



Joining the Conversation: an introduction to hyperlocal media

A Neighbourhood Action Network
scoping paper for LG Improvement
and Development

This paper provides examples of **hyperlocal media** – internet and mobile services that connect people with the neighbourhoods they live and work in.

People are increasingly using the web as a platform to discuss, share and collaborate, rather than simply to absorb information. This change is reflected in the rise of websites such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, the latter now the second most visited website in the UK. These websites are all forms of social media – tools which allow people to share and discuss information.

The rise of social media has not gone unnoticed by the central and local governments. Examples of politicians and policy makers using websites such as Facebook and Twitter to inform and engage citizens are emerging every day. Several of these are inspired by Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign, which demonstrated the power of social media to stimulate grassroots activism.

Some of the examples here are already geared towards the local level, others are operating on a national or international level – but are adaptable to very local uses. We believe that this field remains underdeveloped – and that new models are likely to evolve very quickly over the next few years. The examples set out here are used to stimulate thinking and ideas about how hyperlocal media can progress through local government practice.

1. Introduction

The ease and pace with which the internet has permeated the everyday lives of billions of people across the globe is unprecedented; in 2000 there were over 350 million global internet users, by June 2010 there were nearly two billion.¹ People are increasingly accessing the internet through their phones; 13 per cent of British population go online through their handsets.²

The extent to which the internet has penetrated everyday life differs across the population. Only 37 per cent of over 65 year olds have access to the internet at home, as oppose to an all-adult average of 67 per cent. However, those aged over 65 that do use the internet on average spend 50 per cent more time online than the UK average. In addition, 66 per cent of non-internet users lack higher education and just under half of non-internet users are from the lowest socio-economic band.³

Until recently the Web has largely acted as a virtual library, where individuals can browse, search and download information. Essentially, the beginnings of the internet have seen the transference of print media into digital formats, a process that will continue. Yet the power to publish information has largely rested with those who have the technical knowledge or financial capacity to develop websites.

¹ Internet Usage Statistics, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed on June 18th 2009

² <http://media.ofcom.org.uk/facts/>

³ Department for Communities and Local Government (2008) *Delivering Digital Inclusion: an action plan for consultation*, London

This power to publish is now shifting. Some of today's most popular websites are places where users can easily generate and share information with each other, rather than simply consuming the information contained on a webpage. MySpace, YouTube and Facebook are amongst the most popular, with the latter being the second most visited website in the UK after Google. Websites such as these come under the banner of 'social media' and the movement towards using the internet for sharing information between users has been labelled 'Web 2.0'.

2. What is hyperlocal media?

The global reach of the modern communications technology has not meant that the local aspect of our everyday lives has disappeared. Our quality of life is still influenced by the place that we live – from the standard of local parks, to crime levels and our proximity to friends and family. People still retain strong ties to their local area, with 76 per cent feeling attached to their neighbourhood.⁴

How we say we feel about our local area is reflected in how we use both new and old communications' platforms. According to the report, *Digital Local: options for the future of local video content and interactive services* (Ofcom, 2006) it is estimated that one in four internet searches involves a hunt for local information. More people read a local or regional newspaper than read national papers, and local radio accounts for almost half of all radio listening. This report also found that people were most interested in programming that reflects their city, town, village or neighbourhood. These findings are reinforced by the Oxford Internet Survey (2007), which shows that looking for local news and information about local events are amongst the most popular information searches on the web; 77 per cent of people look for information about local events online, and 69 per cent search for local news.⁵

The demand for local content and services can to some extent be met by popular social media websites, such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube, as well as local council's websites and sites such as Gumtree for classified ads. However, complimenting these are many new websites specifically designed to connect users with their localities, either through social media or other technological advances. Hyperlocal media is a term often used to describe local news and journalism, however, we use the term **Hyperlocal Media** to mean:

'Internet and mobile services that connect people with the neighbourhoods they live and work in.'

These services are already blossoming. They are connecting residents with each other, providing local news and blogs, and encouraging citizens to engage with local democracy. Many are run by entrepreneurial individuals who are keen to innovate; few are developed within the realm of local government and other public services.

⁴ Department of Communities and Local Government (2010) *Citizenship Survey 2009-2010, England*.

⁵ Oxford Internet Institute (2007) *The Internet in Britain*, University of Oxford

There are lots of examples of how hyperlocal media can contribute to the everyday workings of local government. These examples broadly fit into three categories:

- Popular social media tools with hyperlocal application
- Specific hyperlocal websites
- Government or citizen led websites with hyperlocal potential

3. Practical Examples – using popular social media

The popularity of websites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter is an opportunity for local authorities and politicians to engage with citizens. These websites do not need to be recreated locally. They provide access to a massive network of people as well as cutting-edge technology that can be 'embedded' or linked into existing council websites. The cost of exploration and experimentation are low, with potentially large gains.

www.Facebook.com

Facebook has quickly entered the public consciousness and serves as the latest innovation that has changed the way that individuals communicate and interact with each other. In July 2010, nearly 27 million Britons had Facebook profiles.⁶ The extent to which this phenomenon has penetrated our day-to-day lives has not gone unnoticed by the public sector and politicians.

Bracknell Forest Council's

Facebook page serves as a good example of how social networking can benefit both residents and local authorities. The council's page is open to anyone registered to Facebook. Those that choose to can become 'fans' of the council and be updated on topics such job vacancies, council news, advice and local events. Users can also subscribe to podcasts, view and share their pictures of the area on Flickr and take virtual tours of the council's leisure facilities. Bracknell Forest's Facebook page also signposts users to various council services via a 'Do It Online' function, which links users to the online services available via the council's website.



Facebook Politicians is a feature that allows politicians to create their own Facebook page, to which other users sign up as 'supporters' rather than friends. By setting up their own page, local politicians can engage with constituents over local issues, answering and posing questions that complement their day-to-day community work. Facebook has also proven to be an excellent platform for mobilising volunteers and supporters at the grassroots, as seen in President Obama's 2008 election campaign.

⁶ <http://www.epro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/facebook-uk-stats-2010-july.pdf>

Facebook is good for:

- disseminating information, such as advice, events and jobs
- involving people in discussion about the local area
- developing an online profile for local politicians

Twitter.com

Twitter is another popular social networking site. The premise of the website is simple: users are able to send and receive updates from other users they choose to follow.

Sending an update on Twitter is similar to sending a text message on a mobile phone; you enter up to 140 characters of text that is sent to all of your ‘followers’ – other people that want to be kept updated with your activities. These updates have become known as **tweets or tweeting**.



CllrDavidRenard

Meeting with the Swindon Council Chief Executive late PM to discuss a wide plethora of issues affecting the Town

about 2 hours ago from web

Off for our weekly Swindon Council Cabinet meeting shortly. More meaty issus to grapple with

about 2 hours ago from web

Just been to look at 1 Haydonleigh Drive site with Ian and talk through the developer's plans. They need to do some more thinking

about 2 hours ago from web

Updates can be about anything and you can send and receive them via SMS and RSS feeds (receive only) as well as the Twitter website.

Twitter is in the top 100 visited websites in the UK and has become

popular with organisations, politicians, journalists and bloggers. Its ability to spread news and insight was highlighted following the emergency landing of US Airways flight 1549 in New York's Hudson River – Twitter users broke the news roughly 15 minutes before the mainstream media.⁷

For councillors, Twitter is an excellent way to keep in regular contact with constituents. Councillors are using Twitter in different ways; some use it exclusively to inform ‘followers’ of council business and meetings, while others supplement this information with more personal information, such as films they have watched or tales of family life.

<http://www.tweetyhall.com/> is an easy and effective way of following local politicians who are using Twitter. The site, which is sponsored by the Local Government Improvement and Development agency and the Leadership Centre for Local Government, lists councillors that are ‘tweeting’. Through a search facility, users can discover whether their local politicians are using Twitter and choose to follow them. The website aims to encourage participation and open conversations, promoting better and more transparent communication between voters and elected representatives.

⁷ The Telegraph (Jan 2009) *New York Plane Crash: Twitter breaks the news, again*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/scienceandtechnology/technology/twitter/4269765/New-York-plane-crash-Twitter-breaks-the-news-again.html>, accessed 1st July 2009

The London Borough of Camden has started to use Twitter to improve its customer service. Through their **Camden Talking** scheme the borough listens and responds to online conversations (which are in the public domain) relating to local services. One such example occurred when heavy snow prevented council staff from opening up local parks.

The image shows two side-by-side Twitter message cards. The left card is from Simon Redfern (@simon_redfern) at 3:21 PM on Feb 2nd, replying to @camdentalking. It reads: "Why is Russell Square locked? Bit mean spirited of LB Camden isn't it? <http://twitpic.com/1aspq>". The right card is from @camdentalking (@camdentalking) at 4:58 PM on Feb 2nd, replying to @simon_redfern. It reads: "@simon_redfern Parks were locked due to staff shortages. We expect them open tomorrow, pls check here for updates: www.camden.gov.uk/snow". Both cards show the Twitter interface with user icons, names, and timestamps.

The reply from the resident to Camden's Twitter response was:

A single Twitter message card from Simon Redfern (@simon_redfern) at 2:06 PM on Feb 4th, replying to @camdentalking. The message reads: "@camdentalking hello I am super impressed with this. Am going to blog about how brilliant you are!". The card includes the Twitter header and footer.

Twitter is good for:

- giving people short updates or promoting local events
- supplementing councillors existing community engagement
- Publically engaging users who are talking about council related activity

www.YouTube.com

YouTube is a video-sharing website that allows users to share their own videos and watch those created by others. It is pioneering in that it offers anyone with the capability to record video the opportunity to broadcast themselves to a potentially global audience; an amateur video of a teenager playing guitar in his bedroom has been viewed over 50 million times and Susan Boyle's Britain's Got Talent performance has been viewed over 25 million times. YouTube can easily be 'embedded' into existing websites. This means that councils can upload their videos to YouTube and share them via their own council websites, without users having to find them on YouTube. This makes the costs of using YouTube very minimal in comparison to developing the technology from scratch.

The image shows a YouTube video player for a video titled "Chapter 2: Getting Caught - Graffiti and the Law". The video frame shows a man in a blue shirt standing in front of a graffiti-covered wall. The video player includes standard controls like play/pause, volume, and progress bar, along with a rating section showing 22 ratings and a view count of 54,988.

Bristol City Council's YouTube page has played a major part in the city's anti-graffiti campaign. The council's street scene team produced an educational video aimed at 11 to 18 year olds, called 'Street Level'. As well as being shown in schools, the videos have been uploaded onto YouTube and a Facebook group has been set up to encourage young people to discuss their views. One of the anti-graffiti videos has been viewed over 50,000 times.

YouTube is good for:

- getting messages across to a large audience

The Obama Campaign and Popular Social Media

Barack Obama's Presidential campaign demonstrated the power of social media to engage millions of people with the democratic process. Throughout his campaign, President Obama embraced popular social media as a means for mobilising grassroots support, fundraising and campaigning. By using Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter, he was able to directly communicate with millions of people throughout the globe and crucially, was able to instil a sense of agency amongst his supporters and make them feel that they could play a part in history.

Obama's strategy has been highly successful. He has over 1.5 million Facebook and MySpace friends and tens of thousands of Twitter followers. This reach allows him to spread messages very quickly; just moments after his election victory he was able to send out thank you messages to all his supporters via social media. He has also used YouTube to great effect by making his speeches available to internet users and audiences that do not normally engage with print and broadcast news. As well as using the popular social media websites, Obama's team set up **My.BarackObama.com**, which delivers social media and networking functions to Obama followers, and allows users to blog and join groups to support the President. The site has over one million users.

The impact of President Obama's campaign strategy will resonate within politics for sometime. He has demonstrated that, given the appropriate platform, people are willing to engage with politicians and democracy in unprecedented levels. Because of this, it is hard to imagine any future political campaigns ignoring the potential of web 2.0 and social media.

4. Practical Examples – Specific hyperlocal websites

Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are all available for local authorities to use at minimal cost. Yet their lack of geographical focus has led some entrepreneurs to develop social media websites with a focus on the neighbourhood.

There is also an emergence of websites which are reusing existing data – such as information of MP's voting patterns – to provide people with localised, relevant

information. These websites 'mashup' data from a range of sources, filter it according to geographical relevance and display it in one place for users to access.

www.fixmystreet.com

The screenshot shows the homepage of FixMyStreet. At the top, there's a header with the site's name and a link to download the iPhone app. Below that is a search bar where 'je29pf' has been entered, with a 'Go' button. To the left, under 'How to report a problem', there are four steps: 1. Enter a nearby GB postcode, or street name and area; 2. Locate the problem on a map of the area; 3. Enter details of the problem; 4. We send it to the council on your behalf. To the right, there's a section titled 'Photos of recent reports' showing three small images of street scenes. Below that is a section titled 'Recently reported problems' with a list including 'Pedestrian crossing light out', 'Potholes and road core debris', 'No light or lamp', 'Health risk', and 'Health Risk'. At the bottom left, there are three boxes showing statistics: '948 reports in past week', '1,204 fixed in past month', and '33,488 updated on reports'.

When residents discover something broken, out-of-order or vandalised in their neighbourhood, they can visit **Fixmystreet**, enter their postcode and a map of the area is displayed. People can then click on the map at the exact location of the damaged property, leaving a note describing the problem for other residents to see. The message is automatically reported to the relevant council officer by email or fax. The website

makes it easy for council officers to respond to fault reports – either publicly or privately – by simply emailing a response to the person who left the original message. Council officers can choose whether to make their responses public on the website, giving them the option to give a status report about progress with repairs.

Fixmystreet is a good example of:

- using technology to encourage reporting of local issues
- increasing transparency in the way service providers respond to local reports
- lowering the transaction costs of reporting and responding to incidents

<http://cleanergreener.wakefield.gov.uk/>

Cllr Clive Hudson has set up his own blog on Wakefield Council's website to chronicle his family's efforts to live greener and more sustainable lives. Cllr Hudson is the council's Cabinet Member for the Environment and is using the blog to demonstrate how greener living can help the district contribute towards a more sustainable planet. The blog also updates readers as to the council's progress on Environmental issues and links into the council's Twitter page.

The screenshot shows a blog post from the 'cleanergreener.wakefield' blog. The title of the post is 'Spring is Here'. The date is listed as 'FRIDAY, 6 MARCH 2009'. The post content begins with 'Another month roles by and we are now back looking at cutting grass and pruning the climbers etc. I know that the recycling figures for the district have dropped over the Xmas and new year period but like us I am sure it will all pick back up again now that we are back on the regular recyclate and garden waste collections.' Below this, there is another paragraph: 'I am quite pleased with the way things are going in the Hudson household although there is still far too much plastic coming in the form of packaging. I am definetly getting ready to unload all the packaging at a checkout because I do not see why I should be'.

The **Cleaner Greener Wakefield** blog is a good example of:

- a councillor disseminating information about his work to local people

<http://bigcitytalk.org.uk/>

Bigcitytalk.org.uk is an independently run website that has encouraged hundreds of Birmingham's residents to have their say on how the city should develop over the next 20 years. The site was created by a group of bloggers who wanted as many people as possible to understand and input into the development of the plan. The plan is presented online in its original form alongside a 'plain English' version which makes the language more accessible. Users can then comment on any section they choose to and all comments (apart from offensive ones) are displayed for users to read. All of the websites 275 comments were processed and sent to Birmingham City Council before the consultation deadline.

3 comments

1.1.2

Plain English Version

The Council are already trying to make Birmingham better. We held a conference in the year 2005 called "Birmingham – City of the Future". At this conference Professor Michael Parkinson of Liverpool John Moores University said that Birmingham has made a good start, but needs to carry on getting better.

Original Document

Birmingham – City of the

The City Council and its partners are taking steps towards turning the city into 'Birmingham – City of the Future' by 2005. During this conference Professor Michael Parkinson of Liverpool John Moores University said that Birmingham has made a good start, but needs to carry on getting better.

Bigcitytalk is a good example of:

- giving people a voice on local issues
- making information more accessible
- citizens responding to undesired methods of consultation by setting up their own preferred way of communicating
- online consultation on local issues that supplement traditional consultation methods

<http://www.harringayonline.com/>

Harringay Online is a social media website developed and run by a local resident in the Harringay neighbourhood (not the London Borough of Haringey) of north London. The website connects residents of the neighbourhood together, encouraging them to share information, find out about local events, join local groups and discuss local issues. Residents can also discuss and review local restaurants and cafes and other private sector services. Through social media the website is trying to build a sense of place and social capital, whilst also encouraging local people to take action to shape their neighbourhood and engage with the local democratic process. By the end of 2008, Harringay Online had over 1,000 members with between 200 and 300 different people visiting each

The screenshot shows the Harringay Online website interface. On the left, there's a sidebar with a 'Groups' section and a 'CLICK FOR MORE' button. Below it are several group thumbnails with member counts: Warham Road residents (25), History of Harringay (70), Gardening (45), Kids Stuff (40), Love to Dance (23), Pets Lost.....Pet Found (25), Harringay Cyclists (70), Tradespeople Recommendations (62), and The Local Food Group. The main area displays a forum discussion with posts from users StephenBIn, matt, and others. The posts discuss topics like Google StreetView, community land trusts, and bus services. There are also links for RSS feeds and a forum section.

day.⁸ Through the website, local residents have contributed towards local priority setting and are collaborating to organising events such as street parties. Local police also contribute to the site.

Harringay Online is a good example of:

- developing very local social networks
- involving people in discussions about local democracy and civil society
- informing local people about local issues and events
- giving local public bodies and officers a visible social media profile
- gaining feedback and intelligence through a channel of continuous dialogue

www.writetothem.com

had never written to a politician before.

Writetothem allows citizens to write an email or fax to any of their local representatives. Citizens enter their postcode and all of their local representatives are displayed; writing to them is easy and citizens can choose to write to more than one at a time. Since 2005, the website has helped citizens send over 400,000 messages to their elected representatives, roughly half of whom

Writetothem is good a good example of:

- improving councillors intelligence about local issues
- encouraging citizens to engage with their elected representatives
- using the web to increasing knowledge of local democracy

www.meetup.com

Meetup.com is an international website that allows local groups to arrange to meet like minded individuals. With over six million monthly visitors, the website allows users to create, search and join groups that match their interests in their local area. These groups can be about anything from local politics, history and arts, to sports or parenting meet up's. Meetup differs from other social networking sites in that the focus is on offline interaction, facilitated by online social networking. Each group has its own organiser and displays the next meeting date, alongside the number of RSVP's. Attendees can also rate their meet ups and discuss them online after the event, as well as discuss what can be improved in the future.

⁸ Local Government Engagement Online Newsletter (2009), *Exploring Online Neighbourhoods*, <http://www.lgeoresearch.com/LGONewletters/Vol1.pdf>, accessed May 14th 2009

Meetup is a good example of:

- social networking that is focused on offline interaction
- encouraging offline interaction centred around interests and hobbies

5. Practical Examples – citizen or government initiatives with hyperlocal potential

Internationally and domestically, citizens and governments are exploring e-democracy. Most of these initiatives have focused on whole populations, yet their functionality could be adapted and applied at the local and hyper local level.

<http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/>

The UK government's e-petitions website is the natural progression from paper petitions. Individuals or groups can create a petition and visitors can sign it by adding their own details, including name, postal and email addresses. Petitions have

E-Petitions.

Petitions home	Search petitions: <input type="text"/> Go
View petitions	
Create a petition	Open petitions Closed petitions Rejected petitions
About e-petitions	Sort by: Start date Deadline Signatures
Step-by-Step Guide	First Previous Petitions 1 – 50 of 4800 Next Last
FAQs	
Terms and Conditions	We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to...
Privacy Policy	Submitted by Deadline to sign by Signatures
	instruct water companies to return to charging churches as charities rather than as business premises. David Boddy 6 April 2009 43535
	Protect the RNLI from paying licence fees for using Maritime radio frequencies. (with response) Ian Smith 8 October 2009 27490

to meet conditions set out in the website's terms of use as well as the Civil Service Code. The vetting process for new petitions usually takes less than five days. The website does not exclude critical views and decisions to accept or decline petitions are not made on a party political basis. If a petition gains more than 200 signatures then it is sent to officials in the relevant government department or to Number 10 itself. The website was developed by mySociety using open source code, meaning that others can replicate it without having to start from scratch.

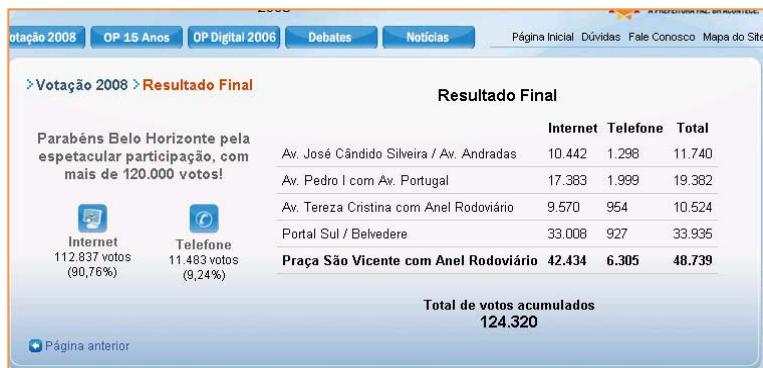
officials in the relevant government department or to Number 10 itself. The website was developed by mySociety using open source code, meaning that others can replicate it without having to start from scratch.

The No. 10 Petitions Website is a good example of:

- using the web to encourage citizens to take up their democratic rights
- a relatively quick and transparent process of government responding to petitions – both positively and negatively

Electronic Participatory Budgeting – <http://opdigital.pbh.gov.br/> (in Portuguese)

Brazil is the international pioneer of participatory budgeting. In Belo Horizonte, the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, participatory budgeting has advanced to a stage where citizens that are registered as electors can deliberate and vote for public projects online and by the telephone. The city's electronic participatory budgeting scheme was promoted heavily and online discussion forums encouraged citizens to share points of view about each project. Voters could vote multiple times so long as they voted for projects in different districts. Overall, nearly 10 per cent of the city's electorate voted using the website; this was more than seven times the number who voted in previous, non-electronic participatory budgeting events – even though the budget for online participatory budgeting was nearly seven times smaller than the non-electronic version. In addition, one third of the voters were out of the city at the time of their vote casting.



E-participatory budgeting is a good example of:

- involving lots of citizens in a very clear decision-making process
- encouraging debate and deliberation between citizens to inform decision making

<http://www.pledgebank.com/>

Pledgebank describes itself as a website that helps people get things done. Developed by MySociety, the website offers a platform for individuals who want to

Recent successful pledges
United Kingdom pledges and global English pledges listed

- I will... [give2EGreenParty](#)
I, Rupert Read, will donate £200 to Eastern Region Green Party European Election campaign fighting fund but only if 19 other people will do the same.
Target met, pledge closed.
- I will... [TTTtraining](#)
I, Ben Metz, will contribute £10 to sending a Transition Town Hackney person on "How to set up, run and maintain a transition initiative" but only if 9 other local people will do the same.
Target met, pledge closed.
- I will... [SecularTFTD](#)
I, George, will set up a "Secular Thought for the Day" website but only if 30 people will agree to write an entry for it.
Target met, pledge closed.
- I will... [5000before18](#)
I, Naomi Dixon, will organising crazy events to raise over £5000 for charity before i turn 18 but only if 10 people will do the same or even better.
Target met, pledge still open for 115 days.

[More successful pledges...](#)

create change in society, but need the support for other people. Support can be in the form of finances, physical action, letter or email writing, attending events or changing behaviour.

The website requires a user to make a pledge which they will fulfil as long as a certain number of other people agree to do the same. A recent successful pledge includes the commitment to donate £10 towards training a local volunteer if

10 other people did the same. The website does not focus on any particular geographical area. However, there are a number of pledges are about specific boroughs, neighbourhoods and projects, and users can search by postcode to find local pledges. This indicates its scope to be used at the very local level.

Pledgebank is a good example of:

- using the web to raise awareness and mobilise citizens to play a part in the solution to problems
- connecting people who have similar passions

Help a London Park – <http://www.london.gov.uk/parksvote/>

The Mayor of London's **Help a London Park campaign** is a good example of using social media to stimulate local democratic activity. Launched in November 2008, the campaign pledged 10 grants of £400,000 to parks chosen by Londoners through a voting process. Votes could be cast via the website, by post or by text for 47 shortlisted parks nominated by London boroughs. The parks were divided by five London sub-regions, and the winners were the two parks from each sub-region that gained the most votes.

The screenshot shows a Facebook group page with the title 'Back the Burgess Park bid - we need Boris's millions!'. It includes sections for 'Basic Info' (Type: Common Interest - Activities, Description: WE WON!!! Thanks for your support), a 'Read the full story:' link, a message about the Mayor's cash being up for grabs, and a note that Southwark Council will provide further funding if Burgess Park wins. It also lists contact details with websites for the park, Flickr, and YouTube.

Once the parks were shortlisted, councils across London worked with their partners to canvass support and votes from local people. Working together, councils, residents and the third sector combined traditional campaigning methods with the use of social media; over 20 Facebook groups were set up, some with over 1,000 members; councillors and active local residents discussed the campaign on their blogs; videos of parks were uploaded onto YouTube and photographs were put on Flickr.

Help a London Park is a good example of:

- stimulating involvement around a cause or campaign
- a campaign that is geared towards mobilising citizens through social media as well as more traditional forms of community action

www.mumsnet.com – by parents, for parents

The screenshot shows the 'Mumsnet Blogs' section of the website. It features a 'Featured Blogger' box for Samantha Smythe, information about existing blogs, and a table listing several bloggers with their latest posts. The table includes rows for samanthasmymythe, lisata, serenedays, and hormonecrazy.

Name	Latest Post
samanthasmymythe	Children, school and rise in depression...
lisata	An update - the dangers of over-balance and where to go now
serenedays	Round And Round
hormonecrazy	About

Mumsnet is a social enterprise, set up in 2000 by two soon-to-be mothers who believe that the best source of advice and information on raising children is other mums. Since 2000, the website has grown; it currently attracts over one million visitors a month and received plaudits from newspapers, commentators and politicians. The Mumsnet philosophy is simple: to make parents' lives easier by pooling knowledge and experience.

As well as facilitating the exchange of advice and information, Mumsnet allows

users to set up their own local groups which allows mothers to network and even meet in their local areas. Parents can also blog on the website as well as use the most popular function, the online forums.

Mumsnet is a good example of:

- using social media to connect people around something they have in common
- social media being useful in everyday life by facilitating the exchange of valuable information between people

6. Practical Examples – Text Messaging

Short Message Service (SMS) is more commonly known as text messaging. As well as being one of the most popular forms of electronic communication between friends and families, SMS has proved to be an effective way for local councils and citizens to communicate with each other. In this section we will present some of the most innovative ways in which councils are using SMS to deliver services, engage citizens with the democratic process, gather and disseminate local information.

Newcastle under Lime Borough Council – LT US NO WOT U THNK

In 2006, Newcastle Borough Council purchased an SMS text messaging system which allows residents to get in contact with the local authority. Residents can ask the council questions about services, as well as send information about local problems such as fly tipping or faulty street lighting.

Southern Oxfordshire – Confirming Right to Vote and Election Results by Text

Since 2006, South Oxfordshire District Council and the Vale of White Horse District Councils have allowed citizens to confirm their right to vote by text message. When annual electoral registration forms are sent to residents, they are able to confirm their details by text, alongside the more traditional options of post, telephone and online. As well as keeping down costs, this service helps both councils receive information more quickly from local residents. Since 2007 South Oxfordshire District Council has also used SMS text messaging to inform residents of local election results.

www.LoveLewisham.org – Reporting environmental issues by text

Love Lewisham is a website that allows residents of Lewisham to report environmental issues to their local council and other services. As well as reporting via the website and email, residents can take a picture of an environmental problem and report it by sending it via text message (known as a multimedia message). If residents choose to, they can receive a text message back to inform them of how their report is progressing.

www.youngflintshire.com – TXT Flintshire

TXT Flintshire is a new service that has been developed by the area's Children and Young People's Partnership. The new text messaging service provides parents, young people and professionals with information about what is going on in Flintshire, and is accessed by the Partnership's website for young people. Young people over the age of 12 are able to receive information about the topics of their choosing, along with other important messages about events in the area. Parents receive similar text messages, alongside other information based on the age of their eldest child.

Participants sign up to the service through a registration form that is available in local places such as schools, libraries, as well as via the web.

East Riding of Yorkshire Council– Bin Collection Reminder Service

East Riding of Yorkshire Council offers a free text message reminder service so that residents remember when their monthly 'blue bin' recycling collection will happen. Residents can send a text message to a council number and subsequently receive a free text message every month to remind them that their recycling needs to be put out for collection.

Food Safety – www.scoresondoors.org.uk and See and Tell

Text messaging is being used by some local authorities to protect consumers from potentially unhygienic restaurants. **Scores on Doors** is a pilot scheme supported by the Food Standards Agency and involving over 80 councils. Under the scheme, any business selling food is given a 'star' rating to show how well they comply with food safety standards. Businesses can display their rating on their doors and windows, if they choose not to, customers can text the name and location of the business – like a takeaway – to a central number and receive a text message which informs them of that business hygiene standards.

Croydon Council's See and Tell service offers consumers the chance to report incidents of poor hygiene or labelling issues in restaurants, shops and takeaways via text message. The council's food hygiene team rely on the intelligence provided by customers who have been affected by poor hygiene, ranging from finding hair in food to merchandise being out of date. When customers text the council's number with a description of the problem and business name, they get an automated response and a phone call from a food hygiene officer within one working day.

Westminster City Council – SatLav and Finding the Nearest

SatLav is an innovative service provided by Westminster City Council to help tackle the problem of people urinating in the street. By texting the word 'toilet' to a council number, residents and visitors to Westminster are automatically sent the location of their nearest toilet by text message. The system uses global positioning (GPS) data which means that the system knows the person's location without them having to specify it.

The success of SatLav has led to the development of a new service which gives residents the nearest location and phone number of facilities such as a library, leisure centre, car park, youth club or children's centre. Residents can also text 'help' to a council number and will receive a list of phone numbers for the most used council services.

7. Managing the Risks of Hyperlocal Media

Incorporating web 2.0 and social media into the communication's portfolio of local authorities will encourage more dialogue between people and their council. However, there are genuine issues which require careful consideration for it to be done successfully.

Moderating Discussions

Hyperlocal media may be seen as risky territory by councillors and officers. Many existing methods of communication open to local agencies are controllable by corporate structures. Opening up web channels that are designed to encourage debate and discussion is seen by some as high risk – for example, social media could be used as a platform to express hate or prejudice towards other people or council officers. There is a clear role for local authorities to moderate discussion and remove offensive content; however this is already standard practice for thousands of discussion forums and social networks.

Moderation of malicious content should be considered a high priority, but not a barrier that clouds the potential benefits of hyperlocal media. Opening up communication so that it is more transparent, dynamic and citizen and community led is a good way of building trust and understanding between people. Through social media, people are able to deliberate ideas and issues amongst themselves as well as with local officials. In addition, social media offers the opportunity for citizens to mobilise around the topics that interest them – which could provide dividends for local areas on issues such as the environment, crime and community spirit.

Moderation differs from control; the former is necessary and the latter is an illusion. Social media and web 2.0 cannot be used solely to propagate a central message; instead it is about opening up communication – making it more transparent, inclusive and appealing to ordinary people on their terms. If councils attempt to exert too much control over hyperlocal media, confidence in its independence will be compromised. Citizens will not engage or will choose to disengage once they feel their freedom of expression is infringed. This could lead to alternative platforms for discussion being developed by citizens, which could be critical or antagonistic. For this reason alone it is prudent for local government to move quickly and appropriately on this agenda, leading at ‘arms length’ rather than risking being on the periphery.

Transparent online discussions will produce valuable feedback for council officers and councillors, some of which will relate to service performance. This will, at least initially, be challenging to deal with. Typically, council officers have received most of their feedback in more structured ways; through surveys, formal consultations or public meetings. Hyperlocal media has the potential to alter this dynamic by encouraging continuous dialogue between councils, communities and citizens. How this is handled depends on what kind of hyperlocal media is in place. Forums, chat rooms and Facebook pages could be the responsibility of designated officers – such as community development staff – who filter and disseminate feedback to the correct individuals. Other tools, such as Fixmystreet, automatically send reports and feedback to the correct department.

Maintaining Existing Dialogue

Pursuing the hyperlocal media agenda does not mean that other forms of communication should be reprioritised. Maintaining existing dialogue – whether through newsletters, public meetings or face-to-face conversation – is essential given the numbers of people who cannot or do not use the web. For local government and democracy to be inclusive, citizens need to be able to choose how they receive information or engage with agencies.

Hyperlocal media can feed directly into the digital inclusion agenda. Councils and the third sector are already working hard to provide ICT skills and training for local people. Such schemes are an opportunity to involve those bridging the digital divide in online citizen engagement.

New skills

New skills will also be needed within local government. Council officers and elected members will require access to training which gives them the knowledge and confidence to use social media and web 2.0 effectively. This may involve officers and councillors learning how to use Facebook or Twitter, or help to use newly-created websites for specific local purposes. There will need to be experimentation and an acceptance that things may go wrong, but that mistakes can be rectified and learnt from.

Finally, there are financial considerations for local government wanting to use hyperlocal media. If councils and their partners decide to setup specific local websites, costs will be higher than setting up a Facebook page or using Twitter. A partnership of local public bodies may have the capability to design websites in-house; others may need to contract external web developers. The costs are highly variable and will depend on the requirements of local partners.

8. Where next for hyperlocal media and local government?

The examples in this paper are intended to encourage councils, councillors and local agencies to think about using very local media to communicate with people more effectively and support policy on community engagement and involvement in local democracy. Some of what has been discussed requires only small amounts of resources to implement; other examples will require more significant investment.

Web 2.0 and social media is more than a trend. It is a natural evolution in how the internet serves our everyday needs. This evolution is already beginning to affect the way citizens engage with public services and national democracy, as seen with the Obama campaign and a number of the other examples outlined in this paper. For councils wanting to move with this agenda at the very local level, the following recommendations should be considered:

a) Hyperlocal Media should be independent or controlled at ‘arms length’

Social media is about users generating and sharing their own thoughts, ideas and issues with one another. Such discussions need to be moderated for offensive or malicious content, but local public bodies should be prepared to relinquish control over legitimate deliberations. This means accepting and responding to criticism as well as well as praise.

By allowing space to have free and transparent discussions, hyperlocal media will help to create a healthy dialogue between citizens and public officials – elected and non-elected – which will ultimately lead to stronger relationships, higher levels of trust and more collaboration.

b) Hyperlocal Media should be done in partnership

To improve confidence in the independence of hyperlocal media, it should be developed in partnership with other public services, as well as the third sector and local community groups. As well as helping to build trust, partnership working will encourage more collaborative responses to local issues from public services.

c) Move Quickly

Hyperlocal media sites – such as Harringay Online – are already beginning to emerge. On occasions sites such as these are used to cause unfair damage or offense to local public bodies or council officers. Instead of reacting when such websites spring up, councils and their partners should move quickly to develop their own social media capabilities.

By getting involved quickly and working in partnership, councils should create spaces for citizens to deliberate in a way that is constructive, independent from official

control and linked directly into the local democratic process. Hyperlocal media sites that are developed by local partnership will – if implemented correctly – generate free discussion and limit the space for individuals who are unfairly targeting the council and officers.

This is particularly pertinent given the current economic climate. This recession will impact upon skilled workers, many of whom are familiar with using the web and social media. As the numbers of unemployed people rises, the proportion of social media users with free time will increase. Hyperlocal media can help to capitalise on this by offering a platform to engage the recently unemployed in local initiatives, such as volunteering schemes.

Hyperlocal media can in the first instance be done quickly at little cost by using popular existing websites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. These can be integrated into existing council websites to test the appetite for very local media.

d) Ensure officers and councillors know how to use social media

Hyperlocal media is not just about citizens connecting with each other on local issues; it is also about public services and elected representatives responding to the needs and concerns of local people. To do this, some officers and members need to commit to using hyperlocal media as part of their day-to-day activity. This need not be intensive, but will be vital to demonstrate to engaged citizens that hyperlocal media is an effective mechanism for communication. For example, a local police sergeant could respond to an online discussion about anti-social behaviour, a councillor could hold an online surgery through instant messaging, or waste management officers could respond quickly to a fly tipping report.

[**www.civicsurf.org.uk**](http://www.civicsurf.org.uk) highlights ways in which councillors can be encouraged to blog about their activities. The Civic Surf project has produced guidance and a DVD to inform public sector bodies of the benefits of civic leaders writing their own blogs. This guidance has been developed with the help of three Norfolk County Councillors who are new to blogging, as well as established bloggers such as Tom Watson MP.

e) Put protocols in place and develop a staff code of conduct

As hyperlocal media will be a new aspect of most officers' and councillors' activity, setting out protocol is advised. How and who intervenes in discussions or responds to queries will need to be guided from a senior level. A Code of Conduct is essential and can be based on the Civil Service document, **Engaging through Social Media: A guide for civil servants**.⁹

f) Be prepared to take risks and learn from mistakes

The technology behind web-based innovations is iterative; mistakes will be made and if they are learnt from they will lead to improve websites with better, more responsive functions. Aside from technological mistakes, many officers and

⁹ The Central Office of Information (2009) *Engaging through Social media*, Download from www.coi.gov.uk/documents/Engaging_through_social_media.pdf

councillors will be moving out of their comfort zone; a process that will require support, training and an acceptance when things go wrong.

g) Ensure hyperlocal media complements existing engagement

Hyperlocal media should not be considered as a low-cost replacement for existing methods of communication and engagement. Lots of individuals and households either cannot or chose not to use the internet, and these people need to have alternative methods of having dialogue with their local authority and elected representatives.

Conversely, the digital divide should not be considered as a reason not to implement hyperlocal media. Lots of people will find the web the easiest platform to engage with their council – often because of convenience – and this will become more embedded in the years to come.

h) Integrate hyperlocal media into digital inclusion schemes

From silver surfers to youth engagement, hyperlocal media should fit into web or media-based initiatives that are taking place in a given locality. Young people can broadcast their videos or music through hyperlocal media. Those learning the basics of the internet can be shown how to engage with their council and use important online public services or contact their councillor via email or Twitter.

Appendix: Glossary of Terms

3g Networks

These are advanced mobile phone networks that are powerful enough to allow users to use their smart phones' capabilities, such as watching videos or surfing the internet.

Blog / Blogging

Blogs are websites which function as the online journal or diaries of individuals. By blogging, individuals are able to share their thoughts and ideas with other people. The word blog is a contraction of the term Weblog.

Embedding

This refers to placing the main function of one website into another webpage. For example, you can place a Google search bar in a webpage which saves the user having to visit Google's website.

Followers

In a social media context, followers are people who choose to receive your online messages sent out through websites such as Twitter.

Friends

Friends in a social media context are people who you link your profile with, thus becoming 'friends'.

GPS

Stands for Global Positioning System. Helps individuals to navigate by using satellites to determine their exact location.

MMS

Stands for multi-media text message. Similar to a text message but allows sender to attach photographs, videos or audio files.

Hyperlocal Media

Internet and mobile services that connect people with the neighbourhoods they live and work in.

Podcast

Video or audio broadcasts which are available to download via the internet.

RSS

Stands for Really Simple Syndication. Used to publish updated information via the internet, such as blogs and news alerts. For example, if you subscribe to BBC News RSS feed, you will receive regular updates regarding news headlines.

Smart Phone

A smart phone is a mobile phone that offers computer-like capabilities, such as sending emails, using the internet, watching videos and satellite navigation. Examples include the Blackberry and the iPhone.

SMS

Stands for short-messaging-service. Popularly known as text messaging.

Social Media

Internet and mobile-based tools for sharing and discussing information between people.

Social Networking

Online communities made up of people who are interested in exploring and sharing interests and activities with others.

Stream

Listening to audio or watching videos via the internet, without having to download it. Examples include BBC iPlayer and YouTube.

Supporters

Facebook users who are supporting a politician via Facebook's Politician feature.

Tagging / Tag

This refers to a keyword that can be used to describe a particular photograph, video or document. For example, a photograph of the Houses of Parliament could be tagged with the word 'Westminster'.

Tweeting / Tweet

Tweeting refers to sending out short messages via the Twitter website or service.

Upload

This is the opposite of download and refers to users putting their content onto the internet.

Web 2.0

The 2nd generation of websites which facilitate communication and collaboration between people on the internet.

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About the Young Foundation

The Young Foundation brings together insight, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet social needs. We have a 55 year track record of success with ventures such as the Open University, Which?, the School for Social Entrepreneurs and Healthline (the precursor of NHS Direct). We work across the UK and internationally – carrying out research, influencing policy, creating new organisations and supporting others to do the same, often with imaginative uses of new technology. We now have over 60 staff, working on over 40 ventures at any one time, with staff in New York and Paris as well as London and Birmingham in the UK.

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