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Nick Ellison & Michael Hardey

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Nick Ellison & Michael Hardey

DEVELOPING POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS?
Social media and English local authorities

This paper reports on a survey of social media use by English local authorities. The survey indicates that English local authorities currently do not engage with social media in any substantive manner. However, as the paper argues, this lack of attention to forms of communication afforded by Web 2.0 risks missing an important avenue of 'citizen engagement', understood neither in the relatively straightforward terms of one-way 'e-democracy', such as e-petitions, nor in the Habermasian sense of rational democratic deliberation, but the more flexible manner of open-ended 'conversations' about local political issues. As the paper makes clear, academic enquiry has largely neglected this apparently mundane use of social media – certainly as it relates to specifically political participation – so some 'interactive snapshots' of this embryonic form of political communication are examined as a way of providing 'prefigurative examples' of its potential. By way of conclusion, it is suggested that the development of civic or political conversations across local government chimes with the emergent liquid modern environment, supporting, but not replacing, the 'fixed', or at least less 'agile', institutions of representative democracy.

Keywords e-democracy; engagement; local authorities; social media; Web 2.0

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Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of a survey of the usage of Web 2.0 social media by English local authorities. The survey was undertaken as part of an attempt to gauge both the quality and extent of current usage and the results prompt important questions about the current and future status of key Web 2.0 platforms like

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Facebook and Twitter in relation to English local governance. It is important to consider the role that social media play – and *could* play – in local politics because their ability to support reciprocal, many-to-many communications as opposed to the one-way or 'one-to-many' forms of communication that characterized Web 1.0 interactions (Hogan & Quann-Hasse 2010) suggests a capacity for more extensive, and different, forms of participation than those that have been deployed to date. Of course, a good deal of space has already been devoted to examining the potential of electronic media to enhance both the intensity and extensity of democratic engagement (Bimber 1999; Ward *et al.* 2003; di Gennaro & Dutton 2006; Zavestoski *et al.* 2006; Loader & Mercea 2011). As discussed below, these studies, whether or not they are sceptical about the democratic capacities of the internet, tend to divide into two broad types: first, those that take an 'e-democratic' approach, concentrating on the potential for less-intensive but wider 'consultation' about specific issues or on the possibilities associated with e-petitioning and, second, those that explore the internet's 'deliberative' potential, testing prospects for an online version of Habermasian communicative action (Dahlberg 2001). Neither approach entirely captures the important, though limited, role that social-media-savvy local authorities could play in enriching local politics and, indeed, in breathing life into hopes for a 'new localism' championed in their different ways by New Labour and Coalition governments. It may be, for example, that the twin dimensions of the local public sphere that conceive local authorities both as providers of local public services and as focal points of local governance could be usefully elided by online interaction in ways that are less possible in the offline environment. Matters of this kind are significant in the context of localist agendas that perennially stress the decentralization of service provision and greater local citizen participation in community governance – the current UK Coalition government's preoccupation with the Big Society being just one variant on this theme (DCLG 2011; Lowndes & Pratchett 2012).

With this emphasis on participation in mind, is it possible to reach a point where local councils, aided by Web 2.0 social media, could operate as the flexible and responsive political institutions imagined in O'Reilly's (2010) concept of 'Government 2.0'? Evidence gleaned from the survey suggests that local councils *could* use the potential afforded by social media not to maximize rational democratic deliberation on Habermasian lines, nor simply as a mechanism for 'one-to-many' forms of consultation, but rather in a manner that provides 'second level' engagement for local citizens who may want to engage with issues relating to the provision of local services and/or the conduct of local governance. This form of participation is best understood as an 'extended conversation', organized by local councils and initiated either by them or by local citizens in the context of interactive social media platforms that would serve as a means both of gauging the depth of, and responding to, citizen concerns. Importantly, civic conversations of this kind need to be distinguished from other forms of interaction that

already exist at the local level, but are either not officially hosted by local authorities or involve primarily interpersonal communications about individual issues or complaints. Independent, bottom-up protests targeted at particular council policies, or discussion forums and blogs are examples of the former, and individualized communications between ward councillors and their local residents (facilitated on all council websites through the provision of the names and contact details of ward councillors) are instances of the latter. Clearly, both these forms of communication are important; however, neither directly provides opportunities for the kind of collective/civic conversations of the kind considered in the prefigurative examples of this type of engagement discussed below. Indeed campaign groups using social media to galvanize opinion or the particular issues that emerge from councillor–resident interactions may themselves come to contribute to the wider council-hosted conversational environment as participation moves beyond the immediate confines of those who have initiated them onto the broader public stage.

The suggestion, then, is that Web 2.0 platforms could contribute to an enhancement – though not in all likelihood a transformation – of local civic relationships, for example, by increasing opportunities for direct communication among citizens and political leaders as it were 'between elections'. Activities of this kind could reduce current disillusion amongst electorates about a 'democratic deficit' in contemporary society. Moreover, increased responsiveness at this mundane level would allow relatively 'fixed' or 'static' representative political institutions to continue to act as the core focal points of formal representative democracy while remaining open to the rapidly changing political environments that increasingly epitomize liquid, informationalized capitalism (Bauman 2000, 2005; Castells 2011). Before turning to these matters, however, it is important to gain an understanding of the current usage of social media by English local authorities.

Research methods

The survey explored both the extent and nature of social media usage among English local authorities. These authorities were identified from the Municipal Year Book (2011) – 352 in all. While the paper follows the categories used by the Local Government Association, it is worth noting that council websites and Facebook pages do not always follow this labelling precisely. Unitary councils may refer to themselves as 'city councils' on their webpages – a title that is also used by metropolitan district/borough councils – and many second tier district councils whose responsibilities cover small towns (as opposed to rural areas) frequently describe themselves as 'town councils'. Such nomenclature no doubt reflects the serial changes that have taken place in the organization of local government and, possibly too, a sense that established labels such as 'city' hold more

meaning for residents than official designations. With these caveats in mind, the survey focused on county councils, district councils, London boroughs, metropolitan districts and unitary authorities – excepting only the City of London Authority and the Greater London Authority, the former a non-elected authority and the latter, though elected, having no exact parallel in the universe of English local authorities (its exclusion consequently not affecting the findings of the survey).

Data gathering took the following form and was conducted during September and October 2011. First, the full name of each council was entered into the Google search engine – this action, which replicates the usual method of finding information on the Web, inevitably identified the first or 'landing page' of the council's website. All local authorities are obliged to have a web page that enables citizens to access information about council services, information about councillors, civic meetings and other activities. Links to a range of more detailed information sites are listed on the landing page and these pages were, therefore, used to identify links to social media. Where these were present they were followed, but in cases where no links were discovered a second Google search was undertaken with the addition of a social media category like Facebook. If no evidence of the existence of social media usage was found through these methods, a final search was conducted by means of the search box situated on the relevant council's landing page. By entering terms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, it was possible to confirm whether or not a council used social media.

Importantly for the argument in this paper, the focus was on central *council-led* activity rather than on social media provision by, say, libraries or other specific services (which may well be contracted out). This decision was taken because the onus here is primarily on the relationship between local authorities as the focal points of local *governance* – a term that embraces both the political and institutional elements of the democratic process, and the configuration and organization of local service provision – and 'their' citizen/user populations. With this central focus in mind, care was taken when conducting the survey to verify that the council social media presence had indeed been officially created by the authority concerned (this point is important because, on occasion, it was found that individuals had created a Facebook presence that to the casual observer may appear to have originated from the local council). A summary of the survey results is displayed in Table 1.

The other element of the survey involves the 'interactive snapshots' examined below. These were 'purposively' drawn from the survey following an exhaustive trawl of each council's Facebook and Twitter sites. Key criteria for selecting the cases were the nature of the interaction – that is, whether it was either about local public services and/or a governance issue – and the presence of a coherent thread, or conversation, which suggested a sufficient level of engagement with the issues under consideration.

TABLE 1 Social media use by English local authorities (per cent rounded up).

Councils	*No social media*	*Percentage of council type*	*Social media active (SMA)*	*Percentage of council type*	*Total*	*Twitter*	*Percentage of all SMA*	*Facebook*	*Percentage of all SMA*	*YouTube*	*Flickr*
County Councils	5	19	22	81	27	22	100	15	68	12	6
District Councils	84	42	117	58	201	101	86	76	65	27	18
London Boroughs	10	31	22	69	32	17	77	16	73	10	5
Metropolitan Districts	4	11	32	89	36	29	91	24	75	16	10
Unitary Authorities	15	27	40	73	55	34	92	30	77	13	12
Total	120	34	231	66	352	206	89	158	68	78	51

The use of social media

Following the search strategies described above, it was found that 120 councils, roughly a third of the total, do not utilize social media in any identifiable manner. The remainder of authorities are 'SMA' but only in the sense that they host and maintain one or more of the major social media platforms – Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr – that currently dominate the Web 2.0 universe. Access to these media can vary, however. The majority of SMA councils provide a link to their social media on the landing page of their website, but 35 councils of all types provided no first page link. In these cases, social media activities were only revealed either by entering the council's name followed by Facebook, Twitter or the name of another platform such as YouTube into a Google search or using the council website's own search facility to discover the location of the social media pages. The absence of a direct link may simply reflect preferences in website design, although it does not encourage visitors to use the available social media resources interactively. Where image sharing platforms like Flickr and YouTube are used (in preference to Facebook or Twitter) the content tends to be embedded within a council's main website. Very few councils have direct links to image sharing platforms from their Facebook pages. It is also indicative that, where YouTube is used (this platform is in fact adopted by only 78 of the 232 SMA councils), the tendency is to utilize it as an efficient means of adding informational content to council websites rather than taking advantage of features that promote interaction and engagement with specific service or governance issues. This type of usage is similar to the way that SMA local authorities of all kinds treat Facebook and Twitter – a feature that is discussed in greater detail below.

Clear patterns of use according to council type are hard to discern. There is no obvious way in which social media usage correlates with the party affiliation of councils, for example. In view of the legal requirement for local councils to host websites, reasons for this lack of association may reflect broad agreement across political parties about the need for a web presence, the specific inclusion of social media arguably being left to be decided by permanent staff. A further possible divide could be along urban/rural lines, the assumption being that metropolitan authorities have populations that are inherently more 'connected' than their rural counterparts (Lash 2007). Whether or not there are grounds for this assumption based on evidence of social media use by individuals living in different environments, the survey found no evidence that local authorities' use of social media can be understood in this way. In short, an urban/rural divide is discernible neither *within* relevant categories that contain large cities and rural areas such as unitary authorities, nor *between* different categories such as the county councils and metropolitan districts.

In terms of a basic 'social media presence', metropolitan districts (89 per cent) are the most likely to be SMA, followed by the county councils (81 per

cent). District councils have the highest number of social-media-inactive authorities of any grouping (42 per cent), while the London boroughs and unitary authorities occupy a middle position with inactivity at 31 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively. Reasons for the lower take-up among district councils are unclear but it is possible that their 'second tier' status, smaller population sizes and relative lack of resources could be contributing factors. Turning to the key platforms themselves, Twitter is the most widely adopted social media tool and it is used by 89 per cent of all SMA councils. Although international comparisons are difficult, there is some evidence that Twitter is also the favoured social media platform in US local government (Bowman & Kearney 2010). The Local Government Improvement and Development (formerly the IDEA) web page, which provides advice and examples of good media practice to councils, advocates Twitter use for the dissemination of topical information about services, advising that Twitter is adept at 'getting simple messages out fast' and that it is easy to use. Indeed, some local authorities in the sample encourage people to subscribe to the council's Twitter stream to get instant updates about school closures, road works and so forth. However, this simple newsfeed-like use of Twitter neglects recently established user practices like hash-tagging, which indicates that tweets are classified as part of an on-going conversation that others can join. The findings from the present survey do not indicate that such conversations *directly* engage with councils via their social media platforms, although a significant exception to this general rule can be found in a recent initiative by Brighton and Hove council that will be considered below.

While Twitter has become the most popular platform amongst local authorities overall, Facebook is used by just under 70 per cent of all SMA authorities with high levels of usage in the London boroughs, metropolitan districts and unitary authorities. Significantly, the survey confirmed that a number of councils harmonize their Twitter and Facebook content – using both platforms primarily as informational newsfeeds providing instant notice of changes to council services, for example, or of upcoming events, to followers or fans.

The use of Facebook bears further analysis because, of all the available social media, this platform offers the clearest possibilities for more sustained interaction between local people and 'their' local authority. Open to the public since 2006, individual users create a Facebook Profile that provides information about them and acts as the basis for networking with other users. This capacity to link across different platforms typifies the break from anonymous Web 1.0 spaces, including the various e-government message board systems (BBS), and, of course, the fact that Facebook does not permit fantasy identities means that councils now have the opportunity to engage with 'real' residents in an inherently interactive environment.

How do council Facebook Pages currently function? In broad terms, significant interaction – meaning reciprocal communication involving debate either

about issues concerned with local political strategy and governance, or sustained communications about the nature of specific council services and conditions of service delivery – is hard to find. To be sure, the survey discovered instances of residents posting a comment to a Page and receiving a response on behalf of the council, and the nature of some of these exchanges will be explored in more detail below. However, even these basic interactions are few and far between, certainly do not apply to every SMA council, are typically brief and tend either to express thanks for a positive comment about a council-run event or refer the individual to the council's website in order to pursue an issue with a particular service. To this extent, council Facebook Pages are not, as yet, spaces where serious or sustained dialogue and debate take place. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the survey was carried out immediately after the August 2011 riots in London and elsewhere in the UK, and, while these events cannot necessarily be labelled as 'political protest', there was a markedly low degree of recognition or discussion about either the disturbances themselves or their local impact on council-led social media. More generally, reductions in services in the face of spending cuts are clearly affecting all local authorities but responses from the public on Twitter, Facebook and the other social media managed by local councils are both sporadic and muted in comparison with the various independent local protest campaigns to 'save' council services that have their own separate social media presence.

To sum up the findings from the survey, even at its best, current social media usage by local authorities amounts mainly to the 'pushing' of *information* about council services and council-organized events to local residents/service users. In this way, authorities are using social media 'passively' – and, in so doing, they are mimicking practices that became familiar in the Web 1.0 era when digital information did little more than complement information already being disseminated by 'hard copy' sources like newspapers and broadcast media. However, concealed within the current preference for one-to-many passive communication, it is possible to discern the outlines of a different kind of council—citizen engagement that, if further developed, could add a significant dimension to local democracy and boost the kind of decentralized 'localism' that UK central governments of all political colours claim to support. This kind of participation is best labelled as a 'conversation' and, as such, it needs to be understood differently from the 'e-democratic' and 'deliberative' conceptions of online participation that have been the focus of so much academic enquiry. A brief excursus into this research will demonstrate how much of the work does not address the potential advantages to be gained from informal conversational interactions, particularly at the local level. The possible benefits will then be considered in the form of examining some 'prefigurative' evidence for the existence and efficacy of these 'conversations' using three 'interactive snapshots' to illustrate their potential.

Online democracy?

Academic interest in 'digital democracy', whether sceptical or not, has concentrated largely on two broad types of 'participation': first, a focus on those forms of 'e-democracy' that are best characterized by activities such as signing e-petitions and 'consultative' exercises that work on Web 1.0 'one-way' principles; second, and more significantly for present purposes, the capacity for a sort of Habermasian online public sphere that could support extensive *rational deliberation* among citizens. A brief examination of aspects of these perspectives will help to establish that both approaches to what should constitute online democratic engagement tend either to over- or under-estimate what can be expected from the internet and, in so doing, neglect the forms of participation that it might realistically support.

Optimism about the capacity of the web to enhance forms of direct representation (Budge 1996) – even replacing traditional representative democracy (Rheingold 1995; Norris 1999) – dates back to the early days of the internet. Focusing for the moment on 'one-way' online communication, understood as non-reciprocal individualized activities such as e-voting or responding to e-consultations, it is clear that these phenomena have become well established at least in economically developed parts of the world. E-petitions are an example. For instance, the German Bundestag's e-petition scheme, established in 2005, 'has received broad approval and undoubtedly contributed to a higher public visibility of petitioning as a form of political participation in Germany' (Lindner & Riehm 2010, p. 21). Elsewhere, in October 2011, the Obama government instituted 'We the People', an e-petitioning system that requires 25,000 signatories (increased from the original figure of 5,000) in 30 days to trigger an official response from the administration, while in the UK, New Labour established an e-petition system in 2009, following on from a popular earlier scheme, launched from Number 10, Downing Street in 2006 (Miller 2009). Since December 2010, UK Local authorities have also been required to host e-petition facilities. In addition to these schemes, many similar systems exist at various levels of government in developed countries – the Queensland Parliament in Australia is one example, the Scottish Parliament's long-established scheme is another, while many US state governments also have e-petition facilities. The issue for researchers, of course, is whether schemes of this kind are effective as means of extending democratic participation and here the evidence is mixed. Lindner and Riehm (2010, p. 21), though well-disposed to the German system, argue that it has failed to attract the participation of underrepresented groups, while Coleman and Blumler (2009, p. 189) point out that a major difficulty with 'popular exercises in e-participation' is 'their uncertain relationship with constitutional decision making', particularly perhaps the difficulty that citizens experience in deciding whether or not their participation has

made a difference to government policy. Straightforward capacity issues are also significant. In relation to the UK Parliament, Miller (2009, p. 172) noted that the creation of a proper e-petitions system would be costly in terms of both financial resources and Parliamentary time – a view endorsed recently by the UK House of Commons Procedures Committee following implementation of the e-petitions scheme in 2009. Indeed, it appears that debates triggered by e-petitions are likely to be conducted in Westminster Hall and simply 'reported' on the floor of the House of Commons (House of Commons 2012) – the risk being that the issues involved will fall below the legislative radar.

E-petitions apart, online forms of consultation have also drawn the attention of academic researchers owing to their capacity to act as vehicles for gauging citizen opinion about specific public policy issues. Academic opinion tends to divide on the basis of whether a specific consultation is primarily about gauging opinion about proposed policy changes or whether it is principally concerned with the democratic education of citizens. In the United States, for example, some commentators have been critical of online experiments with the rulemaking process – the system through which individuals can file comments on proposals for new or revised regulations by Departments of State – because they demand too much technical knowledge. Coglianese (2004) has observed that the process makes significant demands on citizens who need 'to be able to understand what [an] agency is proposing and must be able to have some understanding of the issues involved in the rulemaking' (p. 25). She points out that issues in many rulemaking processes are complex and that

> according to the findings of the US Department of Education, about 90 million adults (or over half of all adults in the US) "experience considerable difficulty in performing tasks that require them to integrate or synthesize information from complex or lengthy texts." (Coglianese 2004, p. 25)

These observations are significant and have been echoed in part elsewhere (Cullen & Sommer 2011). However, e-rulemaking and other consultative processes, together with e-petitioning schemes, by restricting interaction and opportunities for many-to-many dialogues, while surely having a place in the general universe of e-democracy, do not fully exploit the potential offered by Web 2.0 social media.

In this regard, some observers believed that the web, even in its early incarnation, has the capacity to develop opportunities for new spaces of reciprocal deliberation of the kind advanced by Habermas (1998) and Gutmann and Thompson (1996). The decreased costs – economic and social – associated with online participation were thought to be one reason why deliberative practices would prove attractive (Dutton 1999; Rheingold 2000; Kavanaugh & Patterson 2001) to wide audiences, while early research into community informatics

suggested that the web could enable 'wired communities' to develop forms of virtual dialogue that could approximate to the deliberative ideal (Schuler 1996; Hague & Loader 1999; Schön *et al*. 1999; Keeble & Loader 2001) – at least if care was taken about access issues and the need to actively encourage individuals to get online (Keeble 2003).

The intricacies of online deliberation were discussed by Dahlberg (2001) who argued that the web can support deliberative spaces, although he pointed out that stringent conditions involving not only the autonomy of public discourse from state interference but also the close regulation of communicative practices would be required if the dialogue was to approximate to the exacting standards demanded of a rational public sphere. Putnam (2000, pp. 174–80), conversely, although he recognized the internet's capacity for extending communication across time and space, expressed concern about the damage that can be done to offline local communities as computer-mediated communication increasingly substituted for face-to-face interaction. Putnam was particularly worried about the restricted nature of online communication, inequalities of access to the web and the potential for 'cyberbalkanization' of which Sunstein (2007) also speaks. Other commentators like Dean (2003) have also expressed scepticism for similar reasons and do not regard the internet as easily able to extend rational deliberation in an inclusive manner (Pappacharissi 2002). Wilhelm (2000), too, has pointed explicitly to evidence indicating that offline inequalities of power, influence and social and economic capital tend to be reproduced online, with deleterious effects for the extension of democratic dialogue.

More recently, though, greater optimism has been expressed in a future characterized by the 'open and discursive public involvement, which the internet can provide if used reflexively' (Zavestoski *et al*. 2006, p. 405; Benkler 2006; see also Chadwick 2006; Coleman & Blumler 2009). Again, though remaining wary of too-close an identification with Habermas' conception of a public sphere (or spheres), Dahlgren (2009, p. 198) predicts a reconfiguration of civic culture because 'the net, along with the various platforms and applications for communication, constitutes vast and easily accessible civic spaces that facilitate political participation'. Nevertheless, others are not convinced that the undoubted changes produced by Web 2.0 social media will necessarily lead to more and better forms of democratic deliberation. In their study of Blackburg Electronic Village, for example, Kavanaugh *et al*. (2008, pp. 957–958) found that although certain citizens not engaged in offline politics participated in online deliberation, those who were described as 'passive-apathetic' and 'apathetic' towards the offline political world were not encouraged to participate despite their ability to access online communications. Other studies are also critical of the idea that the web can extend prospects for meaningful political dialogue. Hindman (2009), in an argument that echoes Putnam's earlier concerns, contends that the internet's apparent ability to afford citizens greater opportunities to communicate politically simply results in a trivial form of openness.

The real game in his opinion lies elsewhere, most obviously in the domination of a few corporately controlled search engines and the monopolization of much online political communication by (often) wealthy white males.

This brief exploration of research into, and perceptions of, the democratic potential of online participation suggests that Anduiza *et al*. (2009, p. 867) are correct to argue that the literature has generated opposing views about the nature of online political participation, without providing a convincing verdict about its efficacy. One reason for this lack of agreement concerns the undoubtedly complex theoretical and methodological issues that accompany attempts to define and 'measure' the nature and quality of 'participation' across large numbers of people located in different social, political, cultural and temporal spaces. Of necessity, the scope of many studies is restricted and the wider applicability of their findings consequently hard to establish. However, it is also the case that research into the deliberative potential of the internet has tended to focus on prospects for formalized, rational dialogue within and amongst a range of public spheres (Loader & Mercea 2011, p. 758) – and this focus neglects prospects for other less formally constituted but nevertheless significant modes of online participation. To assume that the internet in its contemporary form – taking into account the dramatic take-up of Web 2.0 platforms in recent years – might facilitate large-scale, highly organized forms of democratic deliberation is to credit the online environment with a capacity for discipline and self-regulation that such a vast, multifarious and fragmented 'system' cannot realistically possess. Conversely, to assume that social media cannot facilitate political dialogue and participation *at all* is to be too pessimistic about their capacities. In this regard, it is helpful to think of the Web, with Dean (2003), as a 'zero institution', meaning that it represents a disorganized space with so many 'conflicting networks and networks of conflict . . . that even to speak of consensus or convergence seems an act of naiveté at best, violence at worst' (p. 106). It is this conception of a fragmented virtual framework that informs Wellman *et al.'s* (2003, unpaged) notion of 'networked individualism' where online communities are characterized by 'multiple, shifting sets of glocalized ties'. In this environment, participants may choose to engage in no, a few or many different dialogues varying in their extensity and intensity, but the point for present purposes is that *one* particular variety could take the form of engagement in local political spaces. As argued below, council-led 'conversations' about the conduct of local governance and the quality of local service provision could play a significant role in encouraging informal participation in local issues.

To summarize, whereas experiments in 'e-democracy' such as e-petitions or e-rulemaking, in their continuing attachment to 'Web 1.0-style', one-way forms of communication, *under-estimate* the opportunity for reciprocal dialogues that many-to-many social media platforms can support, hopes for an online Habermasian public sphere (or set of public *spheres*) *over-estimate* the capacity of these platforms to support such a formalized, rational approach to democratic

deliberation. There is, however, a 'middle way' and the following section provides some brief examples of how social media – specifically Facebook and Twitter – can facilitate interaction between local councils and citizens, this interaction taking the form of more or less extended 'conversations' hosted, but not *dominated*, by local authorities.

Prefiguring civic conversations: three interactive snapshots

These examples have been drawn from the survey reported above. As mentioned, they are best understood as a 'purposive sample' designed to illustrate the potential that Web 2.0 contains for enhanced participation at the local level. The snapshots are not representative of Facebook interactions among councils and their local populations. In fact, they stand as rare instances of reciprocal communication between these parties. Nevertheless, they can be understood as prefigurative instances of a type of conversational participation that could be pursued at the local level by authorities concerned both to understand the service needs of their citizens and to engage with the latter in open dialogue about local governance. Participation of this kind should not be regarded as a substitute for the traditional processes associated with representative politics nor, of course, should it be viewed as the only available form of interaction between local authorities and their citizens – online and offline protest campaigns, discussion groups and so on offer important methods of participating in 'autonomous' or popularly initiated forms of local politics. However, hosting civic conversations can offer councils a means of gauging opinion – and engaging *with* opinion – about specific issues arising 'between elections', while also affording citizens opportunities directly to challenge, or otherwise engage with, the policies of local political elites in an interactive, reciprocal environment.

Snapshot 1

Burnley District Council. A 22 November 2011 post asks the council to 'please do something to get rid of the chuggers (i.e. charity fund raisers) in the town'. The following day the council replied stating that it was in negotiations with the national body representing the main charities 'to come to some mutually agreeable arrangement . . . [where] collectors would be able to work in specific areas of the pedestrianized area, three days a week . . . '. The council was keen to point out that it was trying 'to proactively manage the situation so that charities can still raise money but under agreed arrangements', to which the resident responded that this 'sounded much better and safer' and thanked the council for listening.

This case contains the least extensive interaction of the three taken from the survey. However, although this interaction was limited to one individual's contact with the local council, its significance is twofold. First, owing to the nature of Facebook, the interaction will in all probability have been seen by other local residents, meaning that the information about the council's stance on chuggers will not have been restricted to the parties to the conversation. Second, and more importantly for present purposes, the short thread indicates how well individual citizens can respond to having their concerns recognized and followed up – a feature also reported by Whyte *et al*. (2006). An expanded social media presence on the part of local authorities could result in this type of response becoming widely embedded within local government with beneficial consequences for citizen participation.

Snapshot 2

Brighton and Hove Council (unitary). During October 2011, this council gave notice of a Twitter discussion about local residents' attitudes to alcohol. A 24-hour 'tweetathon' was mounted to kick-start a debate about alcohol use that ran until the end of 2011. Over 300 participants, including agencies like the National Health Service and Alcohol Concern and significant individuals from the police service and tenants' associations, took part in the initial 24-hour period (according to the council, over 1,300 people took part in the full survey and 'thousands more got involved in the various events and online activities that [took place] across the city' (Brighton and Hove Council 2012)). Findings from the 3-month debate were made available online, in libraries and General Practitioner surgeries, the council's Director of Public Health commenting on how attitudes to alcohol differed markedly among respondents and stating that the council was trying to help reduce the 'harm that alcohol does' without reducing the enjoyment of the majority of people'. The content of tweets themselves (Argos 2011) naturally varied widely, but the key point is that the council initiated a conversation about a topic of interest and significance to local citizens with which a substantial number of individuals became engaged.

Tweetathons are not new in themselves (Mashable 2011); however, this example is the only one discovered by the survey that is hosted by a local authority with the clear purpose of stimulating citizen debate. Through its Head of Communications, John Shewell, Brighton and Hove council appears to be more aware than the majority of its counterparts of the potential advantages that social media can offer. As Shewell (2011) himself notes, 'social media has an unprecedented ability to strengthen relationships through the power of conversation' (p. 9). In terms of local governance, Shewell argues (2011, p. 6; see also Communicate 2012) that there is a need for local authorities to use social media in ways that allow them to become part of a variety of local conversations, initiating some and joining in others to correct misperceptions about the council's role –

but always with the objective of depicting the council as a willing and active participant in local dialogue. This type of engagement on the part of both local authorities and local citizens need not be understood in strict deliberative terms. The Brighton and Hove tweetathon and the civic conversation that followed it are plainly 'second-order' activities that cannot be compared with the kind of environment demanded of a rational, deliberative public sphere. Nevertheless, the space provided for reciprocity and the building of trust is important, particularly at a time when local government needs to appear responsive to local citizen needs.

Snapshot 3

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council. This snapshot provides a rare example of an extended discussion, in this instance about the town's bid for city status – a clear governance issue. Those contributing to a Council-organized Facebook debate that took place over 25–26 July 2011 were generally hostile to the idea and the thread, which involved 12 contributors, including the Leader of the council, and 38 'comments', ranged widely over loosely connected issues concerning waste collection, recycling and the question of the siting of a speedway track. These matters, particularly the latter, were deemed by the majority of contributors to be more important than Dudley's bid for city status. Nevertheless, the Council was able to make points about the increased inward investment expected from the change of designation, while gaining the clear impression from contributors that the bid was not popular.

The example provides an instance of the kind of 'conversation' that social media can support and that can contribute to a sense of engagement in local affairs. Significantly, it is clear that Dudley council takes social media seriously, at least in the sense that the Leader commits himself to regular Facebook interactions with local citizens. Whether council policy changes as a result of these discussions is less clear. In this case, the bid for city status was not withdrawn (although it ultimately failed). The main issue, however, is not whether policy changed as a result of this particular Facebook conversation. Change at this level, after all, is a matter for the formal representative democratic process and presumably Dudley's bid for city status had been included in the majority party's election manifesto. Rather, this example illustrates the potential for an informal 'local civic commons' and demonstrates in microcosm how it might operate at the local government level.

Discussion

The argument here has been that, to date, English local authorities have currently failed to exploit the 'conversational' possibilities offered by new social media –

and, moreover, that conversational interactions of the kind noted in the snapshots tend to be overlooked as significant activities in terms of engagement in local politics. Whereas Web 1.0-style e-democracy offers too little by way of reciprocal, many-to-many forms of communication and formal deliberative aspirations are too demanding, there is a need, particularly at a time when local authorities are being required to be increasingly responsive to localist agendas, to utilize Web 2.0 media in ways that exploit the available technology more appropriately. It is certainly the case that platforms like Facebook are beginning to be used in interactive and reciprocal ways in local political environments elsewhere, as the example of Facebook Town Hall (*ABC News* 2010) in the 2010 US Congressional elections demonstrates. There is also an urgency to this need to enhance the presence of 'connected' local governance, which concerns two related matters that are worth exploring by way of conclusion.

First, at a time when access to the online environment, especially through mobile devices, is increasing dramatically (Dutton & Blank 2011; Facebook 2012; Gizmaestro 2012) the development of systems capable of facilitating many-to-many communications among political institutions and their networked populations provides a means of both monitoring and negotiating the complexities of ongoing change. If access is one ingredient of the development of these systems, the other is the increased transparency, accountability and responsiveness of political institutions O'Reilly (2010) required in an informationalized society. Without endorsing the explicit libertarianism that underpins O'Reilly's notion (2010) of 'Government 2.0', it is nevertheless important to echo his view that participation needs to involve 'true engagement with citizens in the business of government, and actual collaboration with citizens in the design of government programs' (p. 25). The example of the Brighton and Hove tweetathon, and the ensuing debate about alcohol use and the public health and policing measures required to manage it, is a highly embryonic instance of this type of engagement.

To step up a theoretical level, Shewell's (2011, p. 13) conviction that there is a need to 'shift interactions online, participate in conversations and improve customer satisfaction and overall reputation' has a certain paradoxical resonance with the emergent 'liquid modern' character of global capitalism discussed by Bauman (2000, 2005). Bauman (2000), of course, is critical of the ways in which information and (various forms of) capital flow so fast and freely in contemporary global society that they escape the capacity of 'fixed' political institutions to act as foundational points for 'collective work' (pp. 178–179). The point is that the institutions of representative democracy, frequently the subjects of sustained critique from academic observers (Crouch 2004; Castells 2011) as well as global activists and social movements, are no longer able adequately to reflect changing political developments and opinions fast enough to convey a sense of responsiveness to (often fickle) citizen concerns. Although apparently embracing liquid modern logic, and inevitably imperfect as forms of

communication, suitably enhanced local conversations could act as 'fluid' mechanisms for a different type of interaction that would effectively 'oil the wheels' of, though not supplant, the established traditions of (slow-moving) representative democracy.

Second, at a time when computer-mediated networks, particularly those driven by new social media, are contributing to the fusion of the public and private spheres as traditionally conceived (Pappacharissi 2010), it is important for political institutions not only to work in a fluid manner in their dealings with local citizens but to recognize how citizens themselves perceive local politics. Despite the understandable concern about how contemporary forms of governance – the 'new public management', for example – have progressively constructed 'citizens' as 'consumers', or certainly as 'citizen-consumers' (Newman 2001; Newman & Clarke 2009), and the further worry that 'it is a large error to conflate the two' (Sunstein 2007, p. 136), the liquid features of social media in fact encourage precisely this outcome. Fans and tweeters, where they choose to engage in local conversations, are unlikely consciously to think of themselves as 'service users' or 'citizens'. Just as participants in the discussion about Dudley's city status, for example, elided this governance issue with others that reflected fears about the state of public services, so local citizens in general will engage with problems as they are affected by them, irrespective of their particular provenance. Rather than attempt to separate the increasingly interwoven statuses of service consumer and citizen, it would be better to accept this de facto elision and further accept that social media-facilitated conversations at the local level can act as means of harnessing and framing core issues in ways that allow citizens to engage if they choose to do so, hear others' views and receive responses directly from elected leaders. While this kind of participation is unlikely to resolve existing power inequalities, including the exclusion of marginal social groups, in any conclusive manner, it does provide a way of giving local citizens increased political voice in what is inevitably becoming an increasingly complex communications environment.

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Nick Ellison is Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds, UK. The late **Michael Hardey** was Reader in Sociology at the Hull-York Medical School. *Address*: School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK. [email: n.ellison@leeds.ac.uk]