Energy Babble

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started to contact our colleagues in the energy communities to tell them that the devices
CIRCULATING

We delivered the packaged Babbles to our partners. These moments of unboxing were at times taken by our communities as opportunities for social gatherings – in one case we were guests at a dinner party – while other times they were occasions for more formal group meetings. Gradually the devices became distributed across the communities: on a table in the school library, amongst the books in a bedroom, in the window of a community information shop.

Deployments were not always straightforward. On more than one occasion we wrangled with wireless networks, hardware at times failed, and sometimes units were turned off with the hoover. One by one, however, the devices started talking.

Responses to the Babbles came immediately as people unboxed the devices. Faced with these strange devices, they started to imagine what living with them might be like and how they might use the Babbles to further their causes. In the months that followed, occasional phone calls, emails, and site visits provided glimpses into peoples’ experiences. This culminated in our visits to pick up the devices, as discussions of what people loved and hated about them flowed into much wider conversations of the issues of achieving an energy community.
Deploying

Having finally produced the Babble devices, we set about getting them into the homes and neighbourhoods of energy community members. For the most part, this meant coordinating visits with their ongoing activities and events, which was sometimes tricky. It took us several months to travel to all the communities, hand over the Babbles, assist with installing them, and join in discussions about them. Eventually we managed to deploy three or four Babbles to each community, where they were installed mainly in homes, but also two schools and a pub, with a few left behind to be distributed locally.
tea or even dinner, and visited the various sites where the Babbles would live. Installing
The devices were presented to groups of volunteers in pubs, community centres, and households.

the Babbles often proved problematic. We needed to find power, connect to routers, bypass
The ECDC project, as with other work that falls under the, albeit problematic, banner of speculative design, can be understood in terms of the broad interdisciplinary (and interlinked) fields of ‘public understanding of science’ (PUS) and ‘public engagement with science and technology’ (PEST). The members of the energy communities with which we collaborated can be recast as members of ‘the public’ – they could, after all, be juxtaposed with the government and industry energy experts who generated the technologies and knowledges (not least statistical and technical accounts) of energy-demand reduction. Our various interactions with the members of energy communities (e.g. initial meetings, probe workshops, site, and ethnographic visits, the introduction of the Babble) could be interpreted as attempts to access complex and critical public ‘understandings’ of, and engagements with, energy-demand reduction, not least in relation to the institutional settings through which energy-demand reduction is mediated (as a set of favoured practices, or competitive ‘tendering’ processes, for example).

However, in this essay, we also begin to unravel this picture by tracing some of the convolutions of these communities both ‘internally’ (they were ‘stratified’ publics with their own ‘experts’, ‘advocates’, and ‘laypeople’ and ‘externally’ (they were embroiled in contorted relations of competition and collaboration with other communities, and other constituencies). Our empirical argument is that while PUS and PEST can certainly serve to illuminate the social and material processes in which energy communities are involved, these observations remain limited. Once the broader environment is taken into account – that is, when these communities are situated within their wider networks or assemblages (including those of the present research project) – new and novel empirical insights emerge.

Our theoretical argument is that this suggests that the conceptual parameters of PUS and PEST need to be re-thought in relation to both the present ECDC case study, and any given study.

In what follows, we begin with a brief outline of PUS and PEST, and how these map onto practice-based design research. In particular, we discuss how the Energy Babble might be said to ‘work’ in relation to the ‘core’ and emergent concerns in the fields of PUS and PEST. We then go on to open up the picture of the research, exploring several of the ways in which the ECDC project engaged with, and was engaged by, members of the energy communities. In the process, we encounter a much more variegated set of social and material relations which is usually neglected – one that is relegated to the hinterland of the research, as it were. We thereby begin to throw a very different light on the research itself, the energy communities, and PUS/PEST as viable framings.

**PUS and PEST**

‘Public understanding of science’ was initially oriented towards the study of lay people’s grasp of scientific facts and procedures. Quantitative methods such as questionnaires were the main research tool used to measure levels of – or deficiencies in – ‘scientific literacy’. One overarching concern was that without proper understanding of science, there would be less support for science (and scientific institutions). Partly in response to this ‘deficit model’, a critical or interpretative PUS developed in which the focus of analysis shifted to address the complex relations between science and society in general, but also particular publics and particular scientific institutions. With the use of such qualitative methods as interviews, focus groups, and ethnography, critical PUS began to excavate the tensions that arose between, on the one hand, the folk knowledge or lay...
expertise of publics, and, on the other, scientific institutions’ oftentimes overzealous advocacy of scientific knowledge. Especially important was the tracing of how scientific institutions confidently insisted on the objectivity of their knowledge, often at the expense – that is, the derogation – of lay local knowledges. Not only did this threaten local identities, but it also led to a dilution of publics’ trust in their expert pronouncements turned out to be problematic (based as they were on scientific studies that were contingent on technical and social assumptions that did not always readily generalise). One implication was that scientific institutions needed to become better able to accommodate the knowledges and concerns of publics (for overviews of the evolution of PUS, see, for instance, Wynne 1995; Irwin and Michael 2003; Bucchi and Neresini 2008).

This accommodation in which the boundaries between science and society, and scientific institutions and publics, became, in one way or another, eroded has been discussed in various ways. For some scholars, there was a systemic change in which, for example, the increasingly socially embedded character of scientific and technological problems (for example, climate change, or nanotechnology) led to a greater role for lay or ‘non-expert’ actors in addressing these problems – what Nowotny et al. (2001) called ‘Mode II Science’. At a more microsociological level, some authors suggested that there were already many examples in which lay and expert actors operated together. For example, some publics were sufficiently knowledgeable as to serve in the technical delineation of medical problems (Epstein 1996; Arksey 1998; Callon et al. 2001), while others suggested that scientific and technological controversies entailed antagonistic groupings – or assemblages – composed of a variety of publics and experts, including legal, economic, media, as well as scientific (Irwin and Michael 2003).

In addition, practitioners of critical PUS also became more proactive, advocating processes and procedures whereby the public’s voice could be better integrated into expert deliberation and scientific policymaking. This is the era of ‘public engagement with science and technology’ (PEST), characterised by both the development and testing of a series of deliberative and participatory techniques for enabling public engagement including consensus conferences, citizens’ juries, deliberative polling, card-based group discussion, etc. (Hagendijk and Irwin 2006; Chilvers 2008). However, running alongside this was a series of critiques which drew out a number of limitations with these methods, for example: their de facto lack of purchase within the decision-making process; the impoverished version of democracy they assumed; their proceduralism; their still overly narrow conceptualisation of the public (e.g. Lezaun and Soneryd 2007; Felt and Fochler 2010; Michael 2009; Marres 2012). This is still very much a live area (as evidenced by the recent volume edited by Chilvers and Kearnes 2016), and it is one in which design – in various guises – has had an increasingly prominent role to play. We turn to this in the next section in which we also discuss how ECD falls onto, and indeed can partially re-envision, PEST.

Design and PEST
Design is inherently concerned with ‘publics’ who are often translated into the terms of users – they use the designs developed by designers. However, the relationship between designers and users takes numerous forms (which are not always easy to disambiguate). Thus, at one pole (of a nominal dimension of designer-user interaction), the designer simply imagines what the user-public might want, need or desire (whether that be explicit or implicit). Here, the designer draws on their expertise and, to some lesser or greater degree, a model of the user, to design objects or services that they believe are best suited to particular functions. Obviously enough, the model of the user can vary widely, from a narrow consumer to a world citizen (e.g. Papanek 1984), with corollary political implications. At the other pole, designers directly engage with publics in order to design their artefacts or services. In the case of participatory design, or co-design, not only might prospective users contribute to how best to realise particular or specified goals or objectives, but they might also have a voice in redefining the very nature of those goals and objectives (e.g. Telier 2011; Storni et al. 2015).

At something of a tangent to this engagement dimension is a set of design practices where the aim is not to provide an orthodoxy ‘functional’ object or service (however ‘function’ is delineated), but to develop entities and interactions which serve as provocations of some sort. Here, a particular object, for instance, might operate in ways that do not make obvious ‘practical sense’ – ways which might be obscure, or ambiguous, or playful, or confusing. The point is that through an ‘engagement’ with the object, the ‘user’ ideally comes to critically rethink, say, the direction of technological futures (e.g. Dunne 2005; Dunne and Raby 2013), or else opens up the meanings that attach to certain activities or phenomena such as ‘advertisements’, or the ‘neighbourhood’, or air traffic noise (Gaver et al. 2008; Michael and Gaver 2009).

To be sure, while public engagement with the object can range from a brief encounter at a gallery all the way through to a sustained interaction in which users live for extended periods with the object, the general aim of opening up the possibility for otherwise unarticulated views remains.

ECD falls within the latter of these design approaches – what is sometimes called ‘speculative design’ (though as we have stressed, this moniker is deeply contestable). Throughout this volume, we have documented how ECD engages with publics (through probes, probe workshops, site visits, etc.) in order to design a prototype (the Energy Babble), which is, however, developed at a remove from those publics. The Babble emerged out of a series of dense and convoluted discussions that drew on the materials derived from our energy communities, but also with reference to various other sources (from design history, through the
politics and policy of energy-demand reduction, to research into energy communities conducted elsewhere). The aim was to construct something that was sufficiently opaque, playful, and ambiguous so as to enable users to open with 'energy-demand reduction': insofar as the Energy Babble proved to be 'idiotic' (see 'Design and Science & Technology Studies' essay), it could facilitate the unravelling of the meanings of energy, community, information, communication, reduction, etc. In relation to PEST, ECDC certainly aims to give voice to the public but it is not a voice that is necessarily directly relevant to the standard policy issues that surround 'energy-demand reduction'. Rather, it is in keeping with the ethos of speculative design (e.g. Michael 2012), speculative methodologies more generally (Michael in press; Michael et al. 2015), and the ambition of speculative approaches to interfere with 'streams' of technology innovation (Kerridge, 2015). ECDC can be said to be concerned with facilitating the generation of more 'interesting questions' or 'inventive problems' that open up the very meanings and practices that attach to 'energy-demand reduction'.

Yet, this picture of ECDC as an example of a 'designerly' elaboration of PEST does a disservice both to the design-oriented articulation of the project’s relation to the public, and to the 'publics' we engaged with – publics which, as complex and interrelated communities, were immersed in a nexus of conditions with and against which they were obliged to operate. From the design perspective, the communities were not necessarily 'publics' – that is, groupings that stood in contrast to, and engaged in some sort of struggle with, 'expertise'. And the Babble was not simply a 'tool' through which to 'engage' publics (however speculatively), but a design object which sought to embody and speak to a variety of 'design issues' (the use and integration of particular technologies, algorithms, platforms, etc.) as well as engage with 'social issues' (open access to technologies, fuel poverty, the uptake of renewables, etc.). With regard to 'publics', the above account is all too linear – nuanced relations were developed with particular members of the communities, and it was clear from the outset that the project was as much 'being engaged by' community spokespeople, as we were 'engaging with' those communities. The Babble could thus be seen not only as a 'research device', but also as a 'sociopolitical device' being deployed within and across communities as members went about the local processes of 'making' and 'remaking' energy communities.

In the following sections, we reflect on these entangled processes of 'engaging with' and being 'engaged by' the energy communities. This can certainly be thought of in terms of the 'research event' discussed in the 'Design and Science & Technology Studies' essay, and the mutual effects of researchers and practitioners. However, as we shall also see, this was not a straightforward process, not least insofar as that 'research event' emerged as something other than 'research'. By way of a preview, we can note: that the relations between 'energy communities' and 'researchers' was a fraught one; that the relations between energy communities was challenging; that we were not engaging with singular communities, let alone publics; that the 'leaders' or 'spokespeople' of energy communities were engaging us in particular ways in part to enact a particular trajectory for 'their' community; and that we ourselves as 'researchers' did not always have a consistent or coherent view of the communities or, indeed, of the project.

'Energy communities' and 'researchers'

From the outset, and through the formulation of its case for support to RCUK, the ECDC project sought to recruit and treat as respondents a subset of the ‘communities’ engaged in energy-demand reduction who had received support from DECC as part of its Low Carbon Communities Challenge (LCCC) competition. A total of twenty-two groups had received DECC grants for demand-reduction measures. We (as researchers) were introduced to, and supported in developing relationships with, the LCCC competition winners (the energy communities). However, it soon became apparent that any such relationships required sensitivity and careful negotiation. Here, we draw on events facilitated by the research councils, DECC and UKERC, to consider the complex nature of relations between the energy communities and their researchers.

The Energy and Communities Research Workshop was an initial meeting in November 2011, and perceived by us as something of a matchmaking opportunity for research groups and communities. Following project ‘pitches’ by research groups, a set of prearranged, themed workshops supported various aspects of collaboration, including one titled ‘Recruitment, Recognition, Valuing People’. Here, conversation was substantively led by community members, and covered a range of topics, including what was viewed as the problematic distinction between the researchers and the communities (which was seen to be patronising, or undervaluing local insights), the reductive nature of the term ‘communities’ (which simplified local coalitions that might include end-users, entrepreneurs, local government representatives, etc.), the ‘plagiarist’ nature of academic research (where narratives and practices are taken from communities as findings by researchers), and where academic research projects were seen to be an inappropriate use of resources (not supporting communities’ core requirements, conducting ill-conceived or ineffective activities, etc).

A second meeting, convened by UKERC in Oxford in October 2011, sought to operationalise the misgivings and reticence of energy communities (now reconceptualised – perhaps more constructively and actively – as ‘practitioners’). The meeting entailed an orientation document around the issue of ‘Engaging Practitioners’, which was sent to participating researchers in advance of the meeting, and which drew upon a survey that elicited practitioners’ views
on being researched. Issues for consideration in the framing of activities at the meeting included: the need for clarity regarding the ‘benefits to communities of engaging with researchers’; a proposal that ‘practicable, actionable steps can be recommended’ to practitioners by researchers; and the observation that academics ‘appear reluctant to fund legitimate and valuable input from practitioners’. Indeed, regarding the fiscal concerns of the last point, and against the backdrop of government’s falling enthusiasm for renewables at that time (along with the tailing off of funding from DECC and others), the academics’ projects seemed to be bountifully resourced at a time when practitioners’ resources were becoming stretched and their activities precarious.

Additionally, in dealing with one of the most researched groups in the UK, we can interpret this lack of enthusiasm (and at times antipathy) from energy community practitioners, at least partly as an indication of research fatigue (Clarke 2008). Despite these issues (and others addressed in this volume), our abiding sense is that ECDC managed to sustain the engagement, or at least the polite acquiescence, of our practitioner participants precisely because it adopted a format that was unlike that typical of social scientific study (that had precipitated some of the grievances discussed above).

**Amongst the ‘energy communities’**

Once we had recruited and started to visit the various groups, it became evident that what we had naively taken to be a homogenous and united set of interests, albeit characterised by various local concerns, was to an extent ‘shaped’ by a competition amongst communities for fairly limited funding. For example, the LCCC was run by the Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC), with twenty-two winners from an initial set of more than 500 applications. As a spokesperson for one of the eventually successful communities noted, this was an extremely arduous process entailing, amongst other things, a comprehensive rebuttal of an initially negative decision, and visits to contacts at DECC to lobby for a successful outcome. It was also clear that competition winners had successfully to organise the activities of their group in order to build effective and constructive networks that encompassed not only policy representatives, but also local entities such as councils, charities, and school groups, along with local and national businesses (e.g. infrastructure contractors). In this way, those with LCCC funding considered that their energy networks offered funders a framework that demonstrated capability in delivering a proposal.

In contrast, communities that were more ad-hoc and lacked organisational features, for example those that did not establish a programme of activity, nor formalise finances through the incorporation of a ‘Ben Comm’ (Industrial and Provident Society for the Benefit of the Community) or other instrument of legal constitution, were not well placed to make successful proposals. However, these informal groups shared with the more coherent energy communities an underlying commitment to the Transition model (Hopkins, 2011). They therefore identified with a programme for delivering sustainability (of which renewable energy is seen to be a subset) that included the formation of a ‘core group’, ‘partnership building’, and ‘community engagement’, along with the planning and legal aspects mentioned above. Additionally, through identification with a common and what was seen to be urgent programme of sustainability, though relations amongst groups through their interactions with funding bodies including DECC were ostensibly shaped along competitive lines, the motivating context of the Transition network is in contrast represented as being supportive and mutual.

It is clear then that differentiation amongst the groups we researched is expressed through the extent to which they have made good the ambitions of Transition within their respective communities, which can on one hand be seen as the formalisation of shared commitments, while on the other hand becomes judged in relation to competitive frameworks by external agencies such as DECC.

One effect of success (as an index of competitive fitness) was the capacity for a community to be researched. Well-organised groups were able to contact, host, organise, and inform us more capably than ad-hoc groups. In this respect, our investment as researchers has principally concerned the LCCC winners – including time spent meeting, travelling to and from, speaking about, and designing in relation to. Well-organised groups have ‘benefited’ from exposure to design processes, including discussions about the themes of the workbooks, and descriptions of the technical platform and its features. Consequently, the successfully funded groups could become successfully researched, in that they were aligned with the research devices, having anticipated use and made schemes for the adoption of the final design. Finally, their experience of our research has allowed the successful groups to further expand their own plans, a point that is developed below in the discussion of communities enacting research.

**Within the ‘energy communities’**

Despite variations in the ‘effectiveness’ of the groups we researched, we have argued that commitments such as Transition were often shared across the groups. However, those underlying principles were not necessarily shared within individual energy communities. Ostensibly, our energy communities were a set of diverse constituencies that included the populations of city areas (Bow and New Cross in London, the Meadows in Nottingham), village parishes (Ladock and Reepham), a city (Hastings), a geographic region (Sid Valley), and a university campus (Goldsmiths). We were, in reality, not dealing with ‘whole communities’ but rather with what social scientists would call ‘samples’, and these were highly structured by others, rather than by our own sampling strategy. Initial contacts were often key spokespeople within the communities, including those who were doubtful about academic research, thinking (understandably) that funds should go
had led the formation of ‘Ben Comms’ and acted as authors of funding proposals. At other times our contacts were visible advocates of Transition who had arranged meetings within their communities and published those arrangements on blogs or through Twitter. These contacts then served as gatekeepers, and it was through them that we met others; and through these arrangements a particular and partial version of the energy community became reproduced.

The partiality of these arrangements was of course evident to the spokespeople, and their missing publics were considered in various ways. Representatives of ad-hoc groups at times agonised about the uptake of their projects by the wider constituencies in which they operated. More formalised groups had engagement strategies, and undertook events within schools and civic halls to enrol their publics. Groups also looked to other entities for support, for example legislative frameworks such as the Green Deal were anticipated as methods not only for generating income but also for recruiting members. Certainly, their publics were the direct beneficiaries of the energy-saving measures that had been resourced by the LCCC grants, where solar heating and photovoltaics were installed in homes, schools, and pubs. These infrastructures acted to bind and extend the core groups within their communities, and these measures were at times reviewed enthusiastically by their beneficiaries in terms of savings and features. However, at times the fiscal and utilitarian enthusiasms of the energy publics did not necessarily align with the underlying commitments of spokespeople, evidenced by the various ways in which the energy communities were composed.

Communities enacting research and enacting communities
From the outset of our engagement, community spokespeople were already enrolling publics through a range of activities supported through LCCC and other initiatives. Within this context, it was also apparent that the research project and the Energy Babble were construed as an additional means through which advocates were enacting communities. In this respect, how did the engagement of these groups with our project and researchers reinforce existing ties within the community, and what sort of representation of community became thereby enacted? How did the Energy Babble deployments provide a way of enrolling others, and how did Babble use differentiate or align communities?

Engagement by advocates with the project and with individual researchers were at times prospects for reinforcing existing ties within communities. So, while researchers identified community meetings as constructive occasions for fieldwork, requests for research visits were also taken as opportunities for convening social events for community members. A dinner party was convened to support one Babble deployment. This was an occasion of elaborate hospitality that supported the preliminary impact of our devices within the community and also supported the identity and affiliations of the group: at times explicitly, for example, through after-dinner speeches. The research collaboration also provided the basis for enacting successful communities. Tours of LCCC-funded outcomes that were ostensibly organised for researchers were also occasions of celebration within the core group, and performances of accomplishment for the benefit of partners including local authority and county council representatives.

The plans and actions of individual adopters of the Energy Babble were diverse, though frequently the device was identified as a mechanism for enrolling others into an energy community. It was seen that the device could be taken to public events as a point of curiosity and as a catalyst for conversations, which would provide the basis for a membership drive. Babble was installed in schools where it could be used to broadcast data about savings derived from measures installed with LCCC support, and also for messages from groups which had been formed in order to report on cases of energy misuse. Here, the generation of audio content is an outcome of enrolment activities enabled by the device, and the playback of this material serves as a method of inscribing the community at the site where the Babble was installed, in this case the school library.

If practitioners deployed the Babble as a means of realising community of one sort or another, researchers also envisaged the Babble as affecting the communities. Specifically, we imagined that the device might be used to differentiate from, or align with other communities. For example, in workbooks – and in response to the competitive posture of groups in relation to scarce funding – scenarios were imagined where our design would be used as the basis for energy-saving competitions between communities. Imaginative tropes such as this, while often not borne out in use, demonstrate that the enactment of community and research was a complex, distributed exercise, undertaken by the researchers as much as the spokespeople for the groups.

Researchers enacting research and enacting communities
Our research sought to be driven by empirical encounters with the communities, both at the sites of their energy projects and at events where we undertook activities together. However, a great deal of our time was spent in our studio where we planned those encounters, interpreted resulting data, generated scenarios, proposed schemes, and made designs. Therefore, it is useful to consider our own hand in enacting research and enacting communities. In what various ways have we approached, and represented the ECDC project to diverse communities differently? How did we homogenise the various communities? Finally, how should we reflect on the value we hoped to have for the communities?

The presentation of the research project to the communities, and thus the enactment of those communities, varied in a number of ways. For instance, the articulation of the project in relation to communities developed over time, initially expressing community in relation to the DECC competition, then emphasising the identity of location
and anticipating the features of the constituents, and later through specific engagements with spokespeople. Further, the settings in which there was a presentation to a community member might affect which features of the research were stressed: where slides shown to groups at their meeting in a hotel function room might have dwelt on a description of the research aims, a conversation during a journey between sites on a tour of carbon-saving measures might include reflections on funding schemes and project deadlines.

Here, we see how the informal and incremental features of design research served to perform contradictory, diverse, and partial versions of the communities. By contrast, the final execution and delivery of a range of finalised research devices and events arguably supported the homogenisation of community. In particular, the probe workshop, the probes, and the final design of the Babble can be understood in this way. These formalised formats act to resolve and anticipate their putative communities.

Concluding remarks
It is not easy to summarise these multiple enactments by multiple researchers and communities. What we can note by way of abstraction, is that what a community, or research, ‘is’, is subject to considerable variation as we move across different communities, different encounters, and engagements, and different phases in the research process. Along the way, this variation is proliferated or reduced – depending on practical and rhetorical circumstances, communities, and research becomes more or less homogeneous, more or less differentiated.

In terms of the present ECDC project, this means that we need to tread carefully when we speak of ‘communities’, but also of ‘research’. More specifically, to reiterate, we need to address in more detail how our research process was mobilised by our practitioner participants – how it fed into their local projects and processes. However, ironically, this is simply more of the same: each ‘re-newed’ research engagement becomes yet another opportunity for those who are engaged to mobilise that ‘re-newed’ research process to their own ends. Conversely, our ‘re-newed’ engagement points to another prospect of variously proliferating and homogenising communities. This suggests that there is no ‘end’ to engagement – or rather, we need to think of it in radically dialogical terms, within a processual unfolding of the mutual constitution of communities and research. This point applies no less to the PEST literature – PEST initiatives are themselves appropriated and mobilised by publics; PEST itself examines how ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’ are enacted by publics. What the present discussion has hopefully done – at the very least – is identify and throw into relief this complex, mutualist iterativity of communities/publics and PEST/design research.
tamed with attributions of utility, and portrayed as new sources of information and...
Energy Babble will help Reepham reduce energy

REEPHAM is one of the UK’s first towns to trial a prototype of new technology designed to engage communities in reducing energy consumption. The project addresses how to achieve an 80% reduction of the country’s carbon emissions by 2050.

The “Energy Babble” has already been installed at both schools in Reepham, and units are planned for other venues in the town.

Designed by Professor Bill Gaver and his project team at Goldsmiths, University of London, the Energy Babble collects information relating to energy issues from an extensive network. A server process aggregates and transforms input sources into audio files that are broadcast by each device.

The idea is to open and promote constructive debate and involvement on energy reduction issues. Anyone with access to a Babble can send information to it, either verbally using the microphone or remotely via texting or the internet. The information is then logged, checked, stored and broadcast within a few minutes.

Goldsmiths was awarded a £795,000 grant to fund the Energy Babble over a three and a half year period.

Prof. Gaver said: “The most fundamental achievements will be the Babble on the one hand, and people’s engagements with it and reactions to it on the other. “The Babble itself explores technical possibilities, but also summarises, in a sense, the situations of people who are trying to make progress on environmental action at a community level.

“The reactions don’t just tell us whether people like the Babble, but also – we hope – will reveal a lot of their knowledge, concerns and beliefs about environmental issues, as the many different ways people minimise their energy consumption.”

He continued: “The Babble is not a blank slate like Twitter and other social media, but is more centred on environmental issues. Also, because the Babble is a physical device it has a presence, and a social one, that on-screen systems like Twitter, etc., may not have.

‘Using audio output means it is more pervasive; you don’t have to look at it to engage with it. It is designed to highlight the ways people talk about environmental issues, and that is more or less all it does, all the time. As a winner of the Low Carbon Communities Challenge, the Reepham Green Team were introduced to Goldsmiths two years ago to help develop the Energy Babble.

In total, 35 prototypes have been made available to trial nationwide, of which four units have come to Reepham, two of which are already installed in the schools.

Judy Holland

The Green Team would like Reepham Life readers to help in deciding where the other units should be installed. Please send your suggestions to info@reepham.com, or in writing to Reepham Community Press, Homerton House, 74 Cavston Road, Reepham, Norfolk NR10 4LT, or left at Very Nice Things in the Market Place.

www.reephamchallenge.org

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The arrival of Energy Babble
featured in Reepham Life