facilitating social connections
- Broader impacts

“For some women that haven't been allowed to watch the telly, just to sit with other women and chat, it's a massive, massive thing when they come in here, just that they can do that.”

Women's Aid





1. Alleviating loneliness and other negative emotions

“All my life I’m used to working with people, around people. Because of this sudden change due to my illness, everywhere is quiet.”

Media technology can be a comforting friendly face or voice for people who spend a lot of time alone – especially those who’ve recently been bereaved, or plunged into isolation through illness or disability. Unlike social isolation, loneliness is a subjective condition: you’re only as lonely as you feel. This is why artificial or surrogate companionship can alleviate feelings of loneliness by itself.

Music can make people feel less lonely by triggering memories. One beneficiary said: *“Days when you just don’t feel motivated to do anything or it’s dreary, it’s miserable, cold, and then you hear certain tunes – especially if you hear tunes that make you remember positive things – yeah, it’s good.”*

Distraction was another important feature of media technology, with beneficiaries using TV or radio programmes to distract themselves from drug or alcohol cravings, or simply from their loneliness. People with a lot of trauma in their lives also find it useful to have an easy distraction.

“When there’s more time to reflect or just go into your feelings, then he was drinking more. Now that he’s got the TV, he’s drinking less; he’s more positive about his life.”

“Although I do watch TV by myself, it keeps your mind occupied, so you don’t feel lonely.”

2. Facilitating social connections

Loneliness and social isolation are two distinct issues. While loneliness is a subjective feeling, social isolation is when people have objectively few connections with other people. While all of our beneficiaries struggle with loneliness, many of them are also isolated.

Living on a very low income can make it very difficult to sustain friendships – our beneficiaries often don't have the spare cash to get a coffee or a drink with a friend, let alone pay for a mobile phone to stay in touch or arrange a catch-up. Email and social media are invaluable as free forms of communication.

And because TV, radio and internet are so ubiquitous, lack of access to them can often hurt people's chances of forming and sustaining social relationships. One young beneficiary said, *"I can talk about things... I'm back in the world, because I know what's going on in the world."*

New connections are also forged through media technology. One woman who cares for her disabled mother attended a local carers' group she'd heard about on the radio, while others found out about local subsidised events or got involved in causes they'd found out about using their tablets.

Women's refuges in particular really emphasised the power of media technology to bring people together. Usually these women are extremely traumatised and have often been forbidden to talk to others outside the home, or to make their own small choices like what to watch on TV.

"For some women that haven't been allowed to watch the telly, just to sit with other women and chat, it's a massive, massive thing when they come in here, just that they can do that."

A communal TV often became the social hub of a refuge, offering low-pressure companionship with other residents. It also inspired a sense of community within the shelters, with residents spending time together and arranging activities together outside of home.



"Before it was just an empty room. Now it's got a telly in it, they're coming down and doing more social things and it's adding other stuff. Now they're doing more communal things since we've had the telly."

3. Broader impacts

As well as alleviating loneliness and helping to forge new social connections, the technology we gifted had helped the beneficiaries in lots of ways that we hadn't imagined.

Tablet computers had many practical uses, including applying for jobs or housing, sending emails, online banking, etc. But TV and radio also offered lots of practical uses.

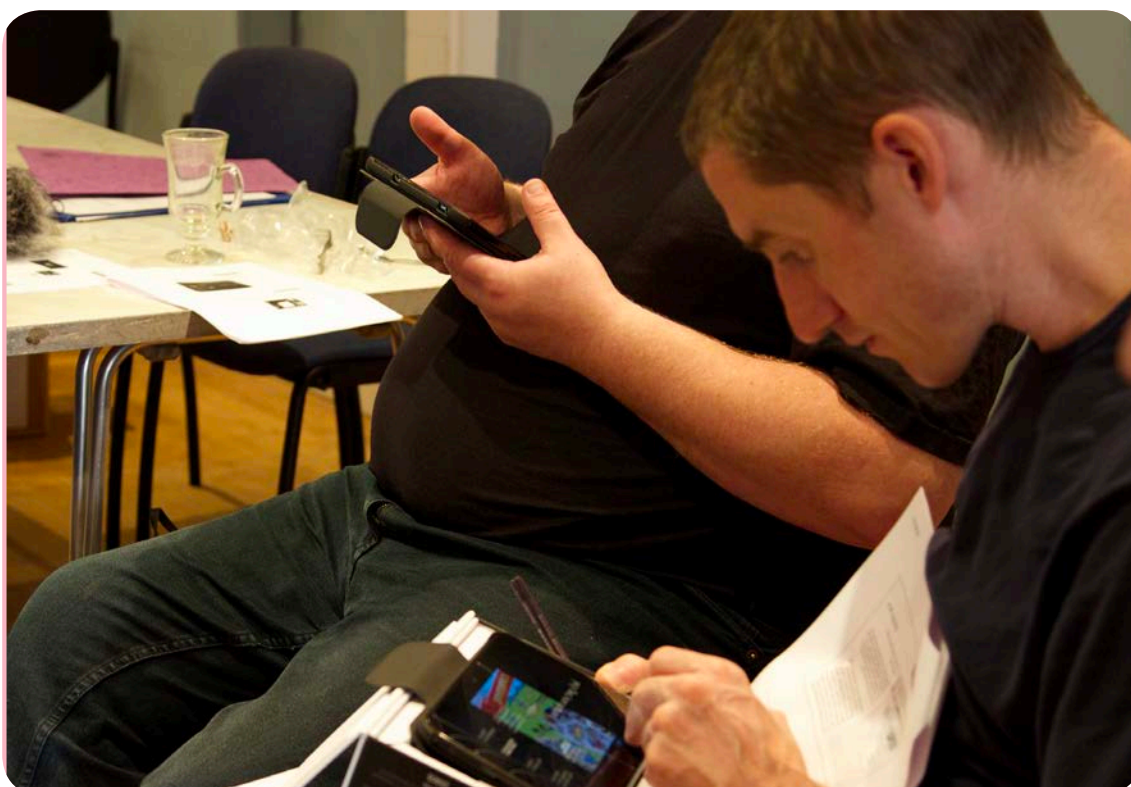
One young beneficiary was inspired by cookery shows to find an apprenticeship in a restaurant. She said, *"It sounds weird; you don't think on TV you see jobs advertised. But you do. Because it makes you realise what kind of jobs you want to do. You see an advert and you're like 'Oh yeah, I could do that.'"*

Many beneficiaries are empowered by their new access to information. Some looked up recipes to hold a baking night, some watched instructional videos on sewing or yoga. Others found out more about practical support, or researched issues like mental health and found out that other people had got through the same difficult situations as them.

Surprisingly, many beneficiaries mentioned the Jeremy Kyle Show as very useful and uplifting. One staff member explained, *"They think their life's Jeremy Kyle really! They've gone through a hard time and you watch it on telly, someone else has gone through a hard time, it makes it feel better, doesn't it. It makes you think 'oh look - I've got through this, they've got through that, you can get through life.'"*

WaveLength's equipment was also useful for non-native English speakers trying to improve their language skills, for educational programmes for pre-school children, and for exploring social skills. One beneficiary said, *"Sometimes I actually talk to the TV so that I can learn to converse with people properly."*

"It just makes them feel like there is hope...they can overcome the mental health challenges and do something positive with their lives."



The Negatives

While it's great to hear all of the benefits of our work, we also wanted to know if our beneficiaries had suffered any negatives since receiving our equipment. Annie asked each interviewee if there were any detrimental effects to using their media technology.

The majority of respondents couldn't think of anything negative to say about their equipment, which was very reassuring for us! However, a few did mention the importance of using it in moderation. A couple of people mentioned that they had used them excessively when they first received them and had to take responsibility for their use to overcome this.

"I just got sort of mesmerised... there was a degree of novelty, so I was a bit like a small child getting a keyboard for Christmas."

Some participants also mentioned the potential risks that social media could bring to vulnerable people, and the importance of its safe use. One beneficiary who had overcome problems with substance abuse said that social media could *"trigger you, like if you see your friends going out drinking, stuff like that, and you're thinking oh God. So I think I'd rather not know, do you know what I mean, I'd rather just not know."*



In Summary

By providing inspiration, motivation and a window into the world, media technology has the power to drive important changes in people's lives. Although it's hard to recognise cause and effect when it comes to new technology, most beneficiaries believe that WaveLength's equipment has a huge impact beyond simple entertainment.

One staff member simply said, "I've known the refuge prior to having tellies and since we've got them, and I have noticed more positive outcomes for the women."

We're talking with the University of York and the University of Sheffield about conducting more studies to further explore the difference media technology has on people's lives by providing comfort, contact and companionship.



