



Listen, Participate, Transform.

A social media framework for local government

A Local 2.0 think-piece

June 2010

Local 2.0 is a Young Foundation project funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government

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Introduction

Impending budget cuts mean that local government will need to change the way it works, largely moving away from a model of delivering services to and for people, to a model of delivering services with people. Public servants will be required to build new relationships with citizens; relationships to help support civil society in responding to inevitable challenges.

As a consequence, local and central government needs to find better ways to forge new partnerships, involving citizens and the state working together to generate new ideas, tap into latent community capacity and make better use of local assets.

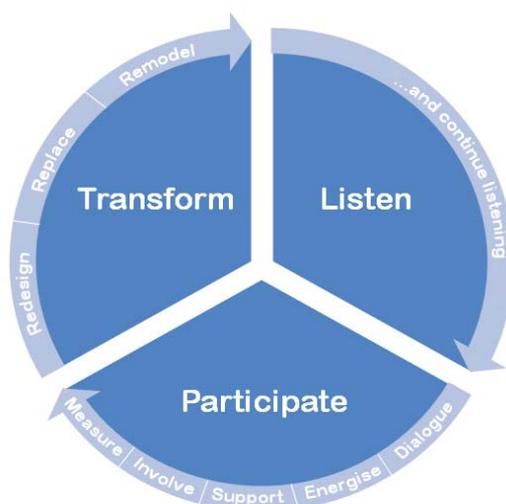
These challenges come at a time when social media has become part of everyday life for millions of people. For those in central and local government, social media will undoubtedly become part of everyday business – a channel for improved dialogue, wider networks and a new kind of mutualism that will be central to delivering effective public services. However, at this point social media is largely uncharted territory for many councils and public agencies.

Good and bad examples, from councils using Twitter during emergencies, to politicians making inappropriate remarks, demonstrate the power of social media and provide lessons and inspiration to new adopters. But these high-profile successes and mistakes also distort the picture of both the opportunities and risks that social media presents for government. The fear of getting it wrong stifles many individuals and agencies from taking the first steps towards using social media to engage people as residents, services users, community groups and active citizens.

This paper – the second in a series from the Young Foundation's Local 2.0 project – is intended to support those councils interested in using social media, by presenting a simple and practical framework to base social media activity on.

The framework, adapted from work by one of the world's largest media agencies, allows councils to approach social media with less trepidation. It encourages authorities to start by listening and analysing social media activity. Councils should then participate in conversations with five actions: to create dialogue with citizens, to energise citizens around a particular theme or event, to support communities to help each other, to involve people in decisions, and to measure social media activity. But social media will achieve more than just conversations and communication; it will lead to a transformation in existing ways of doing business. Services will benefit from greater insight with which they can redesign their delivery, some of the old ways of doing things will become obsolete, and new business models will emerge that are built around social media and other internet and mobile technologies.

A SOCIAL MEDIA FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT, ADAPTED FROM BEING SOCIAL: THE MEC GUIDE TO SOCIAL MEDIA (2009)



1. **Listen** to social media users and conversations about local issues
2. **Participate** in conversations, building dialogue with citizens through social media, but also by: energising them around local issues, providing spaces for residents to support each other, and ultimately empowering them through decision making. The impact of participation should also be measured
3. **Transform** service redesign, replacing or complimenting existing ways of working and adopting new models of working

To support the framework, this paper draws on lessons from the public and private sector, as well as statistical evidence to address the concerns expressed by local government officers about the systematic deployment of social media tools.

Section 1: a social media framework for local government

The end of the broadcast democracy

At first glance, the three Prime Ministerial debates screened during the 2010 UK elections strengthened our traditional 'broadcast democracy' – viewers consuming the messages of leaders were dominated by TV. However, while millions of viewers were sitting at home – perhaps discussing the events with friends or family on the sofa – thousands were engaging in mass online democratic participation, using social media tools to discuss and debate and arguably, influence what leaders were saying. During the third debate over 33,000 Twitter users wrote over 150,000 tweets,¹ and through all three debates, newspapers offered live commentary, weaving in the views of readers with the analysis of journalists.

¹ See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/apr/30/social-media-election-2010>

The impact of social media on voters' decisions is not to be overstated, with research suggesting 32 per cent of people refer to social media as a source of information on the General Election, as opposed to 85 per cent referring to TV, or 60 per cent to newspapers.² Instead, social media exerted a more subtle influence; David Cameron changed his debating style following online mockery of his use of anecdotes in the first debate. Political parties became wary of poster campaigns following high profile sabotage induced by users of www.mydavidcameron.com. Online tools were used to encourage tactical voting, such as <http://hang-em.com/> and <http://www.voteforachange.co.uk/>, mixing tools to help the public analyse data with campaigns orchestrated through social media tools like Facebook.

These examples reflect the importance of the internet for modern democracy; 48 per cent of people say that the internet was a more important source of information during this election than the last in 2005,³ and around 25 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds commented on politics via social networks.⁴

British politicians have not ignored this trend, although their digital engagement methods are modest compared to the extent social media was used by Obama's team and supporters in 2008. His campaign is now legendary – held as a marker for others to follow. However, Obama's digital campaign team was made up of dozens of people and backed by significant financial resources.

Nonetheless, the campaign did not just rely on the old methods of centralised, broadcast campaigning; Obama made digital tools available to supporters so they could rally around their candidate in whatever manner they chose.⁵ Users of <http://my.barackobama.com> were given the power to build support, join groups, hold rallies, meet other local supporters and raise money.⁶

In *Grown Up Digital* (2009), a new study about America's digital generation (ages 11 to 30), author Don Tapscott describes how Obama made people feel connected, allowing fans and followers to feel a direct link between their action and the outcome. His campaign did so by adapting to new norms of expected behaviour by a younger, more social media savvy generation:⁷

- **Freedom:** to choose what issues and organisations you want to support
- **Customisation:** volunteers expect a choice as to how they can be involved
- **Scrutiny:** the right to probe, question and criticise behaviour deemed unethical. The right to exert pressure
- **Integrity:** Honesty, transparency and authenticity
- **Collaboration:** opportunities to work together, regardless of location
- **Entertainment:** humour, engaging on a softer level
- **Speed:** doing things that make a tangible difference

² Echo Sonar *Elections Overview* April 2010
[http://www.echoresearch.com/data/File/UK%20Elections%20all%20Presentations_fv.pdf]

³ *ibid*

⁴ See http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/rorycellanjones/2010/05/so_was_it_an_internet_election.html

⁵ Tapscott, D. (2009) *Grown up Digital*, McGraw Hill

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

- **Innovation:** use the web to do things differently

These expectations are essential for understanding the desires of social media users. Social media is not simply another channel for messages to be broadcast; instead users expect the qualities highlighted above, freedom, collaboration and integrity. They want to be able to scrutinise messages, engage in small talk and do things quickly. Failure to understand social media behaviour will result in outcomes such as disengagement, backlash and ridicule.

The application of these norms is explored in Section Two of this paper, with particular reference to how the private sector is using social media.

Using social media without fear: a framework for local government

In June 2009, Plymouth City Council decided to end staff and elected members' access to Twitter following verbal complaints received about the language used by two of the city's councillors on a Twitter page.⁸ The ban made the national news and in response, local Labour councillor Bill Stevens pointed out that "Not even the Iranian Government has sought to ban Twitter."⁹

However, Plymouth Council is not alone; 90 per cent of councils restrict access to social media in some way, with 67 per cent enforcing a total ban either through policy or software blocking. In contrast, only around 20 per cent of private sector organisations block access.¹⁰

Some businesses have succeeded in harnessing the power of social media, providing useful lessons for local authorities. Big consumer brands in particular, have succeeded in working with consumers to improve products, and in some cases co-design them. Nike allow consumers to personalise the look and materials for trainers, and the clothing manufacturer Champion ran a competition which allowed users to design their own hoodies and vote for the best designs.¹¹ These brands have discovered that consumers are happy to engage to help them improve products, improve services and generate new ideas. In exchange, consumers want transparency and more opportunities for dialogue, sharing and collaboration.

Taking the steps towards social media is difficult for big organisations and few are likely to jump from not using social media to wholeheartedly embracing it. Examples of how it works in practice will be needed to sustain a business case and convince individuals and hierarchies that social media can help them do their jobs.

⁸ See http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/information_about_the_twitter_ba

⁹ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/twitter/5623584/Twitter-banned-by-Plymouth-City-Council.html>

¹⁰ See

http://www.socitm.net/press/article/129/council_ict_managers_should_lead_their_organisations_to_embrace_social_media_rather_than_block_it_says_new_report_from_socitm

¹¹ <http://www.hoodieremix.com>

MEC Global, one of the world's largest media agencies, has developed a simple framework for using social media.¹² We have adapted this framework for local government, drawing in examples from across the country.



1. Listen (and continue listening)

The first step is to begin listening. Listening to online conversation is easy to do and arguably involves no risk. By listening first councils can begin to build an understanding of who is talking and what they are talking about; offering valuable, unfiltered insight into local issues. 'Buzz monitoring' is a term often used by branding and marketing specialists; it refers to the analysis of conversations and public sentiment, leading to better insight into what people think of a brand.

TRY IT NOW: TWITTER SEARCH

1. Go to <http://search.twitter.com>
2. Type in something relevant to your job, like the name of your council or a neighbourhood you work in

Once local authorities begin listening to online conversations it will help determine the best channels to engage with citizens, allowing for customised approaches for engaging with different audiences.

Listening through social media should be seen as an ongoing process, not a one off. Once a council is comfortable that it is beginning to understand how online

¹² The following is adapted from the *Being Social: The MEC Guide to Social Media* (2009) [<http://www.mecglobal.com/assets/Uploads/Reports/Resources/MEC-announces-being-social.pdf>]

communities function and communicate, the next step is to proceed to 'active listening': letting people know that you are really listening. Active listening also means councils providing feedback and reacting to what people are saying.

Important questions when listening:

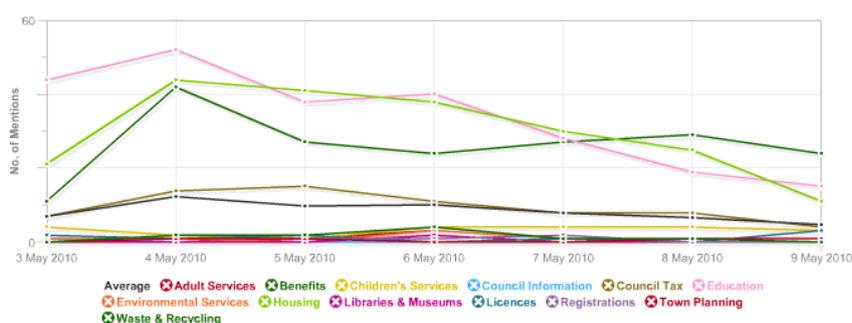
- How does the council's audience use social media?
- What are people's feelings towards the council and its activity?
- How do communities function online?
- What needs are being articulated? How are they being discussed?
- How does the council feature in these conversations?
- Who are the authors and how much influence do they have?
- Where are residents most active online and why?
- What type of content is being created by residents and how do they share it?

COUNCIL MONITOR

www.councilmonitor.com is a subscription based service that monitors social media for mentions of individual councils. It categorises topics by themes as well as sentiment, providing councils with information such as who is talking online, what they are saying, hot topics and more. Similar services are available on free to use social media search engines, like <http://www.socialmention.com>.

Hot Topics in the Last 7 Days

[Show more topics ►](#)



New research has identified a typology of citizen-led local internet spaces.¹³ There are eight different types:

- **Civil society networks:** designed to encourage discussion and interaction between people with both a civic and social purpose

¹³ See Flouch, H & Harris, K (2010) *London's digital neighbourhoods study: typology of local websites*, [<http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/London%20Councils/LondDigNeighTypology%20%283%29.pdf>]

- **Local discussion sites:** similar to the above, but with more focus on making social connections and local knowledge sharing
- **Placeblogs:** blogs that report on local stories at a very local level
- **Local blogazines:** similar to placeblogs, but focus more on lighter neighbourhood profiling and human interest stories
- **Public social spaces:** Profiles set up on Facebook or Twitter for sharing information and often light-hearted conversation about an area
- **Local action groups online:** online spaces for 'real world' groups
- **Local digital news (commercial):** hyperlocal news sites designed to report on local issues
- **Multiples & listings (commercial):** sites primarily used to generate revenue through listing local businesses, services and events.

2. Participate

The response to listening through social media is not necessarily to respond through social media; the implications for councils could be much broader than that, impacting on different services, departments and other public agencies.

However, participating in social media conversations will often be the most suitable approach. In most cases this will not mean spending money on new websites or platforms in order to create new online communities; often it will mean participating in existing communities which operate on existing platforms like Facebook or Twitter.

Participating will require staff time, with someone taking overall responsibility for the organisation's social media involvement. If a council chooses to develop its own communities, it will mean at least one dedicated staff member who is tasked with nurturing participation.

Councils will need to demonstrate that they are able to add value to online conversations. Users will make these judgements based on the online behaviour of councils; do councils respond constructively and provide timely feedback? Are councils actually listening, or just reacting? Questions such as these will lead to judgements being made – and being made very publicly.

Participation in social media should be structured around five key actions:

1. **Dialogue:** having conversations with people through social media
2. **Energise:** giving people something to rally around
3. **Support:** providing platforms that help people support each other
4. **Involve:** involving people in making and influencing decisions
5. **Measure:** learning more about the impact of social media.

Dialogue

Councils should take responsibility for telling their own story, rather than leaving it for citizens and detractors. Practically this means dealing with both positive and negative comments, informing users about issues, and engaging in 'small talk' with online communities. If done well, dialogue will help to build relationships between the council and social media users.

Councils should be friendly and accessible through social media and avoid using channels as a way of broadcasting messages. Social media is not another platform for distributing a press release; it is about mutually beneficial conversations. Ideally, this will mean citizens talking to the council and each other about local issues, rather than it being about the council *per se*.

KIRKLEES COUNCIL'S USE OF TWITTER

More and more councils are using Twitter. Some are using it to 'push' out information, akin to releasing press releases or other forms of news items. Others are using Twitter much more productively as a channel for quick and easy dialogue with residents about local issues. Kirklees Council is one of these and the conversation thread below shows how the confrontational attitude of one resident was transformed through the council engaging in constructive, non-defensive dialogue. The conversation should be read from the bottom to the top.



RT @BrentWoods: Congratulations @kirkleescouncil Your new fountains look lovely. <http://post.ly/9maD>
10:33 PM Oct 22nd, 2009 via UberTwitter



RT @KirkleesCouncil: News: Boost for Huddersfield open market <http://bit.ly/RXbH5>
6:12 PM Jul 23rd, 2009 via UberTwitter



@savocado Thanks for the info. The Cleansing team did a 'deep clean' of the park 6am-11am on Monday and it should now be spotless.
10:29 AM Jul 15th, 2009 via twhirl in reply to savocado



Shitloads of rubbish round the park after the Caribbean festival in huddersfield. @kirkleescouncil fail. #fail
8:56 PM Jul 12th, 2009 via dabr



Why isn't @KirkleesCouncil clearing out the snow!? Heard Leeds has 10% of the snow that Huddss has (via @johnpopham). #uksnow HD1 0/10
2:18 PM Feb 3rd, 2009 via Power Twitter

Energise

There will be occasions where people need to be prompted to collectively engage in conversation and action. Practically, this will mean the council creating and finding fans – people who are willing to get behind a particular cause. Fans will be attracted to pertinent local or national causes, but should not be expected to align themselves to institutions like the local authority; very few people would want to be a fan of their council.

Instead, councils should energise social media users through something they have an emotional connection to – like a neighbourhood, city or service – or a specific issue like the restoration of a park. In the private sector, businesses have provided incentives for people to engage with them, drawing in potential customers. Burger King launched the 'Burger King and the Sacrifice Facebook Application' that allowed users to receive a free Whopper in exchange for sacrificing ten 'friends'. 20,000 people signed up to the campaign.

COVENTRY CITY COUNCIL'S FACEBOOK PAGE

Coventry City Council maintains a Facebook page¹⁴ that asks users of the popular social networking site to become fans of the *city*, rather than the council as an institution. By doing so, the council have asked people to connect with something that resonates with their everyday life, as opposed to an organisation that they might feel has little relevance to them.¹⁵ As a consequence, the council has accrued nearly 12,000 fans, all of whom can be kept up-to-date and comment on local activity. A recent announcement on the Pope's visit to Coventry was broadcast via the page and attracted over 40 'likes' and over 60 comments.

Support

For local authorities, social media is becoming a fundamental tool for helping residents and service users to support one another; it helps people solve problems, share information and mobilise for action.

If social media is not already being used to do this, local authorities should consider whether they are best placed to either instigate it or encourage its development by other groups or organisations. This could be a neighbourhood website in a place where residents do not have the capacity to create one for themselves, or a platform for service users to exchange information and advice.

THE EAST DULWICH FORUM – A COMMUNITY LED ONLINE SPACE

<http://www.eastdulwichforum.co.uk> is a vibrant community-led forum covering an area of south London. It is the first return on Google if you search for 'East Dulwich' and has thousands of residents discussing topics ranging from local transport issues, local bars and restaurants, to community safety and other local problems. The site ranges from general discussion forums to areas for people to discuss family life, local private sector services and property. The site is supported through donations from individuals as well as local businesses.

As well as providing online spaces for people to support each other, local authorities can support civil society through the provision of raw public data. Recent experience suggests that where raw public data is made available, activists and volunteers with

¹⁴ See <http://www.facebook.com/coventrycc>

¹⁵ See http://davepress.net/2010/02/22/see-local-gov-can-do-facebook/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+davepress+%28DavePress%29

the required skills will make good use of it. Examples include a map of bicycle accidents in London, created by a volunteer who combined the accident data with a Google map,¹⁶ and <http://www.wheredoesmymoneygo.org/>, a project by the Open Knowledge Foundation that promotes transparency and engagement through the analysis and visualisation of UK public spending.

The recently launched www.data.gov.uk is already a valuable resource for raw central government data whilst <http://openlylocal.com/> is a pioneering project to open up local government data. However, the provision of raw data in isolation does not support communities. As well as requiring people with the technical ability to use it, it requires people to have a certain level of information literacy to interpret the results.

Involve

Once a council has become comfortable using social media and have either developed, or become involved with thriving online communities, social media can be used to involve people in making or influencing decisions. Direct engagement and acting publicly on feedback both improves awareness of local need and demonstrates to citizens that they are being listened to. Big brands – such as Starbucks – have factored this into the way they work. They developed their own platform for inviting customers to submit their ideas for future products as well as vote on the ideas of others.¹⁷ The platform also allows users to see how Starbucks has progressed successful ideas into practice.

ASK BRISTOL

<http://askbristol.wordpress.com> is a Wordpress site created by Bristol City Council. It is used by the council to consult residents on decision making. The platform is easy to use; it does not require users to log in to post comments for example. Debates are presented to the public with key questions that require feedback. Once the online consultation is completed, summaries of the replies are displayed for users to see, and the gathered responses are fed back to decision makers alongside comments gathered through other communications channels.

Measure

Measuring the impact of social media is tricky but vital. There are lots of actions that can be measured, from comments and blog posts, to page views or tweets. Deciding what to measure is the important part and emerging social media metrics include:

- **Behavioural metrics**; gauging the level of conversation about the council; impact on web site traffic, phone calls to the council and face to face interaction; the lifetime of online conversations; impact on real world decision making
- **Sentiment and attitude metrics**; measuring the emotional resonance and impact on attitudes towards the council

¹⁶ Crabtree, J & Chatfield, T (2010) *Mash the State* Prospect Magazine February p42

¹⁷ See <http://mystarbucksidea.force.com/ideaHome>

- **Ecosystem metrics**; gauging the wider impact of the council's social media activity; numbers and activity of fans, friends and followers; incidences of referrals to council's social media activity; impact on offline engagement.

3. Transform

The implications of using social media for local authorities will go beyond better communication with citizens. It will result in new approaches to designing and delivering services, new business models and a cessation of some of the old ways of doing things. Most local authorities are still someway from this point; however, there are promising indications of how social media and other technological advancements, such as smart phones, will change existing ways of working. These changes can be summarised as:

1. **Redesign** services based on deeper and wider feedback from users
2. **Replace** or compliment existing ways of working
3. **Remodel** services or business models around social media and web and mobile technology

Redesign

Redesigning services based on the feedback of service users is the logical follow up of participation in social media. All forms of participation, from dialogue to involving, will afford insight for service designers and managers to use to improve service delivery, increase efficiency and improve satisfaction ratings.

PATIENT OPINION

<http://www.patientopinion.org.uk> is an independent website that allows NHS users to feedback stories of their experiences of using various health services, with their views being routed back to people in local health authorities, with the aim of creating better services. The website allows quick and easy feedback to be gathered from service users, whilst using transparency and openness as a tool to elicit changes or responses from public services.

Replace (or compliment)

Social media and other forms of internet and mobile technology will compliment, and in some cases replace existing ways of doing things. For example, <http://www.fixmystreet.com> allows residents to report problems with the urban realm to the responsible authority quickly and easily, as well as receive feedback. Fixmystreet compliments existing methods of reporting problems, such as via the telephone or through authorities' own online reporting mechanisms.

FIXMYSTREET BARNET

The London Borough of Barnet has incorporated Fixmystreet into their own council website, largely replacing their previous online reporting mechanisms.¹⁸

The screenshot shows the Barnet Council website's FixMyStreet interface. At the top, there is a teal header with the Barnet Council logo, a search bar, and a 'Search' button. Below the header is a navigation menu with options like 'Main Menu', 'FixMyStreet', 'Report a problem', 'All reports', 'Local alerts', 'Help', and 'Contact'. The main content area is titled 'Report, view, or discuss local problems' and includes a form to 'Enter a Barnet postcode, or street name and area:'. Below this, there are sections for 'How to report a problem' (a 4-step process), 'FixMyStreet updates' (showing 31 reports in the past week, 73 fixed in the past month, and 1,650 updates on reports), 'Photos of recent reports' (two small images), and 'Recently reported problems' (a list of links like 'Re: Mini Roundabout', 'Re: Litter', etc.). A 'Contact' section at the bottom left provides the council's address and a link to view a map.

<http://www.justvisiting.com> allows the family and friends of patients to setup their own secure and confidential online visiting room, where they can update loved ones as to the status of the patient. The website eases the burden of distributing updates about patients' health which weighs heavily on hospital staff and close family members, who often spend time on the phone to multiple people relaying the latest updates. In addition, risks to the patient – such as infection – and barriers to visiting like childcare or poor mobility are overcome.

Remodel

Completely remodelling approaches to working around social media is one of the potential consequences of more widespread use of social media by local authorities. Examples of this are as yet scarce, but are likely to increase. A few that will emerge over the coming months include a new model for involving people in co-production, and a different approach to town centre regeneration.

<http://www.justaddspice.org> is an organisation that offers a new model for engaging the public in the co-production of services. Building upon a traditional timebanking approach, the model – called an embedded timebank – sits within organisations such as schools or housing associations, and allows people to receive credits in exchange for being involved in service delivery. The credits can be used to access other local services, like going to a leisure centre.

<http://www.hometownplus.co.uk> is a new organisation promoting a different model for town centre regeneration, using online platforms to support the local economy. Scheduled to be launched towards the end of 2010, the platform mirrors Tesco's Club Card approach, gathering data volunteered by local people which is used by

¹⁸ See <http://barnet.fixmystreet.com/>

town centre retailers to tailor special offers to individual residents' preferences. Vouchers are redeemed through smart cards and text message vouchers, and the model incorporates behaviour change approaches, with incentives skewed towards ethical, healthy products.

Section 2 –The case for social media

Facilitator: "Does anyone remember what life was like before Facebook?"

Young person: "Yep, Bebo."

Quote from Young Foundation discussion group with young people in West Norfolk

The social media landscape is constantly changing, with new platforms emerging and different age groups migrating from one to the next alongside their peers. This makes the future difficult to predict; just two years ago Twitter was relatively anonymous, now it is helping people influence leaders.

Whilst the social media landscape is uncertain, the behaviour it has instilled in a new generation – the digital natives – will remain. Digital natives have grown up with social media and it has shaped the way that they want to interact with organisations and government: agencies need to respond.

Practically, this means that local authorities need to embrace social media, experiment with it, make mistakes, learn and improve.

In this section we explore the case for doing so.

The important statistics

In 2009, 70 per cent of households in the UK had internet access, with 63 per cent having access to broadband. Traditional uses of the internet still dominate; 90 per cent of people use the internet to send and receive emails, 78 per cent use it to find out information about goods and services. However, the number of people who post messages to chat sites, blogs and other such forums doubled between 2008 and 2009 from 20 per cent to 40 per cent, and 40 per cent of people state that they upload their own content to the web.

Mobile devices are increasingly being used to access the internet. One in seven people have smart phones and four million people have downloaded mobile applications – or 'apps' as they are commonly known. 45 per cent of mobile phone users access the internet through their phones.¹⁹

Social networking is also on the surge. In 2009, 38 per cent of UK internet users had a social networking profile, up from 22 per cent in 2007. With this surge, awareness of privacy issues has risen; 75 per cent of users now restrict access to their profiles to their families and friends (rather than everyone), up from 48 per cent in 2007.²⁰

Businesses are building upon these trends and using popular social media sites to support activity such as customer engagement, brand and reputation management, and crisis control. Whilst these only constitute part of any businesses activity, the

¹⁹ See <http://www.digitalpublic.co.uk/blog/social-networking-a-few-stats-by-david-winfield>

²⁰ See <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consumer/2009/10/social-networking-surge/>

benefits can be overarching; for example, 79 per cent of Twitter followers and 60 per cent of Facebook fans are more likely to recommend brands since becoming a fan or follower.²¹

Social media is personal and informal; it allows organisations to interact with people as they would on the shop floor but on a much larger scale. For example, social media can help build a buzz around particular products; on the day of the Apple iPad launch nearly 400,000 bits of content were generated on the social web.²²

For councils, the web is a proven tool for cost effective service delivery; it is estimated that each council web transaction costs 27p, whilst phone and face-to-face transactions cost £3.22 and £6.56 respectively.²³ However, between 10 and 40 per cent of visitors to council websites – even the most effective ones – leave without the information they wanted to find.²⁴ Of those users that feel dissatisfied, many will end up calling their council.

Social media can help in these situations. It can support more direct, less costly forms of engagement between the public and the council, as well as between members of the public who may be able to help each other out.

There are competing statistics as to the extent to which councils are using social media. Recent research²⁵ suggests that between 32 to 42 per cent of councils are using Twitter, with between 12 and 22 per cent using Facebook,²⁶ even though Facebook is the most heavily used internet brand in the UK, accounting for over 12 per cent of time spent online.²⁷ If Facebook were a country, it would be larger than the USA and UK combined.²⁸

As of early 2009, blogs and podcasts were the most popular social media tools used by councils, but 15 per cent of councils had no plans to use social media.²⁹

Employees and social media

The adverse effect on productivity remains a primary argument against the use of social media within public bodies. However, this argument was once posed for email and the internet itself, but their value is beyond argument; they are tools that can help to make people better at their jobs.

As technology advances, an increasing amount of social media activity will be undertaken through mobile devices – meaning that bans will only be good for preventing people using social media for work purposes. Instead, the solution lies with the effective management of people, rather than the restriction of technology.

Concerns around what employees may say when using social media are also paramount, particularly around more sensitive public services such as the police. There is a real fear that employees will post inappropriate comments or replies – that

²¹ See <http://socialmediaatwork.com/2010/03/11/79-of-twitter-users-are-more-likely-to-buy-brands-they-follow/>

²² See <http://infegy.com/buzzstudy/apple-ipad-what-happened-in-social-media/>

²³ See SOCITM News Issue 109 (June 2009) [<http://www.socitm.net/download/409/>]

²⁴ See

http://www.socitm.net/press/article/116/with_cuts_in_public_sector_spending_looming_councils_must_take_a_fresh_look_at_how_the_web_and_self-service_can_deliver_more_for_less_says_socitm_insight_briefing

²⁵ See two suggested figures <http://news.zdnet.co.uk/internet/0,1000000097,39996275,00.htm> and

<http://www.egovmonitor.com/node/29494/print>

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ See <http://uk.nielsen.com/site/documents/The10MostHeavilyUsedWebBrandsaccountfor45percentofallUKInternetTime.pdf>

²⁸ See <http://royal.pingdom.com/2010/02/05/facebook-social-media-juggernaut-infographic/>

²⁹ See <http://www.simonwakeman.com/2009/01/30/reaching-council-residents-with-social-media/>

are very public and visible. In the early stages of using social media, this fear will probably be more acute amongst employees rather than managers. Proper training for junior staff is essential and clear guidelines and policy are required.

However, providing all employees with the opportunity to engage with customers through social media will help to shed light on the activity of the large council workforce. Social media will also encourage employees to make new linkages within and outside of the council. A good example from the business world is IBM, which does this through its IBM'ers blogging platform, <http://www.ibm.com/blogs>.

Another fear for employees being encouraged to use social media will be around privacy. Council workers will justifiably want to keep work and their private lives separate. Islington Council overcame this problem by advising employees to register new Facebook accounts, revealing only their first names and job responsibilities (all employees inserted 'Islington' as their surnames, for example, Simon Islington and Jane Islington, to comply with registration requirements).

Reputation management

The urge to control messages and communication are traditional responses to the need for reputation management in government. Hence, broadcast communication is often preferred to more interactive, dialogue based interaction.

But traditional forms of reputation management seem to have little impact on trust in local government; 43 per cent of the public trust councillors to tell the truth and 36 per cent trust senior council managers – figures that have remained steady for the past few years.³⁰ In addition, the effectiveness of traditional forms of communication such as council newspapers is far from proven. The Audit Commission state that there is no significant relationship between levels of recorded communications spending and a number of different outcome indicators from the place survey or Best Value Performance Indicators.³¹

Councils could be doing more harm to their reputation by not using social media. Residents are already using social media, from blogs and tweets, to bespoke social networks to talk about local issues that fall under the responsibility of the council. This discussion is happening regardless of council involvement, but would be more productive and better informed with properly motivated council involvement.

A redistribution of control and greater transparency are inevitable consequences of social media; people will talk about local issues on their terms and be cynical of centralised broadcasts. Experience from the private sector suggests that transparency and honesty from the very top means customers are more likely to trust you. A successful example is the blog of the CEO of Sun Microsystems.³² Comments – the negative, positive and bizarre – are accepted on the blog and its success is confirmed by it receiving 400,000 hits a month during 2006.

Accepting that people may be critical is essential, as social media users are savvy to attempts at manipulation. When the car manufacturer Honda released photos of an upcoming car to its Facebook page, fans provided a deluge of negative comments. In response, some positive comments about the car were posted by Honda's product

³⁰ See Demos (2008) *State of Trust* [<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/stateoftrust>]

³¹ See <http://talkaboutlocal.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/auditcommissionreport.pdf>

³² See <http://blogs.sun.com/jonathan/>

manager, who failed to disclose who he was until he was found out and ridiculed by other users.

As was discovered through events such as prolonged snow fall, social media is a good medium for crisis management. Comcast – America's largest provider of cable services – purposefully chose to monitor customer discontent through Twitter and provide swift responses to unhappy customers, muting problems before they had spread around their customer base.

Digital Inclusion

Social media is not a complete replacement for existing channels of communication: some people will still need to pick up a phone or meet services face to face.

If people are not using the internet but do use mobile phones, text messaging may be a better medium. If councils are trying to engage communities where lots of people cannot read or write English, online videos in community languages would be appropriate. <http://www.maslaha.org> – a web based organisation that aims to provide a greater understanding of Islam for Muslims and non-Muslims – presents information through videos in several languages.

One way of tackling the social media inclusion problem is by trying to stimulate social media use in neighbourhoods where it is unlikely to happen organically. If left to organic means, there is a danger that communities with high capacity and voice will use social media to strengthen their influence with public agencies, while communities low in capacity and voice will be further disadvantaged.

Conclusion

The context for this paper is one of change. The public sector is braced for deep cuts that will have consequences for local communities. The response is likely to require more participation from local people, more interaction between officials and citizens, and an end to the broadcast democracy that has largely failed to engage.

Resources will need to be channelled into where they are most effective, and as a consequence, social media will be widely adopted. It will become a valuable channel for dialogue between different actors; a way of galvanising people around issues; a platform for people to support each other; and a basis on which people can be involved in making decisions about their neighbourhoods. However, the benefits for councils will go beyond better informed, more engaged citizens. There will be implications for service design, service models and an end to some of the old ways of working.

This paper is intended to support councils who are preparing for this uncertain period. It provides a framework for councils to conceptualise their social media activity around, with the first step being to listen. By beginning now, councils can start to develop networks and relationships, build skills and gather vital experience in using social media.