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Social Media and Local Government: Citizenship, Consumption and Democracy

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ABSTRACT   *This article seeks to assess and understand the role played by new forms of internet-based communication in UK local governance. Drawing on a survey of all English local authorities the article examines the utilisation of social media before going on to ask what potential these media might hold for the enhancement of local participation. Amidst contemporary debates about the nature of local governance, not least those prompted by the recent preoccupation with the Big Society, Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook and Twitter afford new opportunities for online interaction that could contribute to the reinvigoration of the local public sphere. In particular these platforms could encourage forms of participation that would bridge the divide that has emerged in recent years between residents as consumers of local services and residents as citizens, or local democratic actors.*

KEY WORDS: Citizenship, consumption, local authorities, participation, social media, Web 2.0

Introduction

Connection to the internet has become ubiquitous in economically developed liberal democracies and is growing rapidly elsewhere as states and citizens seek to participate in what Castells (2000) has labelled the 'network society'. Since the turn of the century the capacity for individuals and social groups to interact online, whether through the sharing of images, video or written content, has increased markedly, facilitated by the introduction of mobile technologies – smartphones and tablet computers – that allow people to stay permanently in touch with friends, relatives, preferred organisations and the workplace. This new world of reciprocal and interactive communication means that, in principle, the capacity now exists for larger numbers of people to express their ideas about, and preferences for, particular policies, forms of policymaking and indeed modes of governance. Social media that have developed with the transition of the World

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Wide Web to a second version (Web 2.0) and other forms of instant communication have already played seminal roles in political protests in various parts of the globe, including Iran, Egypt and others caught up in the Arab Spring revolutions. Social media platforms including Social Network Sites (SNS), Twitter and YouTube played a controversial role in the 2011 urban riots in England where, together with Blackberry messaging, they were apparently implicated in directing people to particular trouble spots. However, this article is not concerned with the use of social media as facilitators of political protest, which has already been the subject of considerable academic attention (Solomos 2011, Della Porta 2011). Rather, it is interested in the perhaps more mundane processes through which social media are currently being used by local authorities in England. Beyond this immediate issue, the article examines the viability of social media as a potential vehicle for stimulating citizen engagement in local politics, and asks if particular platforms like Facebook and Twitter could be used to develop innovative and more accessible forms of democratic dialogue within local communities. The research and the discussion that follows is particularly relevant in view of the Coalition government's approach to localism. Building on David Cameron's (2009), rather vague, conception of the 'Big Society', the Coalition's understanding of localism stresses the decentralisation of power from central to local government and, in certain instances, its further decentralisation to local citizens – this particular interpretation of local empowerment differing markedly from New Labour's more 'controlled' approach in which central government continued to play a significant role in local affairs (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). In this context where the precise roles of local authorities and citizens themselves are in a process of constant articulation it is especially pertinent to consider the type of role social media could play in facilitating new forms of local dialogue and engagement.

Central government and local democracy

Viewed historically, central government in the UK has had an ambivalent attitude to citizen participation and local democracy. Following the post-war era of 'big government', throughout which local 'government' was perhaps better characterised as local 'administration' (Cochrane 2000), the Thatcher years saw the emergence of a fragmented system of local *governance* marked by increasing marketisation, privatisation and 'managerialism' (Cochrane 2000, Newman 2001). Conservative policies during the 1980s did nothing to empower local communities and the situation was not markedly altered in the 1990s, when a preoccupation with 'consumerism' (Newman 2001), expressed most obviously through the various citizen's charters associated with John Major's premiership, resulted in consumer-driven versions of accountability that had little to do with local democracy per se. Despite New Labour's stated desire for 'democratic renewal' (Labour Party 1997, 2005) and its apparent interest in 'e-government', both the Blair and Brown administrations followed their Conservative predecessors in their ambitions primarily to improve local *services*. Better service

provision was to be achieved through a range of measures – top-down and bottom-up – that, in the period after 2001, were characterised as the 'new localism' (Pratchett 2004, Stoker 2004). However, New Labour struggled to balance the commitment to ensure high quality, 'best value' services, and the centralised and target-driven demands this objective frequently entailed, with the stated belief in the value of local democracy and citizen empowerment. The upshot was that the vision, ultimately encapsulated in *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power* (DCLG 2008), remained too open to central government interference, and too vulnerable to the undemocratic vagaries of partnership working (see Lowndes and Sullivan 2004), to produce ways of 'doing' local politics that could reconcile the differing predispositions of the service-oriented 'concerned customer' with the democratically minded 'concerned citizen'.

Unsurprisingly, following New Labour's election victory in 2005, the government's approach to local democracy fell subject to the sustained criticism of a revived Conservative opposition that claimed to have discovered the merits of local democracy and argued that 'big government', whether central or local, should not become the ultimate arbiter of local democratic practice. These sentiments informed key elements of the Localism Bill that received Royal Assent in November 2011 (DCLG 2011), although whether any substance underpins the decentralist rhetoric remains to be seen. The bill claims to 'set out a radical new package of reforms [to] give communities greater power to shape their local areas' (DCLG 2011, p. 1), for example granting local people power to define the policies 'against which local planning decisions are made' (DCLG 2011, p. 1). Whether or not any substance lies behind the rhetoric remains to be seen – and indeed there is some evidence in the Localism Bill, not least in its funding arrangements, to suggest that the Coalition government is as reluctant as its New Labour predecessor to relinquish too much control over the direction of local politics. Even so, in an environment in which local authorities have been given a general power of competence enabling them 'to do anything in the interests of their communities that is not expressly prohibited by law' (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012, p. 27), it is not fanciful to suggest that the thrust of policy appears to be towards greater 'local participation', however unclear understandings of this term continue to be. Of course, there is no implication here that the contents of the Localism Bill have any direct connection to social media; however, might it be that the particular emphasis on decentralisation that appears to leave local councils and their communities in a position where local dialogue will become progressively more important opens a space in which social media could be deployed as a core means of engaging with citizens?

In the following sections, the article will examine local authorities' use of web-based communications with a view to discovering, first, whether they use social media at all and, second, if so, how these media are used in practice. A key theme here is the putative distinction between local residents as 'service users' and 'citizens', already noted above. An exploration of the nature of current social media usage by local authorities helps to focus discussion on how present practices can be enhanced in ways that could 'bridge' the perceived user-citizen

division (Sunstein 2007). It is important to ask, for example, whether the systematic deployment of new social media by local councils could help to leverage participation in ways that could increase the quality of local services *and* enhance citizen engagement.

Social media and local government

The widely recognised transition of the World Wide Web to a second version or Web 2.0 has been accompanied by the increasing pervasiveness of mobile devices that enable users to be always 'connected'. The first version of the Web was characterised by one-to-many communication, with low levels of interactivity and relatively small numbers of information producers. Individuals created content through their, often intermittent, access to email, Usenet and bulletin boards. By contrast, today's users can seamlessly co-create and, importantly, share content that can include images and maps as well as text across a wide range of platforms. Mobile technologies like smart phones and tablet computers are woven into social media that allow for the fast distribution of text, audio, video and images, and support the publication of this information across various social platforms such as SNSs. This content can be quickly uploaded to become part of a Twitter stream, for example, and has on occasion contributed to broadcast media coverage of events in Iran and elsewhere. The rapid adoption of social media has done much to drive this transformation in how information is created, distributed and used. Although there is no one definition of 'social media', for the purposes of this article the term is used to indicate those Web 2.0 social platforms that are built around user-generated content that individuals distribute instantaneously across social networks and publically shared information spaces. As O'Reilly (2007) notes, Web 2.0 is characterised by the collective creation and distribution of content. This categorisation includes SNSs (for example, Facebook), image sharing platforms (for example, YouTube and Flickr), blogs and microblogging (for example, Twitter), and similar platforms that are inherently user-centric and interactive. Web 2.0 excludes bulletin boards, forums, personal webpages and other applications that became popular under Web 1.0.

Social media have become the most used and populated part of the Web. Facebook is the most popular SNS amongst English language speakers and there are in excess of 800 million Facebook users worldwide (as of October 2011) (Facebook 2011), of which over 23 million are active UK residents (Clickymedia 2011). Launched in March 2006, Twitter allows users to post up to 140 characters that they can share and tag so that others can find the text in searches. Individuals can 'follow' others' 'tweets' and spread information further through 'retweeting'. It is estimated that there are 65 million tweets created every day at a rate of about 750 a second (Technorati 2011). The most popular video-sharing platform on which users can upload, share and view videos is YouTube. Now owned by Google, about 35 hours of videos were uploaded every minute in 2010

(YouTube 2011). Image sharing is also popular and it is estimated that more than 6000 photos per minute are added to Flickr (now part of Yahoo) (Flickr 2011).

In retrospect, Web 1.0 seems to belong to a very different world. Nevertheless, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the opportunities it provided were regarded as important for the promotion of democratic politics at local, regional, national and international levels. Terms including 'digital democracy' 'electronic democracy' or 'e-democracy', 'digital inclusion' and 'e-participation' became common currency, the terminology indicating the optimistic, egalitarian nature of the majority of initiatives and commentaries (Hague and Loader 1999, Homburg 2008). Relatedly, some commentators identified 'virtual communities' that were thought to have significant democratic potential because of the decreased costs associate with online collective action (Rheingold 2000). The model of a deliberative public sphere advocated by Habermas (1989, 1992) and others is influential in that this first wave of 'digital democracy' initially appeared to offer new spaces for consensual and deliberative engagement (Tsagarousianou *et al*. 1998). Examples include a number of initiatives from the USA – the Public Electronic Network (PEN), for instance, was an email and computer conferencing system owned and operated by the Santa Monica city council in California, USA. Established in February 1989, PEN was designed to give local residents access to information and stimulate participation in local decision-making. At one point PEN had over 5000 Santa Monica residents registered as users (Dutton *et al*. 1993). Again, under the broad umbrella of 'community informatics' various place-based websites provided a 'virtual' representation of a community. Better known examples include Digital Amsterdam City, Manchester Electronic Village Halls, Blackburg Community Network and many more (Schuler 1994, Keeble and Loader 2001). Some of these online resources were part of community regeneration projects designed to foster participation and a sense of 'community' (Schön *et al*. 1999, Mele 1999, Katz *et al*. 2001). The 'Leicestershire Villages' website, developed by the Leicestershire Rural Partnership and described as 'an online community for residents' where they can create a 'page' with information about their village, is an example of this kind of online community initiative (Leicestershire Villages 2011).

Despite the optimistic and creative nature of many of these democracy projects, they failed to approximate to the Habermasian ideal of extended democratic deliberation (Papacharissi 2002, Coglianese 2004, Cullen and Sommer 2011). In particular, research suggests that offline inequalities in power, influence and social capital were reproduced online (Wilhelm 2000, Zavestoski *et al.* 2006). This apparent 'failure' is not surprising in view of the ambitious nature of the deliberative goal and (in retrospect) the inadequacy of the technologies available. In the UK, and perhaps this is no coincidence in view of a decade's experience of e-government, initiatives for central government funding for the local government online programme ended in April 2006.

Although Web 1.0 appeared to offer new forms of civic engagement at the local and other levels (see von Hippel 2005), the subsequent development and increasing ubiquity of inherently open and collaborative social media in

advanced societies has produced an entirely new landscape. The capacity for dialogue and interaction brought about by Web 2.0 protocols far exceeds that of Web 1.0 and, importantly, 'accessibility' issues, though not irrelevant, are less of a consideration than they used to be. Because the majority of people either enjoy 'always on' broadband internet access, smartphone access or both, older under-standings of access and particularly conceptions of the 'digital divide' (Loader 1998), though certainly not to be dismissed, need to be treated with caution. By 2011, for instance, fully 73% of the UK population used the internet in some capacity and about half (49%) could access the Web through mobile devices (Dutton and Blank 2011). Moreover, the most recent Oxford Internet Survey (Dutton and Blank 2011, p. 21) states that 'use of social networking sites represent the single largest increase in internet use over the past two years, now reaching 60%'. Again, the use of internet-based government services is also growing with most UK internet users (73%) accessing some form of government online provision in 2011 (Dutton and Blank 2011, p. 29). Even so, older age groups continue to be negatively associated with the internet, with only 37% of those over 65 years making use of online resources. Household income and levels of educational attainment are also significant. Households in the lowest income group (under £12,000 per year) are half (43%) as likely to use the internet compared (99%) to those in the highest income group (over £40,000 per year). Where education is concerned, there is relative equality of usage across those with a 'basic education' (80%), those with further education (79%) and those who have completed higher education (91%) – however, only 31% of those with no qualifications use the internet (Dutton and Blank 2011, p. 18).

These figures tell a particular story for present purposes. Clearly they do *not* provide direct evidence of the existence of a 'networking generation' or 'gen-eration c', ready and willing to engage in online political dialogue (Hardey 2011). In fact online participation in the political process is markedly low (Dutton and Blank 2011, p. 30). However, the extraordinary spread of internet usage combined with the changing *practices* of use – specifically social network-ing – suggests that there is now serious *future potential* for the enhancement of online participation. A plausible indicator of this potential is the rising number of those using one or more online government services, which has increased from 39% in 2005 to 57% in 2011 (Dutton and Blank 2011, p. 28). Although these figures do not relate to local government, nor indeed to the quality of service provision itself, they suggest that popular interest in online services is growing (use of private online services, particularly those associated with banking, have increased considerably more quickly across all social groups – from 45% in 2005 to 60% in 2011, see Dutton and Blank 2011, p. 25). 'Future potential' can also be understood in a different way. The Coalition government's localist agenda with its demands that UK local authorities should seek to consult local citizens and enhance participation in planning, service provision and other decisions provides a significant incentive for councils to attend to their online presence, now in a context where the opportunity to exploit the potential of social media is con-siderably more urgent than it was even a short time ago.

Research methods

With this changing virtual, and political, environment acting as an influential backdrop, the survey reported on below explored both the extent and nature of social media usage among English local authorities. These authorities were identified from the *Municipal Yearbook* (2011), which provides the definitive list of English councils that made up the survey – 352 in all. This article follows the categories and labels used by the Local Government Association. It is worth noting that council websites do not always follow these forms of categorisation precisely so that, for example, a district or unitary council may describe itself on its webpage as a 'city council' – a title that is also used by metropolitan district/borough councils. Such nomenclature no doubt reflects the serial changes that have taken place in the organisation 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 – excluding only the City of London Authority and the Greater London Authority.[1]

Data gathering took the following form and was conducted during September and October 2011. In order to replicate the widespread and everyday way of finding material on the Web the full name of each council was entered into the Google search engine. This inevitably identified the first or 'landing page' of the council's website. All local authorities are obliged to have a webpage that enables citizens to access information about council services, information about councillors, civic meetings and so forth. Each landing page was examined to identify links to social media and where these were present they were followed. Where no links were found 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, YouTube and so on, it was possible to confirm that links to social media were not embedded elsewhere on a council's website.

Importantly, the focus throughout was on *council-led* activity per se rather than on social media provision by libraries or other specific services (which may well be contracted out). This decision was taken because this article focuses 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 organisation 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 been officially created and was being maintained 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.[2] A summary of the survey results is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Social media use by English local authorities

Councils	No social media	% of council type	Social media active (SMA)	% of council type	Total	Twitter	% of all SMA	Facebook	% 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

Notes: Percentages have been rounded up.

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 utilise social media in any identifiable manner. The remainder of authorities are 'social media active' (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 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 social media active councils), the tendency is to utilise 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. Party affiliation of councils was tracked but there proved to be no clear association with the use of social media. This may reflect broader agreement across political parties about the desirability of councils' use of a web presence of which social media may be a part. 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 2002). Whether or not there are grounds for this assumption based on evidence of the use of social media 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 neither discernible *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%) are the most likely to be social media active, followed by the county councils (81%). District councils have the highest number of social media inactive authorities of any grouping (42%), while the London boroughs and unitary authorities occupy a middle position with inactivity at 31% and 27% 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. It is noteworthy that there are instances of (first tier) county councils, which generally have high levels of social media activity, providing 'umbrella' sites for their associated district and town councils. Hosting a number of second tier councils in this way means that access to council social media can be extended across different local populations on a cost-effective basis, while also arguably increasing opportunities for greater engagement in first tier governance. However, this practice could also have the effect of depriving district and town councils of the chance to develop truly *local* online participation.

Turning to the key platforms themselves, Twitter is the most widely adopted social media tool and it is used by 89% 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 and Kearney 2010). The Local Government Improvement and Development (formerly the IDeA) webpage, which provides advice and examples of good media practice to councils, advocates Twitter use for the dissemination of topical information about services; this site provides the example of how, 'Babergh District Council used Twitter to announce that refuse collections had been cancelled due to extreme weather conditions' (IDeA, n.d.). The site goes on to advise that Twitter is adept at 'getting simple messages out fast' and that it is easy to use. Indeed, it is also clear from the current survey that some local authorities encourage people to subscribe to the council's Twitter stream to get instant updates about school closures, road works and so forth (see, for example, Northumberland 2012). However, this simple newsfeed-like use of Twitter neglects recently established user practices like hash-tagging – where words of phrases are preceded by a # mark – indicating that tweets are classified as part of an ongoing conversation. Hash-tagging creates a search index for other users of Twitter to find and then, if desired, to 'join the conversation'. According to Hermida (2010), such conversations form a significant dimension of citizen engagement in national politics and debates. In English local authorities, however, although there is evidence that individuals use Twitter to campaign about issues related to council policies, there is little evidence from the present survey that such conversations *directly* engage with councils via their social media platforms.

While Twitter has become the most popular platform amongst local authorities overall, Facebook is used by just under 70% of all SMA authorities with high levels of usage in the London boroughs, metropolitan districts and unitary authorities. Interestingly, the survey confirmed that a number of councils harmonise their Twitter and Facebook content – using both platforms primarily as informational newsfeeds providing instant notice of changes to council services, for example, 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 sustained, detailed 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. Importantly, unlike forums and other interactive spaces under Web 1.0, SNS stipulate in their terms and conditions that users must not use fantasy identities so that individuals can easily be recognised by existing friends and others (Facebook 2012). Many people also use their established SNS identity to join other platforms such as Twitter or YouTube. This capacity to link across different platforms typifies the break from anonymous Web 1.0 deliberative spaces, including the various e-government message board systems (BBS). Indeed, Facebook states that 'authenticity is at the core of Facebook'. This new, inherently interactive, environment means that councils have the opportunity to engage with 'real' residents. The potential for greater engagement increased after 2007 when Facebook introduced the fan page (or page) that was designed specifically to encourage brands and organisations to use the SNS as an adjunct to their marketing and public relations activities. Again the starting point is a profile with a similar format to the original individual Facebook profile but it is no longer necessary to stipulate a gender, age or other individual characteristics in what is essentially a 'corporate' profile. Fan pages cannot 'add' people as friends but individuals can choose to join as 'fans'. Councils predominantly use pages although a few continue to use the profiles that are intended to facilitate more interaction between members and replicate the sort of activity that has been observed under the Web 1.0 BBS system.[3]

  How do council Facebook pages currently function? The survey discovered instances of residents posting a comment to a page and receiving a response on behalf of the council. However, these exchanges 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. In an example that typifies these rare interactions, one resident posted a picture of neglected domestic refuse on his street following the council's message about changing collection arrangements. Several others commented that they did not approve of the reduction in collections and eventually the council responded with a link to the main council website to follow up the issue (at which point the thread becomes lost). This example apart, council Facebook pages are not, as yet, spaces where serious or sustained dialogue and debate take place. Where they do occur, conversations relate almost exclusively to the quality of local services as opposed to issues concerned with the nature and broader conduct of local governance. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the survey was carried out after the 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 them on council-led social media. Only one London Borough posted images of the impact of the riots on its streets – and here, indicatively, some residents responded in 'service mode' by organising 'clean the streets' groups. More generally, reductions in council services in the face of spending cuts are clearly affecting all areas but the survey

found that 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.

Social media as an information channel

Evidence from the survey indicates that, for the most part, SMA authorities are using social media 'passively' as one means, among others, of pushing information about local services to the public. This practice mimics the early days of the internet when, due to the high production costs associated with the skills required, digital information tended to do no more than complement material from other 'top down' sources such as local newspapers, broadcast media and paper-based newsletters. Now however, the extraordinary expansion of the internet has eroded cost barriers and the widespread adoption of social media has gone some way to addressing the concern that only a minority of people are routinely connected. The fact that it is now established government policy that all councils should have websites that enable residents to pay bills and council tax, access various council documents such as planning applications and, differently, to participate in e-petitions, suggests that 'connectedness' is rapidly moving into the mainstream. And yet in this rapidly evolving, dynamic environment, a third of English local authorities make no use at all of social media, while the remaining two-thirds of councils current exploit only *elements* of the opportunities afforded by these media – and specifically those that constitute an essentially 'Web 1.0' approach to service information. The key issue to consider, then, is whether local authorities should continue to use their social media platforms as a consumer information channel, or whether they should exploit the potential of Web 2.0 technologies in the interests of enhanced citizen participation.

There is a certain 'top down' assumption here: that it is – or should be – the responsibility of local government to enhance citizen engagement in local politics. Clearly citizens can and do engage with the governance of their local communities in a variety of ways, some of which are proactive, protest-oriented and 'bottom-up' (Barnes *et al*. 2007). The point, though, is that local authorities are well placed to establish channels of communication with citizens that could, over time, lead to increasing levels of interaction and dialogue about the nature of local governance, including the delivery of local services – and the related question, therefore, is whether councils should promote the role of social media as a potentially significant driver in this process.

To be sure, there is a good deal of ambivalence about the dialogic potential of internet-based platforms (Coglianese 2004, Zavestoski *et al*. 2006, Cullen and Sommer 2011). Chadwick (2008, p. 16) provides a daunting list of reasons as to why elected officials may wish to steer clear of 'deliberative online consultation'. These include lack of time and resources, the need to moderate online conversations, the fear of marginalising elected representatives and losing control of the policy agenda, apprehension about raising citizen expectations about their

influence over policy, and concerns about the representativeness and expertise of participants. In addition, other more traditional critiques of offline deliberative democracy remain pertinent in an online context: feminist writers like Young (1996) have argued that deliberative democratic procedures too easily discount various forms of power, while Valadez (2007, p. 319) points to possible linguistic (and by extension, cultural) difficulties associated with efforts to develop 'genuine reciprocal understanding'.

These criticisms are significant and suggest that enthusiasts who believe that forms of online engagement must necessarily result in better deliberation and a more empowered citizenry should be cautious. At the very least, there is a need for clarity about the overall goals of online engagement and supporters certainly need to be realistic about the capacity of social media to act as a panacea for better local governance. Nevertheless, there is good reason to explore the potential offered by Web 2.0 social media a little further. O'Reilly (2010, p. 12), for example, argues that 'citizens are connected as never before and have the skill sets and passion to solve problems affecting them locally as well as nationally'. He refers to the emergence of 'Government 2.0' as a sort of analogue of Web 2.0 with the potential for creating transparent and responsive forms of governance that could share increasing amounts of data with the public and allow those data to be developed in ways that move their usage into local (and virtual) communities 'beyond government'. The point, for present purposes, is that Web 2.0 technologies are likely to demand new responsibilities and new functions from governance institutions (see DigitalGov Group 2012). As Bass and Moulton (2010, p. 294) argue, these institutions not only have a responsibility to allow access to information but they also need to 'provide tools that enable the public to effectively search, analyze and understand the information'. The enhanced use of social media platforms by local authorities could be one means, among others, of fostering this kind of engagement.

Less speculatively, a study of interactive e-democracy in Scottish community councils found that 'web based tools enable and encourage more people to have their say in local democracy than has previously been the case through community councils' public meetings and communications' (Whyte *et al*. 2006, p. 6). Although oft-mentioned problems of access to the internet and developing adequate computer skills were initially perceived as potential hindrances to participation, the study found that receiving councillor responses to matters raised and feeling that their opinions had been properly considered were thought by respondents to be more significant issues (Whyte *et al*. 2006, pp. 70–74). A further study of online interaction (Williamson 2010) where all respondents had guaranteed internet access found that individuals are increasingly choosing to 'connect' directly with political representatives online, the suggestion being that this form of 'direct politics' is becoming more widespread as technological capacity progresses.

There is, then, some evidence that online participation is perceived as a 'legitimate' means of pursuing civic interests – and given the speed of technological development it is realistic to suppose that its reach will only increase over

time. His list of potential challenges notwithstanding, Chadwick argues that Web 2.0 social media can play important roles in the development of democratic interaction. For one thing, social media act as vehicles for ongoing citizen vigilance, as the extraordinary dynamism of the blogosphere attests, but Chadwick (2008, p. 23) also stresses their capacity for generating different types of engagement. If e-petitions stand as examples of large-scale 'one-way', or 'non-dialogic' forms of participation, interactive discussions about local waste collection and disposal, evident to a small extent in the survey, stand at the other – and it is with regard to the latter in particular that social media could contribute to a 're-articulation' of citizenship at local level.

At the heart of this process lies the ambiguous status of local residents as both service consumers and political actors. Of course, in view of the increasing scope of local government in the twentieth century residents have progressively – and inevitably – inhabited both roles. However, over the past two decades or so there has been a progressive shift away from traditional conceptions of the public sphere as a space in which political participation and the consumption of collectively provided services, free at the point of need, were cast as rights of social and political citizenship, to a position where individual citizens have come to be regarded as potentially empowered consumers, expected to make informed choices about their needs and well-being in a market place of public goods (Newman 2005). This neo-liberalisation of citizenship is held by some (see Needham 2003) to threaten the solidaristic, collective foundations of the public sphere as individuals increasingly come to perceive themselves – and conse-quently act – in marketised terms. Sunstein (2007, p. 136), too, believes that there is reason to be concerned about this turn to consumerism because 'con-sumers are not citizens and it is a large error to conflate the two' – his point being that 'in many contexts, people acting in their capacity as citizens, favor measures that diverge from the choices they make in their capacity as consumers' (Sunstein 2007, p. 137).

Although these positions resonate powerfully with civic republican ideals of the public sphere (Miller 1995, Sandel 2010), efforts to maintain the division between the individual as citizen and the individual as consumer on which such ideals are founded are likely to prove difficult in the context of the growing extensity of social media. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in fact encourage an amalgamation of 'governance' and 'consumption', and this feature of Web 2.0 should not necessarily be perceived negatively. Fans, tweeters and image sharers, should they choose to engage in local issues, are unlikely consciously to distinguish between their 'service user' and 'citizen' identities. They will simply engage with problems and issues as they arise, whether these are about local services or the nature of local governance itself. Where local authorities fully embrace the interactive potential offered by Web 2.0 social media they would be better able to respond to local residents' concerns 'in the round'. It is this prospective elision of the local resident as both citizen and service consumer, in the developing communicative context of interactive social media, that could produce a re-articulation of citizenship and engagement at local

level. Going further, it is worth stressing the point that this emergent interactive nexus could lead to new and different constructions of the 'political'. Newman and Clarke (2009, p. 161) recognise, for instance, that 'consuming may also offer new ways of expressing solidarities and exercising political power', while one local authority in the survey – Brighton and Hove – is apparently beginning to appreciate how social media may be used to stimulate different types of citizen participation (Shewell 2011).

Conclusion

This article has reported on a survey designed to gauge the current levels of social media activity in English local government. To date, and with only rare exceptions, it is clear that local authorities are currently using social media simply to 'push' information about local services to residents. One third of local councils do not attain even this basic level of activity. The reasons for this apparent lack of interest are by no means clear but two related points are worth considering by way of conclusion. First, an element of 'path dependence' underpins current usage. Apart from their websites, which are used as static, one-way sources of information provision and for other basic operations such as facilitating payments for services (Dutton and Blank 2011, p. 29), local authority communications strategies remain embedded in assumptions about marketing and publicity anchored to traditional understandings of media practice. As Shewell (2011, p. 7) notes, 'the vast majority of the public sector still relies heavily on traditional communications based on media relations, marketing (for example posters, leaflets and events) and paid-for advertising'. Although these strategies are labour-intensive, expensive and often ineffective (owing to the difficulties involved in targeting and engaging appropriate audiences), it is clear from the survey that, in the main, local authorities do not yet appreciate the advantages to be gained from the opportunity 'to communicate in both directions in a cost-effective, authentic and direct way' (Shewell 2011, p. 8, see also Caldwell 2012). Further, this traditional 'real-time' attitude to communication is clearly at odds with the superfast, 'always on' character of Web 2.0 SNS and the expectations of the increasing numbers of 'networked individuals' (Wellman *et al*. 2003) who inhabit virtual space.

Second, these tendencies are compounded by a social media environment in which the vast majority of activity around social networking is indeed *social*. The large corporations that own key platforms like Facebook and Twitter have an interest in reinforcing this overriding social function for commercial purposes (Beer 2009, Beer and Burrows 2007), with the result that these platforms are not 'advertised' as – and are therefore not perceived as – potential vehicles for political communication. In this context it is not surprising that neither local authorities, nor local citizens, consider social media as means of facilitating engagement in local political issues. This state of affairs needs to be challenged, however, and the argument here is that local authorities are well placed to take a lead in shifting current perceptions of social media use, *not* in order to dominate

or direct communication about local issues, nor of course to replace formal democratic processes, but to facilitate reciprocal, many-to-many interactions of the kind that social media have made progressively more feasible. It is certainly reasonable to suggest that *all* local councils could use Twitter and their Facebook pages more proactively than they do at present to invite comments and opinions about, for example, local planning, key policies relating to local services such as education and housing, and overall spending decisions.

In this way, and assuming open access to relevant data, it may be possible for councils to develop open, flexible, but sustainable, online spaces that could operate with three key objectives. First, to create opportunities for the expression of a wide range of views about council policies and services, which could then be used to amend proposed decisions or provide further explanations for decisions already taken. Second, and closely related, to provide opportunities for citizens themselves to learn more about decision-making processes and, through their participation, to arrive at clearer understandings of the workings of local political processes and the reasoning underpinning particular policy choices. Third, as discussed above, to contribute to the reconfiguration of local citizenship by using social media platforms to integrate the consumption and governance dimensions of local issues as a means of demonstrating to residents the (often) close connections between them.

To sum up, English local authority social media use currently defines residents primarily as consumers of council services. Although some evidence of residents engaging with councils about service delivery, or seeking to critique a particular policy, was found there is little to encourage them to pursue online communication with any persistence when sustained interaction is not offered in a systematic manner and rarely takes place. In an era where the scope and role of local government is constantly being scrutinised and where levels of citizen engagement are low, the current utilisation of social media remains too 'passive' and constrained to involve residents properly in all aspects of local governance. This state of affairs needs to change and local authorities are in a good position to develop the interactive and participatory potential that Web 2.0 social media can bring to local politics.

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wider analyses of the social and political impact of the role of the internet and social media.

Notes

1. The City of London was excluded from the analysis because it is a non-elected body and therefore has no 'democratic' relationship with citizens. The Greater London Authority (GLA) was also excluded. Although the GLA has an elected assembly and mayor, and acts as a strategic regional authority with responsibility for such services as the police, economic development and public transport, its functions have no exact parallel in the universe of English local authorities, being neither similar to single tier county councils nor to the various forms of unitary authority that exist in England. The GLA makes use of social media, but its exclusion does not affect the findings from our survey of county, district, metropolitan and unitary authorities.
2. It should be noted that Facebook itself has generated a basic page for every council in England by simply adding information from Wikipedia. These pages are not created by the council concerned and do not indicate that it has an official Facebook presence; in all likelihood it is the product of automatic software 'scraping' of Wikipedia information.
3. Such conversational spaces are owned by Facebook (or the social media platform concerned) so that while the manager of a page might be able to delete a post that data will always exist. While this level of detail may not concern a non-governmental organisation (NGO) or residence group it could constitute a problem for government bodies that may be more concerned about the ownership and control of spaces where they engage with citizens. Indeed this may point to the need to develop SNS platforms specifically tailored to democratic deliberations.

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