

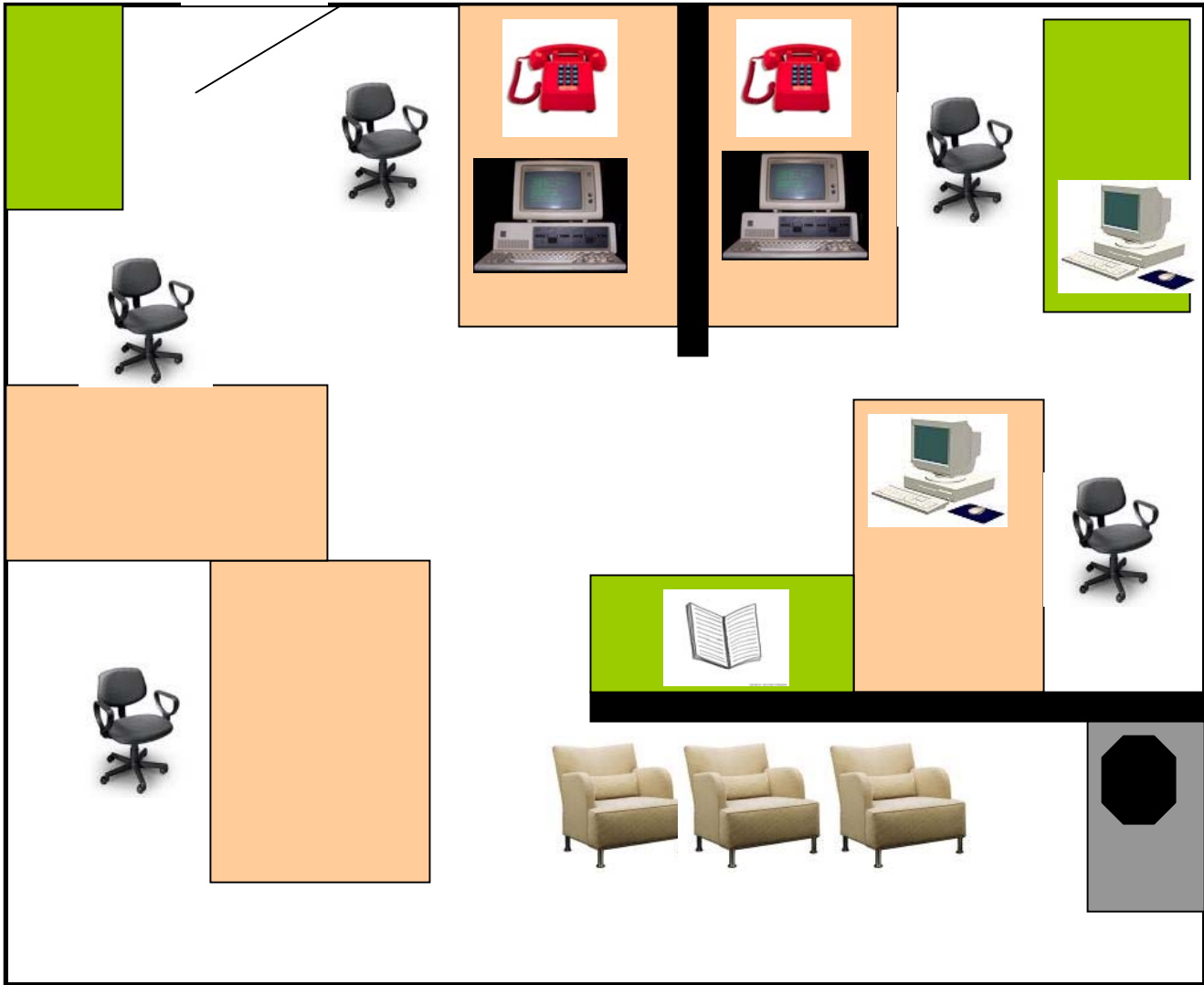
What can an ethnography of information giving by telephone tell us for designing a website?

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## Fieldwork at a Mental Health Information Service

- Mental Health Helpline, Run by an NHS Trust
- “A Listening and Information Service”
- Runs a database of local and national organisations
- Holds a large amount of printed material
- Runs as an out of hours service
- Organised and administered by two full time staff
- Operated by trained volunteers
- Is run on a budget



## They Wanted a Website

- They were getting new machines
- Upgrading the database / infrastructure
- Possibilities:
  - An Information Website
  - A Text Chat Website
- “We could halve the number of calls”

# What can our fieldwork say about a website?

Eight Themes from the fieldwork:

- First Time Callers
- Working With Confidentiality
- Reassuring Callers
- Formulating the Problem
- Drawing From Experience
- Signposting
- Doing The Organisation's Work
- Being There

## First-Time Callers

- Operators feel 'Lucky' If they get a first time caller
- They feel they can help these people
- Work hard to find information for them

## First-Time Callers

“I've got information on self harm. I've just brought the information up on my screen. ...”

*The operator then reads the caller some information about Bristol Crisis (a national service for women who self harm), including the telephone number*

I was wondering if there is anything in [your area].

*The operator then silently reads some details about the National Self Harm Network*

I'm just reading something off the screen... no ... this is [another City].

## First-Time Callers

*“The caller has got all the support she needs. She is embroiled in it all, social services etc.. She is probably trying to let off some steam.”*

# First-Time Callers

## Website Issues

- Information calls are few and far between
- Information calls can be about something other than the information

## Regular Callers

- Make up the vast majority of calls
- Often from lonely people

## Regular Callers

*Hello, helpline*

*what would you like to talk about today? ...*

*How's about – what have you done today? ...*

*Nothing!?*

*What did you have for your tea? ...*

*Okay... What did you have for your lunch? ...*

*...Aren't you hungry? ...*

*... well you can't get by on just a sandwich. You should have some tea.*

*...*

*What have you seen on TV? ... Neighbours! I haven't seen that in years. Who's still on it?*

# Regular Callers

Website issue

- Talk and human contact is key to most calls

## Working with Confidentiality

- Callers are offered confidentiality
- Yet confidentiality is impractical
- And there are conflicts of purpose
- Operators use work-arounds or 'confidential enough' talk

## Working with Confidentiality

“Do you live in [name of city]? Because there are various rescue homes. ... I don't know if there is one in [name of another city]”

“You're in Eastern China!?”

# Working with Confidentiality

## Website Issues

- Information technology often makes rules more rigid
- We have been told no log-in or identifier would be acceptable
- This would make many forms of interactivity difficult

## Reassuring Callers

- Callers are often reassured at the start and end of a call
- Reassurance that they are not wasting someone's time
- Reassurance that their problems are valid

## Reassuring Callers

“And if there's anything else call us back ... *No honestly that's fine ...hope it goes well ...*”

“That's fine, well we're here until 11 O'clock ...”

“1 in 4 suffer from mental health problems”

# Reassuring Callers

## Websites Issues

- It is possible that reassurance about not wasting time would be unnecessary
- It would be hard for a website to be 'reassuring'

## Formulating the Problem

- Operators often get the caller to elucidate the problem

“Was it anything in particular that made you feel like that?”

“Can you give me some more information about what we might do to help you? ...”

“Mmm you don't need to worry... we can talk about anything that's bothering you”

## Formulating the Problem

- Operators often choose the problem (the problem the operator can help with)

“I've got information on self harm. I've just brought the information up on my screen. ...”

# Formulating the Problem

## Website Issues

- Users could possibly look through the information until they find the useful parts
- The expertise in choosing a useful subject will be lost

## Drawing From Experience

- Volunteers mostly have some personal or professional experience of mental health issues

- That experience will be drawn from in many calls

“What sort of benefits do you get?”

“A poodle is the type to go for”

“There’s a Holland and Barratts in the city center”

- Volunteers also often know which are the better organisations to help (and so which is the better information)

# Drawing From Experience

## Website Issues

- There are more subjects talked about than could possibly be kept in a database
- The knowledge of what information is more useful than other information is lost

## Signposting

- A purpose of the helpline is to pass callers on to other organisations
- But the practices of passing callers on aren't that simple  
“If you want anyone to talk to we are open 7-11”

9.40pm ... I'm sure will get you a fresh appointment... ... In the morning ...

9.48 ... make a fresh appointment ...  
... if you make an appointment...

9.50 ...make a fresh appointment ...  
... we are getting outside now... the length of time...  
...make a fresh appointment ... ...okay... (trying to end)  
... is there any other issue I can help you with ...  
... okay caller ... ... do you want to take a note of any of the  
helpline numbers?  
...yes?...have you got your pen?... Saneline 0845...  
... Do you want depression alliance? ... 020 ...  
... okay caller ...

9.55 ... we have to go now caller... I know...  
... but if you contact them and see ...  
... I'll give you the national counselling organisations ... just a moment.  
...  
... I'm trying to find the information for you ...

9.59 (call still going on)  
... if you make a fresh appointment in the morning ... (trying to end)

# Signposting

## Website Issues

- Hyperlinking to other organisations (or just providing numbers) achieves the idealised version of the helpline's purpose
- That may or may not be a good thing

## Doing the Organisation's Work

- Operators must generate data about callers
- This manifests in talk in calls:

“Is that where you found the number for this?”

- The ‘database’ is privileged in the write ups:

“I've got information on self harm. I've just brought the information up on my screen. ...”

# Doing the Organisation's Work

## Website Issues

- The website displaces the system from the organisation to the users and this will make it very hard to gather data

## Being There

- Operators speak to callers one at a time
- The phone is often engaged
- There is an answer-phone out of hours
- Emotional Labour

*“The caller has got all the support she needs. She is embroiled in it all, social services etc.. She is probably trying to let off some steam.”*

# Being There

## Websites Issues

- New forms of labour would be needed at the helpline
  - New shift patterns
  - Lose the 1 at a time structure
  - The volume of contacts might increase
- The users would perceive a very different order of service
  - No out of hours
  - No personal contact

# Conclusion

What does this tell us about websites?

- It tells us there are a lot of problems and issues

## What does this tell us about websites?

- Callers wouldn't use it (But others might?)
- The operator is very active in this “information giving”
- Should the website reproduce the workplace?
- Displacing the information is a serious organisational issue

Thanks