

Study report:

The research context

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

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Online neighbourhood networks study

The research context

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

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The research context

Introduction

The *Online Neighbourhood Networks study* explores the ways in which people communicate online using locally-based websites, and whether that communication has an impact on their civic engagement. It can be informed by, and has the potential to contribute to, distinct sets of knowledge including social networks and social capital, the development of community online networks, and the connection between online interaction and civic engagement.

While there appears as yet to be only a small literature on local interactive websites, the literature on the other three areas of enquiry is substantial. This paper is not intended to offer a comprehensive review of these literatures, but draws on some key examples from each field in an attempt to situate our study in relation to existing knowledge.

Section 1: The local environment and local demographics

In the neighbourhood: localness and communication

The Online Neighbourhood Networks study is concerned with interactions between co-residents in spatial areas regarded as neighbourhoods or local communities. The issue of scale is not trivial. While most people may think of their neighbourhood as comprising from a few up to perhaps 200 units, in some uses the term applies to 'perhaps 4,000-15,000 people' (Hilder 2005, p6). Generally, professionals delivering services tend to interpret 'neighbourhood' as spatially larger (sometimes significantly larger) than residents do. And as the *Digital Britain* report points out, free online media can make a difference at the most local scale:

Community sites with no costs can serve very small, human news geographies of a single ward or a few streets.

(DCMS 2009, p150)

When considering communication between residents in a locality, we need to begin with the recognition that - with the exception of gated communities and secured apartment blocks, which are enclaves - neighbourhoods necessarily incorporate the *private* realm (households), the *parochial* realm ('community' places), and the *public* realm (streets) (Lofland 1998). Most people move readily and fluidly between these three realms but behaviour in each is governed by unwritten rules, which it is possible to transgress. In considering local online sites, there is a role for research in understanding whether people recognise the online context as public or parochial, or some blurring of the two; how they transfer their behaviours accordingly; and whether the development of digital conversations is impeded by lack of clarity in the rules of accepted behaviour.

Further, in order to ensure that local online communication is seen within the ecology of local communication generally, we need to take account of available contexts for interaction, including attitudes towards privacy and expectations of neighbouring; and institutional and semi-formal contexts.

Expectations of neighbouring are culturally varied and local online sites may reflect this. One study of a neighbourhood site in Boston Massachusetts expressed disappointment about the depth of neighbour relations reflected in the accounts they gathered:

While almost every participant expressed the fact that they knew several residents "by face", such accounts are still indicative of a *cursory* rather than *deeply personal* relationship.

(Pinkett and O'Bryant 2003, p204-205, emphasis added)

The emphasis in UK urban or suburban neighbourhoods tends to be on a balance between reciprocity and respect for privacy: cursory relationships based on recognition rather than intimacy are the norm (Harris 2006). People do not expect neighbours to be friends and seldom visit in neighbours' houses unless on the basis of friendship. In practice it seems likely that this is echoed in north America, according to Hampton, who identifies a reluctance to accept that weak social ties make up the majority of people's social networks:

There is less reason to assume that community networking will have a large influence on the distributed nature of existing, relatively small networks of strong ties, than on networks of weak ties, which are more numerous and less intimate, but still have supportive qualities.

(Hampton 2003, p418)

Burrows and colleagues (2005), writing before the advent of Google maps, highlight the changes implied by the online availability of 'images' of the neighbourhood. They examined the potential of commercial internet-based information systems to characterise places and sort populations, raising the dangers of neighbourhoods not being represented by their residents, in an unanswerable process of digital differentiation. In this light, we can consider local sites as a response by which residents' digital conversations are made audible and thereby constitute valid representations of the neighbourhood. Perceived neighbourhood reputation is important to many people and is a serious consideration for regeneration policy (Permentier *et al* 2009).

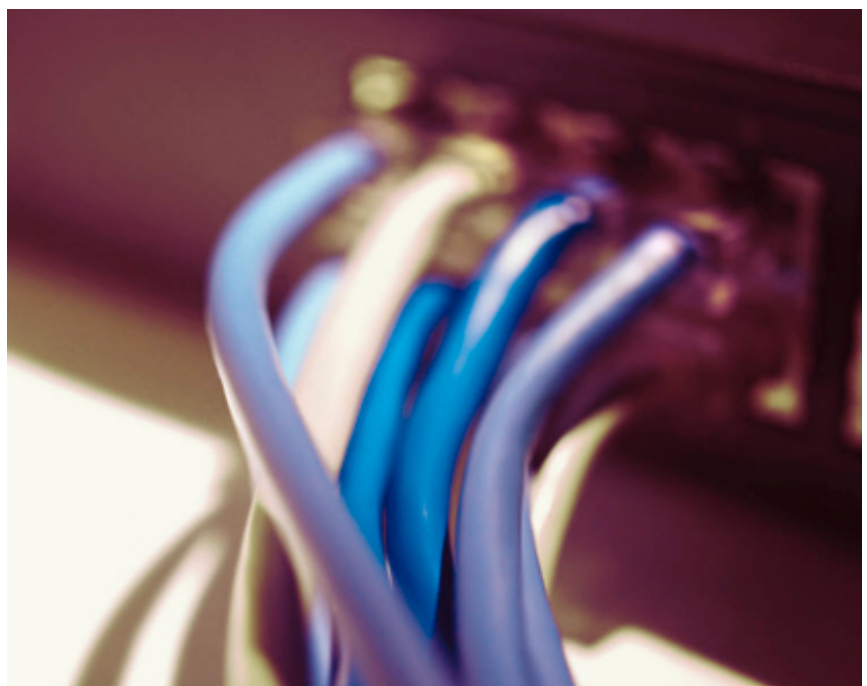
Reporting on a major US study of neighbourhood web sites, Hampton (2007) explores the contexts in which Internet technologies can augment neighbourhood social networks (p737). He concludes that:

Internet use does not privatize; it does not isolate people from the parochial realm of the neighborhood. Internet use over extended periods appears to be an antidote to privatism – it affords the formation of local social networks... The evidence here suggests that the Internet is already slowly building local social networks, at least in those neighborhoods where context favors local tie formation.'

(Hampton 2007, p739)

Internet Building social networks

There is evidence to suggest that the Internet is already slowly building local social networks



A study of online and face-to-face communication in three apartment complexes in Australia (Foth and Hearn 2007) distinguishes collective interaction from networked interaction. The authors suggest that online groups are appropriate for discussion *about* place, while mobile phones, email and instant messaging are more appropriate for networked interaction for sociability *in* place. The distinction is illustrated by participants in focus groups in Leeds, reported by Coleman and colleagues (2008):

Ironically, communication technologies were seen as contributing to the erosion of local identities by forcing them to adopt protocols of expression and practice which undermined communal autonomy. For example, when speaking about the organisation of a protest intended to keep open a local school, participants acknowledged the convenience of using e-mail, as opposed to putting letters through hundreds of doors, but at the same time felt that this form of communication led to a fragmentation of community:

“It is still just a form of communication, and it takes away from the community spirit because it limits conversation.” (Group 6)

“I think that’s what caused some of the problems between parents, because it’s been texting and e-mails and so actually the true message has not got across properly.” (Group 6)’

(Coleman et al 2008, p779)

This is a useful reminder of how changes in communication practice can work against certain interests unexpectedly: in this case, apparently because technologies for one-to-one communication were used when the context demanded the kind of open and transparent exchange afforded by online forums. The effects of these technologies will be different. For instance, Sooryamoorthy and colleagues (2008) show that while mobile phone use *decreases* the geographical diversity of social ties, internet use *increases* it. It remains to be seen whether the growing use of local internet sites will have an impact on this second finding.

The formal and semi-formal contexts for local face-to-face encounters are also significant. These would include venues or meetings of community and voluntary agencies, local schools, shops, parks, libraries, cafes and so on, which help people establish and maintain social ties. As Hampton points out, the integration of the internet into everyday life offers a new (and possibly in some cases unique) setting to facilitate local interaction (Hampton 2007, p716). It would seem that local interactive online sites have a role to play in public discourse between the parochial and the public, and they can do so in the expectation of *influencing what happens* in those realms. In a seminal early paper on the impact of the internet, Craig Calhoun wrote:

Strong communities provide people with bases for their participation in broader political discourse. They provide them with informal channels of information, chances to try out their ideas on friends and neighbors, and opportunities to hone their presentations of ideas and identities before they enter into the public sphere. Significant discourse about public issues takes place in settings that are not themselves altogether public and that tend to be circumscribed by the bounds of community – churches, PTAs, workplace cafeterias. We need to recognize the

importance of intersections between the larger public discourses that are predominantly dependent on mass media in contemporary society and these smaller discourses on the boundaries between community and public life.’

(Calhoun 1998, p388)

Ten years after this was published, local social networking sites were beginning to emerge to provide precisely this kind of context. As we will see, local online use seems most likely to find its place in the context of everyday public discourse.

Will ordinary people discuss local issues online?

In much of the literature pre-dating social media there is an implicit assumption that sustained online interaction is unlikely or unnecessary among people who see each other frequently face-to-face, or who have little in common other than the place where they live. One argument was that ‘community is no longer (if it ever was) about neighbourhood’ and there are no grounds for expecting co-residents to have much to talk about. This line follows Wellman’s characterisation of twentieth century western social interaction in terms of ‘networked individualism’ (Wellman 2001), but takes it rather further than Wellman’s research justifies.

Other more dystopian views were voiced about the anticipated negative social impacts of online, and these tended to take the opposite view: ‘real community’ is precious, something you have to invest in, that depends heavily on face-to-face interaction with the visual cues of in-person interaction, it is not easy to leave and cannot be replicated by remote communication. This somewhat romantic view of traditional neighbourhood community has often been contrasted to imaginatively pessimistic views of the social impact of online technologies. Thus Locke (1998) for example anticipated an ‘autistic society’, apparently oblivious to the possibility that his attitude towards people with some disabilities might be offensive. He claims that virtual communities ‘abstractly unite dissociated people’ – which is conceptually tortuous – and adds:

The psychological nature of the hookup... falls far short of any kind of human experience to which our grandparents were accustomed.’

(Locke 1998, p200)

Timms and colleagues quote a similar example of this kind of thinking:

Rather than providing a replacement for the crumbling public realm, virtual communities are actually contributing to its decline. They're another thing keeping people indoors and off the streets. Just as TV produces couch potatoes, so on-line culture creates mouse potatoes, people who hide from real life and spend their whole life goofing off in cyberspace.’

(McClelland 1994, cited by Timms *et al* 2001¹)

¹ The quotation is also offered by Rheingold (1993), ch.11.

If there is any value in this thinking, it arises when emphasis is placed on the advantages of co-presence as 'thick with information'. But this soon gets the standard anti-technological exaggeration: Boden and Molotch for example claim that

when we are in co-presence, we have some evidence that the other party has indeed made a commitment, if nothing else than by being there

(Boden and Molotch 2004, p103)

- a view which obviously applies to some circumstances but not to others. The mutual commitment of commuters on the tube or prisoners in a compound is questionable. And it does lead us to ask: if someone moves into a neighbourhood, to what or to whom are they expected to be making a commitment? Our point is that romantic misconceptions of cohesive traditional community are a poor place to start when seeking to understand the contribution that online can make to local social interaction.

In the debate about the social impact of the internet, then, there are two strong tendencies to be questioned: the first is the tendency to privilege strong ties above weak ties, and to assume that online would somehow supplant the former catastrophically; the second is to adopt an either/or stance and to overlook the *complementary* role of online in relation to other forms of communication. Both suggest a profound misunderstanding of what has been called 'the metabolism of community' (Harris 2003, p24).

Before the emergence of what was recognised as social media, a number of papers reviewed available evidence of the psychology of online interaction. Unwanted anonymity or pseudonymity, and the loss of visual cues afforded by face-to-face interaction were among the reasons put forward for doubting the social contribution of online. Susan Watt and colleagues found that visual anonymity in online communication *enhances* normative behaviour in groups (Watt *et al* 2002). They concluded that online communication is

no less social, and may actually be more socially regulated, at least at the group level, than face-to-face communication.'

(Watt *et al* 2002 p77)

Birnie and Horvath (2002) found that online social communication appeared to complement or be an extension of traditional social behaviour rather than being a compensatory medium for shy and socially anxious individuals.

Some of Wellman's research bracketed fixed line telephone use along with face-to-face in describing high levels of individualised contact between residents in urban areas (Wellman *et al*, 2001). Subsequent work from the same team has shown that new media (internet and mobile phones) 'do not replace in-person (and wired phone) contact among household members' (Kennedy and Wellman 2007, p665). People use these media to communicate with those they see face-to-face daily or frequently. Offline interaction reduces problems of sociability such as lack of trust, thereby facilitating online knowledge sharing (Matzat, 2010). We should therefore not be surprised to find that people are more than ready to communicate online with others in their neighbourhoods, as the recent flourishing of sites like [Harrington Online](#) and [East Dulwich Forum](#) demonstrates.

Section 2: Exclusion and inclusion, cohesion and diversity

How does the local use of online relate to what we know about social exclusion and cohesion? High levels of material deprivation are generally associated with low levels of engagement with communication technologies, but Longley and Singleton have shown that the picture is not clear-cut:

The England-wide picture illustrates that the pattern of 'digital unengagement' is less heavily concentrated upon urban conurbations than on areas of material deprivation. It is also clear that many of the neighbourhoods that are 'digitally unengaged' are not materially deprived.

(Longley and Singleton 2009, p1296)

If nothing else, this cautions us against expecting simplistic correlations between the socio-economic classification of localities and the uptake of local sites for digital conversations. Nonetheless, studies of digital inclusion in the UK (eg Jaxa-Chamiec and Fuller 2007; Fresh Minds, 2008) have either not found or have overlooked the potential contribution of local sites to social inclusion.

Age and educational attainment are widely regarded as strong indicators of access to and use of the internet, and a great deal of progress has been made in reducing the significance of these barriers. This raises the question: if everyone had access, would local uses of the internet help to reduce social exclusion?

Probably the best-known and most studied community network is Blacksburg Electronic Village in Virginia ([BEV](#)), which dates from 1993. Reporting from their long term work on use of the site, Kavanaugh and colleagues note that 'the positive social impacts of information and communication technology are associated with higher levels of education and extroversion and with life cycle (i.e. 35-64 years of age)':

Digital Exclusion

Age and educational attainment are widely regarded as strong indicators of access to and use of the internet



These demographics and psychological attributes predict participation in community life, local groups, sense of belonging and collective efficacy, all of which lead to higher levels of activism and social uses of the Internet, and ultimately to increases in overall involvement both within and beyond the geographic community once people go online. There is a clear concern that people with lower levels of education who are more introverted, younger or older, and who do not participate in local groups, will not contribute to the general pool of social capital and collective action.'

(Kavanaugh *et al* 2005)

This describes a medium-town context in which inclusive civic involvement is widely and routinely practised. Blacksburg is not a village, it is a university town of approximately 43,000 people (year 2000) and has higher than average measures on education, income and internet penetration (Kavanaugh and Patterson, 2002, p330).

Another study suggests that at the micro-level, in localities where the sense of cohesion may be weaker, lack of personal offline ties is likely to constrain people's online involvement:

Individuals are more likely to make friends online when they have a relatively high level of "belonging" (*i.e.*, if they know more people in the neighborhood and believe that they live in an area characterized by neighborliness).

(Matei and Ball-Rokeach 2002, p420)

People in low-income or fractured neighbourhoods will not all react in the same way to communication opportunities. In a study of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Berlin, Schnur found that local social capital can make the crucial difference in neighbourhood development where official data and monitoring imply comparable conditions:

When a difficult initial situation with other negative factors (e.g. disinvestment) coincides with a lower level of social capital, the potential to overcome marginalisation can be particularly poor... In a slightly different situation, i.e. a poor initial situation but with relatively high levels of social capital, conditions tend to stabilise.

(Schnur 2005, p500)

Hampton also places emphasis on whether or not the local context favours the formation of social ties. In his *e-Neighbors* study the context of an apartment block and a gated community both 'overwhelmed any individual desire to use the technology locally.' However:

Those without the technology, and those in neighborhoods without an existing propensity towards local tie formation, are structurally disadvantaged twice over; they are unlikely to build local community with or without the use of information and communication technologies.'

(Hampton 2007, p740-41)

If circumstances are favourable, Hampton says, 'those who have smaller networks on average, and consequently are the most likely to have a deficit of power and access to information, are the most likely to participate' (Hampton 2007, p740).

Arguably the most significant findings on social inclusion and community cohesion come from Hampton's recent (2010) paper on 'Internet use and the concentration of disadvantage', in which he explores the role of online media in relation to collective efficacy. The study was based on the [i-Neighbors website](#), which allowed users in the US and Canada to set up local online communication and information resources. Email lists were the most extensive use of this university-based service, and the research was based on the 50 most active neighbourhoods that had accounted for 91% (25,308) of all messages sent using the i-Neighbors system. At their peak the majority of these neighbourhoods had between 25 and 95 members. Perhaps surprisingly,

fourteen of the most active were located in census tracts classified on the disadvantage index as within the top 20th percentile for the most disadvantaged areas in the nation, only one of which was located in a suburban area. Six of the 14 were within the top 10th percentile for areas with the highest concentration of disadvantage.

(Hampton 2010, p1122)

These are areas where residents could be expected to experience serious constraints on their abilities to exert informal social control and establish a stable sense of cohesion. Following detailed analysis of the language patterns used in the messages on these lists, alongside demographic data from census sources, the author concludes that:

neighborhoods in a context of disadvantage experienced levels of informal social control and collective action that were similar, if not more extensive than those of advantaged areas.'

(Hampton 2010, p1128)

Hampton's point is that when the internet is used for local communication within an area of concentrated disadvantage 'it overcomes contextual constraints on the formation of collective efficacy.' He therefore concludes that:

The Internet serves as a contextual leveller between advantaged and disadvantaged communities by affording the formation of collective efficacy—local social cohesion and informal social control—within a context of concentrated disadvantage.'

(Hampton 2010, p1128)

These findings are rather isolated in the literature. We can anticipate arguments that local websites demonstrate a Matthew effect, whereby their power to bring influence and other social benefits is more quickly and effectively exploited by those already relatively empowered and influential. This issue applies both to cohesion and to exclusion, and calls for evaluated case studies and systematic research over time.

Section 3: Social capital and social networks

Community networks and local websites have developed in parallel with popular and policy interest in social capital and social networks. Granovetter's (1973) groundbreaking study of the role of weak ties in helping people find employment, and Putnam's (1995) article on 'America's declining social capital' anticipated the explosion of interest that was to follow the latter's book, *Bowling alone* (Putnam 2000). An *either/or* tendency is strongly associated with early thinking in this thread. Putnam himself observed:

'My hunch is that meeting in an electronic forum is not the equivalent of meeting in a bowling alley—or even in a saloon...'

(Putnam 1995, p76)

- raising the question of why anybody should assume that the one should be the 'equivalent' of the other.

Alongside this work, Barry Wellman and colleagues at [Netlab](#) were exploring the nature of contemporary community using social network analysis. This thread led to the Netville study, the first analysis to demonstrate the potential of online connections to contribute to local social life. The Netville study is discussed in more detail in section 5 below. What follows comprises a brief review of some points at which these two major sociological themes have emerged in the discussion of local online communication.

There seems to be qualified endorsement for the view that online can contribute to the generation of social capital. In a detailed literature review published in 2004, Pigg and Crank distinguished between communication and information functions of online. As we might expect, the information function is less likely to contribute to the generation of social capital: 'content, per se, is not the driving force'. But the researchers suggest that there is positive evidence from the communication functions for three out of five components of social capital (networks, resources for action, and reciprocity transactions). For the remaining

What is the potential of online connections to contribute to local social life?



two components, 'bounded solidarity' and 'enforceable trust', the researchers did not identify any empirical studies on which to base a judgement (Pigg and Crank 2004).

Others find the impact to be largely positive if unspectacular. A study in Japan found some weak support for the hypothesis that reciprocity and trust online contribute to social and political participation offline (Kobayashi *et al* 2006). Gaved and Anderson identified numerous instances of community-based ICT developments making a difference to people's quality of life, sense of well-being and social capital. They conclude that:

Community network initiatives have been shown to be influential in the formation and maintenance of social capital, however these influences are complicated and sometimes difficult to predict.

(Gaved and Anderson 2006, p21)

The most compelling theoretical exploration of the connection of new media with social capital is probably William Davies's 2003 report, *You don't know me but...* In the earliest light of social media Davies took the trouble to acknowledge the negative aspects of social capital in existing social structures, and recognised that civility online could emerge in ways not always fulfilled in the offline world. Anticipating the potential of neighbourhood sites, he argued that:

Social software can exploit the bridging properties of the internet to social benefits. Codified interaction provides etiquette to interact with neighbours at a local level, while being able to connect people who have shared goals and would not otherwise meet. New possibilities for civic behaviour open up, while more private interests – dating, business networking – are also available as a result of this software. Where social capital is built around tacit, cultural identities, it divides as much as it unites. By specialising in a more codified type of social interaction, social software holds out the possibility of new public conversations, not only between scattered parties with shared cultural interests, but between local neighbours with far less in common.

(Davies 2003, p59)

Attempting to link Putnam's findings about social capital in America with the emerging experience of community networks, Blanchard and Horan argued in 1998 that social capital and civic engagement 'will increase when virtual communities develop around physically based communities and when these virtual communities foster additional communities of interest'. It could be claimed that that is precisely the ecology we see emerging in neighbourhood networks now, twelve years on.

Blanchard and Horan's was an exploratory and largely theoretical study, which illustrates the difficulties in making claims about social capital and online behaviour from very generalised evidence. Although the definition of social capital is itself heavily contested, theorists have naturally tended to speculate on this theme. Thus for example, according to David Halpern,

Putnam has suggested that

the internet, far from building social capital, may prove to be the ultimate form of narrow bonding social capital, allowing people to identify and connect only with others who share their interests in the most precise, narrow sense imaginable.¹

(Halpern 2005, p307)

Similarly, from the social networking side of the debate, Wellman and colleagues speculate whether

greater use of the Internet may lead to larger social networks with more weak ties and distasteful interaction with some of these ties, resulting in lower commitment to the online community.

(Wellman et al 2001, p449)²

Against this understandable and fascinating conjecture, there are occasional very specific claims. For example, that local face-to-face ties are the foundation for online ties:

respondents from all groups... are equally likely to form personal ties online when they know a greater number of people in the neighborhood to talk about a personal problem.

(Matei and Ball-Rokeach 2001, p558)

According to Matei and Ball-Rokeach, the chances of making a friend online increase 'by 32% for each neighbour known well enough to talk to about a personal problem.' This might suggest that an online network is unlikely to compensate those who have few strong local ties, and their potential exclusion could thus be compounded. The researchers conclude:

People who contribute social capital to their residential places can also be expected to lend their social capital to the online groups they inhabit. Put another way, unless social connections online are supported by preexisting social and cultural networks offline, their long-term prospects are probably not that great.'

(Matei and Ball-Rokeach 2001, p561)

¹ The phenomenon whereby a higher proportion of people's online connections are likely to be to those with whom they have much in common, and to be largely *about* what they have in common, was described in 1997 by Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson as 'cyberbalkanisation', a term which can never have been expected to catch on.

² It's important to stress that the two suggestions quoted here, by Putnam and Wellman *et al*, were presented very much as speculation and were not claimed as evidenced knowledge.

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Among the concerns of the internet dystopians has long been the possibility that people might be seduced into spending more time connecting remotely with those beyond their neighbourhood, and thereby neglect local face-to-face social relations. It's hard for this argument to be put across without it sounding moralistic. We have not been able to identify any analysis which confirms the damage to social capital in fifteenth century Europe caused by the invention of printing, which privatised news consumption away from the highly-communal town square encounter with travellers or with town criers. The first part of the accusation – that people will use the internet to communicate with remote others - is not going to surprise anyone and has been evidenced in various studies. Ferlander and Timms for example looked at two community-based Internet projects in suburban Stockholm and found that

The Internet was used for the maintenance of non-local strong bonding social capital, with many visitors using the Internet to keep in touch with family and friends outside the local community.

(Ferlander and Timms 2007, 9.4)

Happily the authors do not regard that as either a bad thing nor as the whole story. They conclude that:

use of the Internet is not inimical to the enhancement of social capital and that, given the right social context, it can enhance both local and wider forms of social capital.

(Ferlander and Timms 2007, 10.6)

Our problem is both to understand the connection between communication and social capital; and to differentiate the possible effects of different kinds of mediated communication, recognising that changes in technologies (eg social media) as well as other social changes (such as the increasing diversity of local urban populations) might be contributing in unseen ways. There is 'no single internet effect' (Quan-Haase et al

2002, p319). As one commentator has noted, there are difficulties caused by the conflated use of the two concepts 'internet use' and 'social capital':

In the existing research, "Internet use" has been regarded as mere web browsing, one-to-one emailing, many-to-many listserving or online chatting; it has also been considered as any combination of all the above. Obviously, these different types of online activities contribute differently to the accumulation of social capital.

(Zhao 2005, p2)

Thus we should only expect partial answers. Quan-Haase and colleagues consider the evidence on what they regard as three forms of social capital: social contact (network capital), civic engagement, and sense of community. They conclude that:

the Internet is increasing social capital, civic engagement, and developing a sense of belonging to online community. We suspect that people not only have more relationships than in pre-Internet times, they are in more frequent contact with their relationships, and the strengthening of the bonds through more frequent contact means that ties can be more readily mobilized for aid.

(Quan-Haase *et al* 2002, p319)

That paper was based on a 1998 survey. In a subsequent review Quan-Haase and Wellman suggest that:

the Internet occupies an important place in everyday life, connecting friends and kin both near and far. In the short run, it is adding on to – rather than transforming or diminishing – social capital. Those who use the Internet the most continue to communicate by phone and face-to-face encounter. Although it helps connect far-flung community, it also connects local community.

(Quan-Haase and Wellman 2004, p125)

Significantly perhaps, they add that the internet 'may be contributing to new forms of interaction and community that cannot be measured using standard indicators of social capital':

The Internet makes it necessary to redefine our understanding of what social capital is.

(Quan-Haase and Wellman 2004, p126)

Further understanding of the connection between the receipt of information and the generation of social capital is provided in a study of a health publicity campaign after Hurricane Katrina. Beaudoin (2007) found that the media had a positive influence

on neighbourliness (described in terms of practical help) and on informal support (described in terms of emotional and informational support). The project used African-American radio channels, and the increase in neighbourliness was greatest among respondents who were most exposed to the media campaign. The main message of the research is that mass media can 'cause' social capital.

Beaudoin claims to find a direction of causality from mass media to social capital (mass media campaign generates social capital) and **not** in the other direction (social capital causing media use); nor does he find a reciprocal or circular relationship. In a footnote he says that he initially tested tv, radio, newspaper and internet and detected no difference in results. This suggests that an internet communication campaign can generate social capital, but people with high social capital are not necessarily more predisposed than others to pay attention to such a campaign. We note that this involves the internet as a broadcast medium, not for interactive communication. Nonetheless it seems to answer in the negative the question posed ten years ago by Robert Putnam:

'social capital may turn out to be a *prerequisite for*, rather than a *consequence of*, effective computer-mediated communication.'

(Putnam 2000, p177)

If it is questionable to apply Beaudoin's conclusions to local websites in the UK, recent conclusions from a longitudinal study of two forums in suburban Israel are harder to ignore. Mesch and Talmud claim that:

'the mere enrollment in the bulletin board becomes a source of formation and extension of social capital, apparently increasing the size of locally based social networks and norms of reciprocity.' (Mesch and Talmud 2010, p15)

Putnam's general argument on the decline of social capital in America is based on and demonstrates a relation between levels of generalised *trust* and pro-social behaviour. This has led to exploration of the connection between social capital and civic engagement, which is widely acknowledged but fuzzy. Some commentators go so far as to regard the latter as part of the former: this would mean that if online communication can be shown to contribute to civic engagement (and it has been, as we note in the next section) then by extension it contributes to social capital.

Certainly, lack of clarity about terms can cloud the issues. In a study of email lists in Jerusalem, Mesch and Levanon, questionably, make a direct link between people expressing their opinion on neighbourhood and community issues, and 'fulfilling civic duties' (Mesch and Levanon 2003, p343-344). In the next section we consider briefly some of the evidence on the connection between online communication and civic engagement.

Section 4: Democratic participation and civic engagement



Photo by Peter Walsh Projects

Democracy is about relationships. If too many are dysfunctional, it won't work. Increasingly, concerns are being expressed about the mismatch between people's experience of democracy and its ideals. The UK government attempted to link democracy and community engagement together in its local government white paper (DCLG 2006). The policy effort recently invested in themes like empowerment and co-production suggests an emerging recognition that democracy is not predominantly about formal processes, universally accepted procedures, stable forums using replicable formats and congregational spaces. From now on it will be more about local variations, different options for accountability, relationships and conversations: that is the direction implied by localism.

Stephen Coleman has described the circumstances for this transformation as follows:

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)

Geoff Mulgan has also taken up the theme of 'democracy as conversation':

Most of the day to day business of contemporary government is closer to monologue... The challenge for democracies is whether they can bring more of that vernacular conversation into their deliberations.

(Mulgan 2006, p235-236)

At around the same time that debates about co-production began to take hold, Tom Bentley was calling for the stimulation of more 'everyday democracy' by developing the local roots of democratic self-governance, for example through making 'co-production by citizens as important as professional knowledge and performance management' (Bentley 2005, p55).

Conversational democracy and the co-production of local quality of life are not trivial undertakings: but both are within the legitimate aspirations of neighbourhood online networks. Attempts to establish 'citizen-facing' governance using network technologies from the top-down, based for example around a city council website, may work against these objectives. Goodwin's (2005) exploration of Birmingham City Council's unsuccessful attempts to use their website to develop 'new forms of active engagement with citizens/community groups' lead him to remark:

The interactivity required cuts to the heart of issues of power and control within the organisation.

(Goodwin 2005, p380)

Using case studies of attempts by city councils to stimulate civic engagement through internet infrastructure, Tapia and Ortiz report that:

- The municipalities initiated the project and universally encountered problems with deployment and implementation along the way.
- Most projects ended in failure.
- Most citizens who supported the project were left confused, disgruntled, and mistrustful in response to past, current, and future municipal technology projects. (Tapia and Ortiz 2010, p108)

These lessons were essentially about how corporate hierarchical thinking struggled to understand network thinking. To those who recognise it, the internet offers the power of horizontal communication, but it is not an unqualified advantage. Ten years ago Robert Putnam suggested that 'computer-mediated communication so lowers the threshold for voicing opinions that, like talk radio, it may lead not to deliberation, but to din' (Putnam 2000, p173). There are numerous examples where this prediction seems to have been fulfilled: the question is whether or not they belong in the early gradient of a learning curve and will be overcome as norms of online behaviour become commonly established and accepted.

This section explores how the new association of networked technologies with citizen engagement in democratic processes is being made evident. What we need to bear in mind is this: the Habermasian idea that the role of supervising democracy and governance falls to rational-critical deliberators in the public sphere is being revised (Bakardjieva 2009, p100). 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.

There is a dauntingly large literature on the internet and civic and political engagement. A meta-analysis of 38 north American studies concludes that the effects of internet use on engagement are positive, but probably not substantial (Boulianne 2009, p205). The author notes that researchers tend not to find any significant effects when it is assumed that political engagement leads to internet use. Most models assume the opposite direction of causality – that internet use affects engagement – but a two-way causal process is possible and there is no definitive conclusion.

Boulianne (2009, p202, 205) also notes that the effects of the internet on political engagement seem to be increasing over time. In their Blacksburg research, Kavanaugh and Patterson found that the longer people have been using the internet, the more likely they are to use the local network for the purposes of building social capital and to increase involvement in local community issues. However, their data do not support the argument that *an increasing proportion* of the population will become involved in local community issues as a consequence of online activity. In their discussion they offer an explanation in terms of 'latent capacity

The demands of modern life compete for people's time and attention. Nonetheless, many community members are interested in local issues, and are predisposed or "poised" to be more active... For individuals predisposed to become more involved, the internet and associated community computer networks help to distribute information more widely, more conveniently, and allow for efficient participation in discussion. Thus, the internet capitalizes on existing social networks while at the same time it reaches people "predisposed to be more active".

(Kavanaugh and Patterson, 2002, p. 340)

There may be something to be learned from the numerous studies of civic engagement and internet use which do not distinguish *local* participation. Pasek and colleagues (2009) for example suggest that online use could help to address declining levels of civic engagement and encourage people toward greater civic and political participation. Shah and colleagues (2005) regard civic participation as an important individual-level indicator of social capital. In a study which is essentially about how people communicate about politics, they used US national panel survey data and included interpersonal political discussion, interactive civic messaging, and civic participation in their model. The researchers found that 'online media complement traditional media to foster political discussion and civic messaging. These two forms of political expression, in turn, influence civic participation.' They note:

Online information seeking and interactive civic messaging—uses of the Web as a resource and a forum—both strongly influence civic engagement, often more so than do traditional print and broadcast media and face-to-face communication.

(Shah *et al* 2005, p551)

We might ask, what sort of motivation and commitment is being generated here? Does online, with its potential to combine information, deliberation, debate and transparent decision-making, encourage a level of commitment to local politics that is sufficient to refresh democracy? A number of papers (particularly Bakardjieva 2009 and Coleman *et al* 2008) explore the nature of *local* civic involvement as non-specialised everyday practice and experience, in relation to online, and we discuss these now.

Coleman and colleagues (2008) examine the ways in which emerging opportunities for interactive communication between citizens and their political representatives might enhance people's feelings of political efficacy. Participants in focus groups in Leeds suggested 'a sense that language was no longer their own and local distinctions no longer respected [which] led to a kind of retreatism: an unconfident withdrawal from the discourse of official politics.' (Coleman *et al* 2008, p779)

The researchers point to the importance of the 'politics of the mundane' in forming levels of political efficacy, which they say 'depends upon structures of confidence arising from empirical experience of the effectiveness of intervention':

The most telling tales are those learnt close to home. Everyday encounters with authorities, such as school teachers, police officers and local authority officials, play a vital role in political confidence-building. Time and again in the course of the focus groups we witnessed how lack of satisfactory outcomes in local political action affected beliefs in general about the ability of ordinary people to exercise influence over the political system.

(Coleman *et al* 2008, p 785)

A sense of detachment from local decision-making, however trivial by comparison to national and international politics, is shown to be profoundly damaging in terms of empowerment:

Our findings point to a strong linkage between the breakdown of local attachment and an explicit sense of political inefficacy.

(Coleman *et al* 2008, p786)

If neighbourhood networks have a contribution to make in addressing this detachment, perhaps it is because they could exploit what Bakardjieva calls 'subactivism', a kind of politics that unfolds 'at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life':

It is constituted by small-scale, often individual, decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and are difficult to capture using the traditional tools with which political participation is measured. Subactivism is a refraction of the public political arena in the private and personal world.

(Bakardjieva 2009, p92)

Bakardjieva argues that modern society has 'circumscribed political activities in a specialized compartment, to which the ordinary person living his or her everyday life hardly has any access' (p96). She encapsulates the prevailing model of civic participation as follows:

The civic is related to services typically provided by institutional entities, be it the municipality, the school, the health care system, or the taxation office. Participation in this scheme of things is equivalent to consumption, compliance, or, at best, defending one's entitlement when it is somehow compromised.

(Bakardjieva 2009, p98)

In this model, as she notes, the internet 'simply furnishes a smooth connection and extended reach to anonymous offices and administrative representatives or automated interfaces'. Reminiscent of the model promoted by the e-Envoy's office in the early 2000s, the internet is presented to the citizen as a context for consumption. But for Bakardjieva, the internet offers the means to bring everyday social discourses into the political process, whether or not the political establishment recognises it. Bakardjieva sees potential in the transformation of institutional and technological networks:

A technological network based on the pulpit, the printed bible, and village word of mouth offers a substantively different set and scope of subject positions compared to a network based on the national newspaper or modern broadcasting technologies. The Internet transforms the process of identification by exploding the number of discourses and subject positions to which the individual becomes exposed, as well as by multiplying the participation forms available at that individual's fingertips. Moreover, by reaching deeply into users' everyday lives, Internet technology allows for active appropriation of discourses and constitution of new discursive repertoires by individuals and groups, thus bringing discursive agency closer to subjects' everyday experience.

(Bakardjieva 2009, p94)

Kavanaugh and colleagues (2005), having the luxury of examining civic involvement in a town with the an exceptional history of connectedness, emphasise the integrated nature of face-to-face and online participation, in terms of measures such as collective efficacy, membership of groups, sense of belonging, and activism. Like other observers, they consider that it makes a significant difference when online connections are grounded in offline relations:

These offline relationships have built-in norms of reciprocity, governance rules, and participant roles that transfer to their online interactions. It is harder to shirk responsibility online when we expect to see other members face-to-face in the near future.

Kavanaugh et al (2005)

In a more recent BEV study, Kavanaugh and colleagues examine how the internet may be used 'to spur political discussion and participation among politically passive citizens' (Kavanaugh et al 2008, p935):

for passive-apatetic and apathetic citizens we find little evidence yet that the Internet (including blogs) helps bring these individuals into community or political decision-making spheres. These persons may still feel disconnected from 'power games' and that they lack influence in political outcomes... Although we find that these communication technologies add voices from engaged segments of the population, voices from passive-apatetic and apathetic groups largely remain silent.

(Kavanaugh et al 2008, p958)

This brings us back to the findings of Coleman and colleagues published in the same year. They argued that new media opened up new channels of lateral communication, but 'failed at the level of vertical communication when public protest was ignored by politicians' (Coleman *et al* 2008, p784):

Participants placed their trust in traditional forms of interaction, not because they are technophobes, but because the apparent immediacy of the Internet is not matched by institutional transparency and responsiveness.

(Coleman *et al* 2008, p782)

It remains to be seen whether local forums, not governed by authorities, are widely found to be appropriate spaces for transforming this state of affairs.

Very little of the literature has distinguished local *social* participation from *civic* participation or attempted to link them. A study of the online Carlisle Community Center (CCC) in Boston Massachusetts found that people who spent a lot of time in the local online environment also spent their leisure time involved in social activities and in 'non-work Internet' (Millen *et al* 2001; Millen and Patterson 2003). Against this, the researchers found that people who spent the most time in *offline* groups were *not* also spending time in some of the areas of the online network that had been designed to support such groups.

In a study of community networks in two rural Minnesota towns, Sullivan and colleagues distinguish between public-oriented political engagement and private-oriented sociability. Their focus is on 'political resources' – by which they mean political interest, knowledge and efficacy, and expressed political behaviour such as voting or contacting an official or representative. They found that pre-existing political resources at local level play an influential role in determining whether community networks can be effective:

It is the political variant of social capital, and not the purely social variant (i.e., private sociability), that is significantly linked to different patterns of computer use effects in the two communities... The findings from the present study suggest that extant political resources and infrastructure in a community may be more critical to the development and growth of community electronic networks than social networking per se.

(Sullivan et al 2002, p883)

Using a telephone survey, Jensen and colleagues (2007) confirmed this distinction between 'political / community-oriented associational practices' and the 'social modes of association'. Offline, levels of civic participation can be expected to reflect levels of social participation (*ie* people are unlikely to join together to bring about change in the political world if they do not also come together socially); but it is not clear if the same applies online. It seems possible that *online civic* participation may be stronger in those contexts where *offline social* participation is higher.

Coleman and colleagues found that their focus group participants were using the internet in three potentially democratising ways:

to seek practical and diverse information that would strengthen their civic roles; to communicate with like-minded others, sometimes around issues of cultural values; and to create occasions of symbolic visibility, such as in the mass 'Make Poverty History' petition and in 'going to the press' to expose ineffective political representation.

They go on:

As well as these specific uses of new media, participants shared a general optimism about the communicative possibilities of being online, especially as parents, consumers and hobbyists. *But this optimism stopped short at the point of democratic citizenship.* A widespread lack of trust in the consequences of interactivity, often inspired by bitter experience, led participants to doubt the value of sending messages to representatives who would not respond to them. This non-responsiveness was all the more disappointing given their experience of successful interactivity in other contexts. The

more accessible the Internet made politicians and political institutions, the more distant their non-responsiveness made them appear and the more political efficacy atrophied.'

(Coleman *et al* 2008, p786, emphasis added)

The call for online political engagement between citizens, officers, and representatives is not a vain one, but it is not yet apparent what the appropriate channel will be; or whether it is not so much the channel, but the way it is managed that matters. Edwards (2008) reports on a study of an online forum that functioned for nearly three years facilitating communication between councillors and citizens in the municipality of Dordrecht in the Netherlands. Enthusiasm gradually waned and some councillors abandoned it. In exploring their reasons for withdrawal, the author lists some recognisable challenges for online citizen-politician interaction:

The most frequently mentioned reasons involved a gradually narrowing circle of participants on the forum, a coarsening of tone and an increasing number of anonymous postings. In addition, some councillors mentioned having felt annoyed at the increasing incidence of 'politician bashing' on the forum. Other objections had to do with the substance of postings, such as an increasing number of 'clientelistic' questions and the 'emptiness' of the communication in terms of any 'real' discussion. Despite their mixed feelings, most of the interviewed councillors acknowledged that the forum had indeed performed a useful signalling function, especially regarding themes that elicited a relatively large number of postings. They mentioned the discussion on speed ramps as an example. One councillor indicated that this discussion had contributed to a change in the party group's standpoint on this issue.

(Edwards 2008, p238)

The online context for the study was established specifically for the purposes of political mediation. It is by no means clear that any or all of the problems described by Edwards would necessarily translate to an online context which was established with more general social ambitions. Edwards reports that several councillors found themselves uncertain as to how to deal with anonymity. His findings point to a number of issues where either a cultural change or some alternative kind of channel may be needed, although it's hard to escape the argument that politicians find openness problematic:

A number of councillors indicated a preference for continuing online communications initiated by citizens exclusively in one-to-one settings. This preference for one-to-one communication might be partly related to reluctance among politicians to enter into more probing communication with citizens on a medium with such a public scope as the Internet. The 'observed-by-many' communication that occurs on an online forum places politicians under scrutiny from their political opponents and the wider public.

(Edwards 2008, p244)

Meanwhile, Bovaird and others have been exploring the trend towards co-production of public services (Bovaird 2007). He argues that without policy intervention, citizens are more likely to invest in *individual* co-production (adjusting their own behaviour, for example to reduce crime by locking their windows or reduce environmental costs by recycling materials), than in *collective* co-production. However, where it can be encouraged, it is collective co-production that will bring gains to the public sector. Bovaird and colleagues suggest that web 2.0 technologies fulfil the requirements which make collective co-production easier and more likely (Bovaird *et al* 2009).

Anticipating neighbourhood networks and citizen journalism, William Davies observed seven years ago that social media

produces a new type of communication, between a conversation and a broadcast. It challenges the drift towards intimacy that is so tempting for all networks and organisations, because it publicises and codifies informal chat.

(Davies 2003, p52)

It can be argued that mainstream broadcast media have seen new media as both an opportunity and a threat. No doubt energised by the election of Barack Obama and some aspects of his campaign, the [Knight Commission report](#), published in the US in October 2009, looks to situate local use of new media within the context of a revitalised culture of local democracy. The report needs to be understood as a production of the established news industry, and is therefore wary of the emerging power of citizen journalism. Hence its emphasis on having skilled journalists working at local level:

for true public accountability, communities need skilled practitioners. They ask tough questions. They chase obscure leads and confidential sources. They translate technical matters into clear prose. Where professionals are on the job, the public watchdog is well fed. Part-time, episodic or uncoordinated public vigilance is not the same.

(Knight Commission Report, p14)¹

The Knight Commission's concern to reassert the status of mainstream media in 21st century democracy seems to leave them nervous at the speed with which citizen journalism is coming over the hill, but takes no account of the quiet emergence of neighbourhood networks.

The *Digital Britain* report, published shortly before the Knight Commission report, goes slightly further in acknowledging local sites:

They show that grass roots media can provide an accurate, reliable, popular source of news and information without regulation or subsidy. Their news values and thresholds are new, reflecting grass roots interests and priorities.'

(DCMS 2009, p150)

¹ The argument for professional writers is ironically undermined by the unprofessional choice of metaphor. A well-fed watchdog is of course less likely to be alert.

Jay Rosen's widely-cited definition ('When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, *that's* citizen journalism' (Rosen 2008)) might be said to encompass the content of local websites. But it could be time to echo Goode's (2009) caution against portraying citizen journalism as being explicitly *alternative*, designed as part of the counter-culture and set against traditional mainstream media. Rather, he sees citizen journalism

within a framework of *mediation* that can account for a wide spectrum of news-making practices, from activists blogging about local public body corruption, through cell phone photojournalists, to taggers who contribute to shifting memes of public discourse through the simple act of labeling news stories already in circulation.

(Goode 2009, p1291)

Indeed it seems unlikely that most contributors to sites such as, for example, St Margarets in west London, would see themselves as presenting alternative world views to mainstream media. Nor would most contributors to local forums sites think of themselves as journalists. Nonetheless, in discussing the journalistic and news publishing role of local web sites we need to take account of the gatekeeping role. Research into the attitudes of newspaper editors suggests that some saw 'real practical advantages and philosophical reasons for easing restrictions at the gate in order to make the news more of a participatory process than a static product' (Lewis *et al* 2009, p13-14). The gatekeeping role hitherto played by professionals is being weakened. But with questions being raised about responsibilities and accountability for published content, the need for some kind of role remains. As local websites develop and mature, that will be an important area for research.

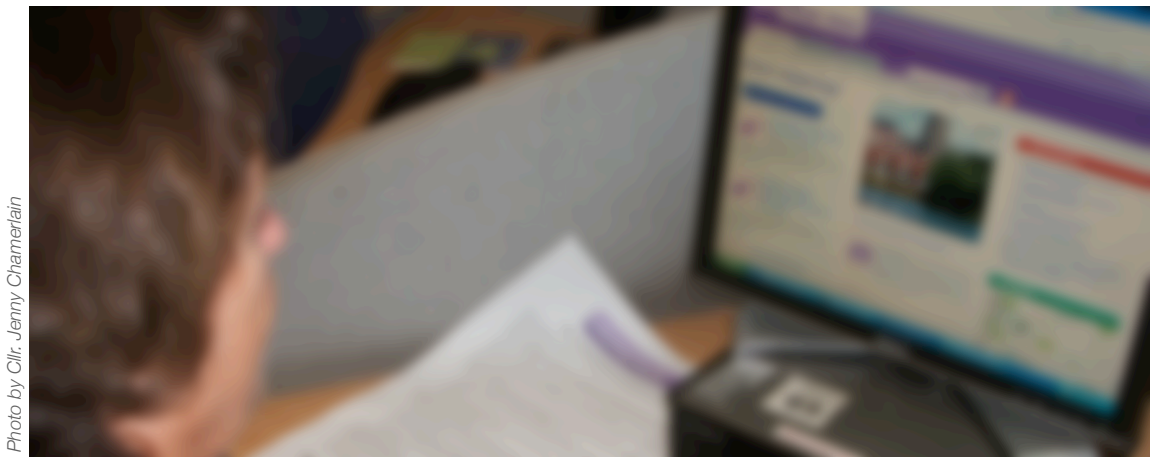
Goode identifies the importance of understanding this new phenomenon in terms of conversational democracy. He argues that 'citizen journalism feeds the democratic imagination largely because it fosters an unprecedented potential, at least, for news and journalism to become part of a *conversation*':

Much of the conversation generated within the sphere of citizen journalism is *horizontal*, that is, peer-to-peer in nature. Citizens share, discuss, provoke and argue with each other in this environment... professionals, elites, power-holders and experts (including professional journalists and editors) *feed into and feed off* this ongoing conversation.

(Goode 2009, p1294)



Section 5: From community networks to neighbourhood sites



Community networks emerged in the 1990s as local expressions of the appropriation of computer technology for social development. The literature is extensive. While these networks pre-date what we now think of as social media, they nevertheless provide overwhelming evidence of people's motivation to create and exploit online technology for social benefit at local level. While established community forums continue to prove popular, social networking platforms have since come to be used for local sites, offering new options for promoting interaction online and offline.

Compared with the general literature on the internet and social capital, or on the internet and community engagement, there are relatively few studies of local sites. Some example sites, such as The WELL, described in Howard Rheingold's seminal book *The virtual community* (1993, 2000), and the Blacksburg Electronic Village which we have already referred to, have important lessons but require caution because of their wide geographical scope. In this section we want to get closer to neighbourhood-level issues, making particular reference to the Netville (Toronto) and Jerusalem studies.

Keith Hampton's continuous presence from 1997-1999, living as a resident in 'Netville', gave his study an ethnographic dimension which was augmented by detailed social network survey analysis, monitoring of an online forum, focus groups and so on. The locality was at the time a new suburban development comprising largely lower-middle class, English-speaking married couples and families (Hampton and Wellman 2000, p198). A breakdown in broadband supply, amid disputes with the developer and the telecommunications provider, fortuitously created a control group ('unwired'), resulting in particular clarity of the findings. The wired residents

recognized three times as many, talked with twice as many, and visited 50% more of their neighbors compared to their non-wired counterparts.

(Hampton 2003, p421)

The study also showed that the use of email in interpersonal communication did not lead to a decline in local contact by other means of communication, suggesting that 'email enhances community – rather than transforming or weakening it' (Hampton and Wellman 2003, p295).

Analysis of local social ties among both those who were connected and those who weren't enabled the researchers to conclude that

wired residents' Internet use increased the distance at which neighbors were in contact.

(Hampton and Wellman 2003, p297)

Strikingly, the ethnographic element in the research identified acts of visible collective efficacy, with residents occupying the cramped front spaces outside their homes to sit out, rather than more spacious designed rear patios. This trend was not noticeable in adjacent or nearby housing developments. Hampton and Wellman conclude:

The ability of the local computer network to expand the number and spatial distribution of neighborhood social ties encouraged residents to sit in front of their homes where social interaction and surveillance were possible.

(Hampton and Wellman 2003, p301)

In terms of the potential for neighbourhood online networks, Hampton's robustly-researched conclusions from the Netville study are clear:

Contrary to dystopian predictions Internet use is not inherently related to a decline in the size of people's social circles or a reduction in social capital. The focus of existing Internet research on the benefits of strong ties has ignored the important role of weak ties... For the most part North Americans do not have a large number of strong neighborhood ties... and there is no reason to assume that new ICTs can reverse this established trend. CMC [computer-mediated communication] at the neighborhood level provides an opportunity for local social interaction that facilitates the formation of weak social ties and community involvement.

(Hampton 2003, p426-427)

Another study looked at a community technology project in a predominantly African-American, low-to-moderate-income housing development in Boston Massachusetts, where residents had been decanted and returned to renovated properties. This context would naturally have provided plenty of common ground for interaction among returning residents. The researchers found that participants had strengthened and expanded their local ties; their civic engagement, social contact, sense of empowerment and sense of community correlated positively with internet use; they had a heightened awareness of community resources; they were better informed about what was happening locally; were using the internet to gather information to help address basic needs, and they reflected a renewed confidence and ability to learn (Pinkett and O'Bryant 2003).

More recently, partly in response to echoing claims that the internet was a cause of increasing social isolation in the US, the Pew Internet Project carried out a review of *Social isolation and new technology*. The Pew Internet Personal Networks and Community Survey, carried out in 2008, collected data from 2,512 Americans: four per cent of respondents are

users of neighbourhood email lists or community forums. The main findings relating to that use were as follows:

- ♦ 60% of those who use an online neighbourhood discussion forum know “all or most” of their neighbours, compared to 40% of Americans.
- ♦ 79% who use an online neighbourhood discussion forum talk with neighbours in-person at least once a month, compared to 61% of the general population.
- ♦ 43% of those on a neighbourhood discussion forum talk to neighbours on the telephone at least once a month, compared to the average of 25%.
- ♦ 70% on a neighbourhood discussion forum listened to a neighbour’s problems in the previous six months, and 63% received similar support from neighbours, compared to 49% who gave and 36% who received this support in the general population.’

(Hampton et al 2009, p10)

We might ask, what constitutes ‘discussion’?¹ Using online to blast-off an opinion about a local issue does not necessarily advance the interests of conversational democracy. A detailed study of mailing lists in Jerusalem (Mesch and Levanon 2003) offers an indication of the kind of detail we need to be looking for. The researchers carried out a content analysis of 1,190 messages posted by 401 different users on two lists during a random sampled month, and categorised contributions under four headings: information seeking, household aid/help, shopping and consumption, and opinion. They note that when the theme of a message was views on local issues, 46 percent of posts were replies to previous messages (Mesch and Levanon 2003, p341). If nearly half of the contributions were responses, this strongly suggests that digital conversations were being generated.

Furthermore, it seems that these conversations may not be contained by the technology: 52 per cent of the study’s respondents reported meeting at least one list member in another (face-to-face) community context. And of these, almost one third reported meeting personally more than three people they had initially met through the list.

This adds more weight to claims that neighbourhood sites can be expected to contribute to local social capital. The most striking finding relating to social networks is probably that offered in the e-Neighbors study, which found that

those who were enrolled and actively participated in e-Neighbors, by sending at least one message to their neighborhood list, experienced *an average increase of 4.36 ties* in each year of the study.

(Hampton 2007, p734, emphasis added)

Many local government officers would give a great deal for such a demonstrable increase in social connections.

Reporting on interviews with community network organisers, staff and volunteers, Longan distinguishes between an information orientation and a communication orientation in community networks:

¹ Indeed, the Pew Internet Survey asked a question designed to ascertain whether the internet had affected people’s understanding of the word ‘discuss’ in relation to ‘important matters’ and ‘significant ties’. The researchers do not find that it has. See Hampton et al 2009, p29-30.

community networking empowers individuals living in the neighbourhoods the network serves by providing them with information useful in everyday life but does not encourage community mobilization.

(Longan 2005, p855)

For Longan, this instrumental approach is not the same as promoting 'communicative forms of community and mobility through online conversation that promotes mutual understanding of a shared situation' (Longan 2005, p856). He goes on to quote one of his interviewees illustrating a key element of added value in neighbourhood websites:

You can come and engage in the conversation. You can come and get the information, and, gee you can do it anonymously at your pleasure. You do not have to be at the public hearing on August the 19th at 7:00 p.m. in some particular courthouse somewhere. You can cruise out there whenever it's convenient to you, whenever you would choose to, and access the information, and even participate in the dialogue, and even leave your opinion there.

(Dennis Merrell of *Charlotte's Web*, cited by Longan 2005, p856)

Some commentators have noted that it is not always possible to get away from some kind of moderator role in online networks. Goode (2009) identifies this role as an example of the new formal hierarchies that might emerge in citizen journalism, and calls for investigation into 'the manner in which those formally vested with gatekeeping powers in citizen journalism sites exercise that power, and the codes, values and routines that inform their practices' (Goode 2009, p1302-03). A key basis for exploring this theme will be the recognition that many are not 'formally vested' with powers but *informally* create any power they have, through voluntary endeavour. From a study of public online discussion in the Netherlands, Edwards concludes that the role of the moderator 'has the potential to enhance the quality of Internet discussions as forms of deliberative democracy' (Edwards 2002, p18).

As a veteran of virtual communities, Howard Rheingold has various observations to make about the need to manage potentially awkward contributors, including 'the energy creature' - 'an articulate person with time to spare, access to the Net, and a need for negative attention' (Rheingold 1993, 2000, p330). This is the area where the traditional gatekeeping role of editors becomes more subtle, and research is needed to understand the set of skills required to be a successful moderator. In the future it may come to be thought of as no more remarkable than the skills required to chair a meeting. But these meetings can be lively and they go on 24x7. In theory, all participants could shout at once and still be heard.

A number of studies have suggested that attitudes to technology may not be reliable predictors of use of online networks. Millen and Patterson for instance reported this in 2001, and it's reasonable to suppose that it is even less strong as a predictor ten years later. However, it may predict *heavy* use, *ie* dominant contributors and especially site originators may be found to be more comfortable than most with computer technology.

Finally, we note that openness seems to matter. The online forum in Dordrecht, reported by Edwards (2008), was originally established as an open online facility. Initially there was no registration to the site, but after some time it was decided to turn it into a 'half-open' forum, whereupon:

the number of visits decreased drastically to about one third of the previous average of 150 visits a day. Citizen-councillor interaction almost disappeared. In January 2007, the council decided to terminate the forum.

(Edwards 2008, p234)

Section6:What role for policy?

An Ofcom review of the use of local and regional media found that community websites are used at least occasionally by 46% of broadband customers and regularly by 16% of those users. Local commercial sites are used regularly by 33% (Ofcom 2009, p50). They note that

over 90% of adults use local media' and 'most adults use multiple sources of local and regional media.

(Ofcom 2009, p47-48)

However, there is little evidence of policy interest in local online discussion forums, or of incitement to provoke policy interest. The *Digital Britain* report, which weighed-in at 236 pages, has just three paragraphs on local sites. The report recognises that as local people use free online media to generate their own news, the movement 'has the potential to be good for local pluralism and expression as commercial funding for traditional media diminishes' (DCMS 2009, p150). The general sense of policy detachment was explained at least partially in the *Power of information* independent review some three years ago:

government has not yet adequately engaged with most user-generated sites or non-professional re-users of its information. Part of the reason for this low level of engagement is likely to be risk aversion in light of the less controlled environment that user-generated websites represent. Websites on which anyone is allowed to participate are, by definition, less controlled than sites to which only the operator can contribute.'

(Mayo and Steinberg 2007, para 41)

In the US, the nearest the Knight Commission comes to acknowledging the potential of local sites as we see them, is in its Recommendation 15:

Ensure that every local community has at least one high-quality online hub... Communities should have at least one well-publicized portal that points to the full array of local information resources.'

(Knight Commission 2009, p61)



Interestingly and perhaps predictably, the role of encouraging and promoting these hubs is regarded by the Knight Commission as a responsibility not of local government, but of the charitable sector.

The recent Carnegie *Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society* offers a substantial chapter on 'Democratising media ownership and content', but has little to say about local websites, although it does call for 'policy and financial commitments from local and national governments and support from philanthropic organisations to enhance the infrastructure for local and community media' (Carnegie UK Trust 2010, p96).

But it's not clear what these financial commitments would be for. Part of the confusion lies in the embedded expectation that influential media cost money and the funder pays because they're interested in that influence. Local online appears to contradict this model in a radically democratic way, because sites depend far more on social and cultural capital than on financial capital. So it's not a question of 'who pays the piper?' The pipers are already playing their own tunes, in a different economy of ideas.

One of the basic tenets of community development is that bottom-up, home-grown initiatives may take longer to gear-up but are more likely to be sustained long-term through the commitment of local people. A sense of ownership is of fundamental significance, as Rheingold illustrates in describing the negative experience of the pioneering virtual community *The WELL* being taken over by a venture capitalist (Rheingold 2000, ch 11). It's not as easy as it sounds.

Meredyth and colleagues (2002) report on an attempt to develop a networked community on a high-rise estate in Melbourne, which seems to have struggled to make an impact in the absence of any community development that would engage residents in decisions about their own communication ecology.

But the agencies most strikingly absent from the developments are local authorities. There have been numerous publications concerning social media, aimed at local government in the UK in recent years; yet neighbourhood networks simply do not seem to feature except in the occasional aside. Policy skirmishes about council regulations that prohibit use of social networking sites probably don't help, but in our view the arguments are quite different: lack of awareness or interest in independent local websites is not so much about appreciating new technological platforms as it is about a reluctance to explore the everyday context of community engagement and conversational democracy.

It has been argued that progress depends on the confused foot-soldiers of political action making the case loud and clear. From their study of political capital and local online in Minnesota, Sullivan and colleagues stress the need for commitment among 'the most politically knowledgeable and active citizens' if successful online networks are to be created:

In communities in which the politically active citizens are no more supportive of such projects than the politically apathetic citizens are, political and civic leaders have little to build on.

(Sullivan et al 2002, p883)

However, in the UK at least, it seems to us that many of those who are politically active are pre-occupied in the blogosphere, with their heads turned towards national rather than local politics.

The *London's Digital Neighbourhoods* study is more likely to make an impact, we suggest, by helping to persuade officers and elected members that local sites merit attention and arm's-length support. Andy Gibson quotes a local government officer on the question of 'getting out of the way:

"There's no need for local government to do these things for itself, when it has residents and business who are better-placed (and often better-skilled) to do this for us themselves."

(Daniel Ratchford, Strategic Director of Environment and Leisure, London Borough of Sutton, in Gibson 2010, p37).

Section 7: Concluding remarks

One of the striking points that emerges from a review of the literature is the length of time it seems to be taking for local use of online to have a widespread impact. Taking the study by Mesch and Levanon as an example, we note that the mailing lists they studied were both established around 1995 (Mesch and Levanon 2003, p340). As was the case with the Netville and Boston studies carried out by Keith Hampton, the findings were largely positive and the explanations persuasive. These experiments were succeeded a few years later by the advent of social media offering more user-friendly platforms in a context of high levels of internet use, and very low establishment costs. While our research has discovered numerous local sites of varying types (Flouch and Harris 2010) – including an estimated 150 in London – their impact has been slight, and awareness within local and central government appears to be negligible.

But the evidence appears to be building, and the timing of the London study may be ideal. Where sites have bedded-down and clearly display a welcoming and inclusive style, with a lively mix of material and participants, the potential for stimulating and supporting pro-social behaviour deserves closer scrutiny.

The literature suggests that systems generate generalised social capital in terms of weak ties at local level, which points to pro-social behaviour and the likelihood of increased co-delivery of services. It also suggests a related contribution to sense of belonging and social cohesion. While the supporting evidence is not incontrovertible, there is no convincing evidence to contradict these assumptions.

In our view, the area where we should look for impact is in conversational democracy and the mundane politics of the everyday, and how this is converted into civic action. It would be a mistake to expect impact in terms of conventional political processes.

The literature describes an ongoing and hitherto unsuccessful search for an appropriate channel for citizen engagement in local governance. Our project may allow us to claim that this search is coming to an end. Involvement of councillors in spaces where the conversations are already going on may prove pioneering. There are specific issues such as anonymity and the apportionment of officer time that need to be addressed, but these are hardly reasons for ignoring the phenomenon. As Geoff Mulgan has argued in a recent think-piece, governments are likely to need strategies to build up their relational capital (Mulgan 2010). Invaluable opportunities for doing that seem likely to emerge in discussions that take place in citizen-led spaces.

People behave pro-socially offline and always have done. They discuss local issues and express civic concerns face-to-face and always have done. We know that people do the same online, and as this review has shown, we know a little about the ways in which they do that and the degree to which it implies change. But a further point arises, based on the reflection that people do both – they behave and discuss pro-sociality both online and offline at the same time, and we don't know much about what the combination amounts to. The momentum accumulating behind this movement has in its favour the decline of the welfare state and the accelerating culture of 'responsibilisation' and co-production, whereby citizens are required, encouraged and supported to play a greater part in the issues and services that affect their quality of life. It follows that the prospects for neighbourhood online networks are very promising, if viewed in the light of a more conversational democracy and an open politics of localism.

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Guide to materials in the online neighbourhood networks study

- 1 Online neighbourhood networks study summaries
 1. Summary (4 pages)
 2. Extended summary (16 pages)
- 2 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
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