

the online neighbourhood networks *study*

a study of the social impact of citizen-run online
neighbourhood networks and the implications for local
authorities

Section 5: The future for citizen-run neighbourhood websites

2010

Networked Neighbourhoods

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For further information about our group or this series of study papers, please contact:

The Networked Neighbourhoods Group: info@networkedneighbourhoods.com

Online neighbourhood networks study

Section 5

Kevin Harris and Hugh Flouch
The Networked Neighbourhoods Group

(See last page for complete listing of the *Online neighbourhood networks study* materials)

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Section 5 contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Sources of local news
- 3 Local identity and defence of the neighbourhood
- 3 Diversity and representation
- 5 The role of the administrator
- 6 Concluding remarks
- 7 References
- 8 Guide to materials in the online neighbourhood networks study

The acoustics of the public sphere are being altered and, for better or worse, the voices of ordinary people are more audible, and harder to ignore or dismiss.

The future for citizen-run neighbourhood websites

The picture that emerges from studying these sites is one where a broad variety of information gets shared and issues get aired; and within that constantly churning mix, democracy is very much alive. People raise the alarm about concerns, scrutinise public decisions, call their agencies to account, apportion blame, broadcast and correct misinformation, explore solutions and volunteer to take action. People have had their lives changed. They watch and are entertained or upset; get angry, express delight and show compassion; are moved to take part in events; decide they want to know something.

This happens because it is an environment where other digital conversations are going on the whole time – about litter and recycling, transport, shops, parenthood, irregularities and disturbances, entertainment, local history, the exchange and recycling of goods and so on. Those who have sought the revival of democracy in mechanical processes like voting, petitions and scrutiny might do well to examine the way this fertile mix of content nurtures an agitated, involved democracy of everyday life.

We have therefore asked, should councils act to help establish local sites, and how should officers and members engage with them?

These questions are salient because of two main drivers for closer relations between councils and local websites. The first is a broad cultural change which accepts the end of the post-war settlement between citizen and state (Coote, 2010), incorporates principles of co-production (Bovaird et al, 2009) and builds on what Stephen Coleman has described as ‘conversational democracy’ (Coleman, 2005). The second is the economic imperative that requires local authorities to make savings on a very significant scale.

It seems to us that neighbourhood websites can make positive contributions where either of these drivers applies.

In this section we offer some final thoughts on a number of issues that arise from the findings reported in the preceding sections, referring to

- sites as sources of local news
- local identity and the defence of the neighbourhood

‘I have, through this forum, met some amazing people. I have fallen in love, had my heart broken and been picked up by the people I have met here, and my life is massively enriched because of it.’

*‘The old terms of exchange, while never satisfactory, have become increasingly unacceptable. As people have become less deferential, as society has become more diverse, and as new means of two-way communication have developed, so citizens are coming to demand a less distant, more direct, conversational form of representation.’
(Coleman 2005, p9)*

- diversity and representation, and
- the importance of the administrator's role.

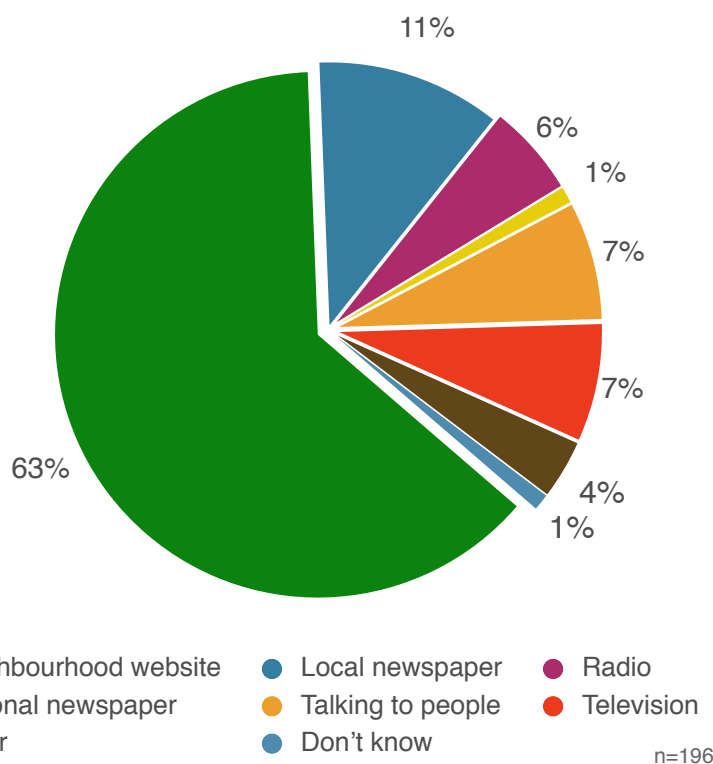
Sources of local news

Whenever there is broad cultural change it is reflected in a society's communication ecologies. In seeking to understand the place of local websites in the mix, it makes sense to explore attitudes towards local news. Each of the sites we have studied can claim to contribute here, offering an environment which is sensitively managed, encourages growth and diversity, and is always changing.

'We still talk about a healthy local press as if it exists.' (Local councillor)

As part of our study we asked users of the three sites to identify what they regarded as their main source of local news. The results, shown in Figure 1 below, confirm the significance of neighbourhood sites as local news channels in the eyes of their users: sixty-three per cent of respondents identified their local site as their main source. Even allowing for the nature of the sample, this finding is indicative of a profound change in the way in which information is generated, and confirms the potentially powerful influence of the sites at local level.

Figure 1: What do you use as the main source for your local news?



Comments added by respondents within the survey further illustrate the value that the sites provide in this respect:

- ‘Why a road has closed, why there's police tape up, what the empty shop is going to be are all answered quicker on a local forum than they ever appear anywhere else!’
- ‘The local press has more or less given up the ghost - local blogs are increasingly the only places to cover local news and they're certainly the quickest.’
- ‘Neighbourhood site gives me the ability to ask about what is happening, to be proactive in terms of news rather than relying on the pre-set agenda of news media.’

This grounding in information and news is important: augmented with everyday chit-chat it provides the context for the social benefits we have outlined.

Local identity and defence of the neighbourhood

The sites we have studied have very different characteristics, but each contributes in its way to the strengthening of local identity. This again is characterised by diversity: through people coming together to clear snow-bound paths; through collections of local history photographs and accounts; through expressed concern for the safety of other residents; through passionate vigilance in the defence of buildings, structures, spaces and businesses with which residents feel some binding association.

There will no doubt be many occasions when the power of a local site to help people defend their neighbourhood is interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as an expression of nimbyism. There will be issues of collective self-interest and relative power as local groups and political interests seek to capture attention and influence through these sites. This leads us to offer some final reflections on diversity and representation.

Diversity and representation

At several points in our report we touched on issues to do with the diversity of participation and the extent to which the sites can be said to be ‘representative’. Here we want to summarise some key points to be taken into an ongoing debate.

Who's not here?

As we have noted, it is not possible for us to gain an accurate picture of who is participating on neighbourhood websites. On at least one of the sites we studied, pseudonymity prevails and on another the amount of anonymity was seen as problematic (see section 2 above). This does not mean that the participants are or are not culturally representative of the locality; nor does it mean that the conversation reflects either the diversity of the participants or the diversity of the locality. It means we should be cautious about making assumptions. But also, as we noted in section 1, as the sites accrue more legitimate but unsystematic influence, there could be tensions between that and their lack of formally recognised representation.

Where people are not participating on the sites, we cannot know whether their non-participation is by choice or through a form of exclusion (including what is known as 'digital exclusion'). In any public or quasi-public space, some people will not feel culturally included: but many may not regard that in negative terms, they simply choose not to participate. However, if neighbourhood websites begin to have influence, and if they accumulate that influence more or less monopolistically with one dominant site in any given area, this issue of cultural exclusion could assume significance.

Our case study sites, as we have noted, have arisen organically in areas that are relatively affluent but certainly not uniformly affluent. We are aware that neighbourhood websites are emerging in some low income areas and it will be useful to evaluate their progress. Perhaps more importantly, it will be valuable to see sites established in areas where local social relations are fractured and where levels of collective efficacy are low (see section 1 for our discussion of collective efficacy in relation to the study sites). There seems to be no reason why citizen-run neighbourhood sites should not make a rewarding contribution to local quality of life in any kind of neighbourhood. Some will emerge organically but some may need the stimulation of community development to help them take root.

Representation

We need to be wary of expectations about the representativeness of these sites. As we have pointed out, each of the study sites was founded with a broad sense of social purpose but not with a view to being necessarily democratically representative, culturally representative or accountable. These spaces can hardly be

described as profit-driven, but they are privately owned and privately managed. They are community-based but visible to all. They contribute to democracy but have no democratic mandate. These sites are turning over the soil in which democratic life could flourish, but they are not doing so in any traditional democratic sense in which spokespeople are chosen and elected and are accountable. In our view, the question is not 'how do we fit these resources into the existing model of democracy?' but 'what do neighbourhood websites tell us about the kind of democracy that is emerging?'

The role of the administrator

Fears that local websites could unleash an unrelenting fury of council-bashing appear, at least in the three sites we have studied, to be entirely unfounded. In fact the opposite seems to be happening: through the kind of moderation which creates a respectful context for discussion and debate, participants come to recognise the challenges for public services and their own potential to co-produce public service outcomes.

The study revealed great respect for the way that administrators act to contain negative posts and comments, insist on fairness, and remove combustible material. Interviews with administrators have revealed the complexity involved and the stress experienced in the role. Sites that have allowed a culture of persistent negativity will hold back the ability of this movement to fulfil its social potential. Successful sites which establish balanced argument and avoid the downward spiral of aggressive negativity, and which therefore offer an environment in which councils will wish to engage, depend heavily on the culture established and maintained by founders and administrators. The skills and temperament involved need to be more clearly recognised and understood.

'You can encounter suspicion from established volunteers in the community and some of that can boil over into downright hostility... It can be odd to find yourself disliked by people who you have never even met. I've had lots of insulting thoughtless remarks directed at me.' (Administrator)

Concluding remarks

The context for online neighbourhood networks should not be seen narrowly in terms of the technology. Local websites have been emerging for some time in a changing democratic environment in which the relations between citizen and state have been undergoing revision. We have found readiness ('2.0 willingness') within local government to engage with social media generally and citizen-led websites in particular, together with a lot of uncertainty about how to do so. In a few authorities, officers are already in post with a remit to promote online engagement, but in most cases caution prevails, and there is no single problem susceptible to a single solution.

There is widespread understanding that the independence of these sites is essential but it is acknowledged that as the benefits become apparent, councils themselves could have a role to play in facilitating the development of new sites across their areas. It's likely that a mixed model of relationships will emerge: some sites will flourish with a connection to a single officer or member, others will benefit from a connection to an area forum or other accountable body, others may thrive with occasional input from a range of officers. As the number of sites increases, there will be a need to understand questions about the relative impact of clusters, the possibility of monopolies, the advantages of syndicated content, and so on.

We think that the expansion of citizen-run neighbourhood websites is desirable and imminent, and that local councils have a role to play in nurturing their future. Our study has shown that such sites can make a distinctive contribution to local social capital, cohesion and civic involvement. They provide a space for freedom of expression which if appropriately moderated can be supportive without being over-protective. They stimulate a varied mix of content which reflects everyday life and affords a refreshed attitude towards local democracy.

And yes, the experience of local democracy will be different. As we noted in our review of the research context (Harris and Flouch, 2010a), the acoustics of the public sphere are being altered and, for better or worse, the voices of ordinary people are more audible, and harder to ignore or dismiss.

References

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Guide to materials in the online neighbourhood networks study

- 1 *Online neighbourhood networks study* short summary (4 pages)
- 2 Introduction, background and extended summary
- 3 Online neighbourhood networks study (Main paper):
 - Section 1: Social capital and cohesion
 - Section 2: Supportive and negative online behaviour
 - Section 3: Empowerment, civic involvement and co-production
 - Section 4: Relations with councils
 - Section 5: The future for citizen-run neighbourhood websites.
- 4 Council survey report
- 5 Guide for councils to online neighbourhood networks
- 6 Videos (Part of the Guide for councils)
- 7 Network timeslices
- 8 Research context
- 9 Online neighbourhood networks typology
- 10 Neighbourhoods seen through online timeslices
- 11 Local broadcast media

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