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## **Public engagement in local government: the voice and influence of citizens in online communicative spaces**

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The communications and engagement strategies of local councils play an important role in contributing to the public's understanding of local democracies, and their engagement with local issues. Based on a study of the local authority in the third largest city in the UK, Leeds, this article presents an empirically based analysis of the impact of new opportunities for public engagement afforded by digital media on the Council's communication with citizens. Drawing on over 20 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with elected politicians, Council strategists, Council communications specialists, mainstream journalists, and citizen journalists, the article explores perceptions of the Council's engagement and communication with citizens from the perspective of a range of actors involved in the engagement process. The research asks what the differing motivations behind the Council's communications and engagement strategies mean for the way that digital media are and might be used in the future to enhance the role of citizens in local governance. The research suggests that while there are no grounds for expecting digital media to displace existing channels of public engagement, digital media are beginning to play an important role in defining and reconfiguring the role of citizens within local governance.

**Keywords:** politics; news; journalism; social media; digital divide

### **Introduction**

This article contributes some empirically based insights to the discussion of how the roles of politicians, the media, and citizens have been reconfigured by changes in the political communications landscape (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Blumler & Coleman, 2013; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009; Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 2011). In a move away from studies of the perhaps more abstract and less observable communicative relationship between national politicians and the public, our research explores how communicative relationships between a local council and citizens are adapting to new opportunities for public engagement afforded by digital media. Using Leeds City Council (LCC) as a case study, we draw on interviews with over 20 elected politicians, members of the Council's Consultation team, Council communications specialists, mainstream journalists, and citizen journalists with a view to addressing two questions: (1) What is the role of digital media in the Council's public engagement strategies? (2) How is digital media changing the perceptions of the role of citizens in the Council's public engagement?

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In the past, politicians and governing bodies had no alternative but to use the mass media to communicate with the public. And, due to the concentration of the news media in a limited number of organizations with access controlled by professional journalists, citizens had few opportunities to contribute to the triangulated sphere of communications between politicians, journalists, and citizens. Recently, changes to the dynamics of the 'established pyramid' of political communication have led both practitioners and scholars to reconsider the way they think about and research local civic practices. An actively engaged citizenry has increasingly come to be considered vital to the move from top-down command government to devolved, co-productive governance. Democratic governments at all levels are paying more attention than ever before to the dynamics of public engagement. Understanding these changes has particular relevance in the context of current pressures upon UK local government to adopt more collaborative, consultative, and consensual approaches to decision-making than they had previously been used to. Indeed, we would argue that there is a convergence between what Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) have called 'the third age of political communication', and an emerging set of priorities characterizing the behaviour of local government and its relationship with the citizens it represents.

In the current communications environment, characterized by the proliferation of media outlets, the interactive capacity of the internet and new possibilities for citizen-led journalism, the nature of communicative relationships between politicians and the public are in a state of flux. The changing role of the mass media and the opportunities afforded by new (digital/interactive) media increase the possibilities for governing institutions to communicate directly with citizens via internet sites, email, and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Prior to the arrival of social networks, smart phones, and other mobile devices such as iPads, research into the impact of ICTs on participation in politics focused mainly on the informational capacity of the internet. The thinking was that by increasing access to information, citizens could become more easily engaged in political issues (Bimber, 1999, 2001). Studies of such 'e-government' initiatives found mixed results, with most concluding that increased access to information does not necessarily create a new set of citizens or encourage those who were not already engaged to become engaged (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). But communication technologies have now moved on, and the focus is increasingly upon the dialogical, interactive features of the internet and the possibility for citizens and their elected representatives to bridge traditional political distances (Coleman & Price, 2012). However, there remain many unanswered questions about the potential contribution of this enhanced communicative relationship and its consequences for the quality of democracy. In particular, we need to know more about the role of digital media in the relationship between citizens and political institutions from the perspective of those who are attempting to stimulate citizens to become engaged. Most studies of the contribution of digital media to public engagement focus on their effects upon public behaviour (Gennaro & Dutton, 2006), the use of social networking sites by politicians as individuals (Coleman & Moss, 2008) or by political parties as collective bodies. Fewer studies have explored how local government strategies to engage with citizens have been supported, complicated, or even hindered by the use of digital media.

Councils increasingly expect citizens to be engaged in the formation of local policies, providing services once delivered by the state and holding local representatives to account through ongoing dialogue. In addition, councils realize that citizens now have the potential to fulfil a number of production roles within the local media ecology, through various forms of citizen journalism which are often perceived as possible sites of public engagement. In much the same way that the term citizen journalist is interpreted in a multitude of ways by scholars (see Robinson & Deshano, 2011), we found that perceptions of the ways in which citizens can contribute to journalism about local issues were discussed in several different contexts, with varying implications for

the participation of citizens in the production of news. We used these perceptions to create a typology of citizen journalism differentiated according to four production roles (Firmstone & Coleman, 2014). First, citizen journalist ‘producers’ can be individual or collectively organized producers of information and opinion, independent of mainstream media. Second, digital media can enable citizens to be ‘contributors’ of user-generated content that is incorporated into mainstream news by professional journalists. Third, digital activities on public sites such as Facebook can heighten the contributions of citizens to the production of news as ‘sources’. Finally, through comments in online forums citizens can become ‘participants’ in local news. Taken together, these expectations are indicative of an emerging imperative to govern through innovative forms of interactive communication.

The main focus of this article is on how actors fulfilling differing roles within local government perceive the role of digital media as a facilitator of enriched democratic engagement, that is, a more effective congruence between professed norms and empirical characteristics of the relationship between represented citizens and an elected local government. We begin by exploring how one specific council is exploiting the opportunity for direct communication with citizens and what impact this has on the role of the mainstream media in its commitment to the enhancement of public engagement. Moving on from the Council’s current use of digital media, we look at how actors perceive the advantages and disadvantages of these technologies. Previous studies have claimed on the one hand that digital media have the potential to reach those who are isolated from society and estranged from politics because of social inequality, and on the other that they exacerbate existing social inequalities (Gennaro & Dutton, 2006), widen existing knowledge gaps, and simply make it easier for those who are already interested in politics to get more involved.

In discussing public engagement, it is important to acknowledge the complexities inherent to this highly contested concept (see Coleman & Firmstone, 2014 for a more detailed analysis). We argue that public engagement has several contested meanings. When asked why local government needed to engage with citizens, our interviewees referred to three main reasons (although the third was mainly implicit). First, public engagement was understood as a process of public education, informing rather than interacting with citizens. Second, it was seen as being about consulting the public, either as a broad entity or as specific groups or mini-publics. Third, more commonly alluded to than advocated, public engagement was understood as a process of empowerment whereby citizens moved from being recipients of council decisions and services and became partners in their production. The ways in which interviewees perceived success related closely to these differing conceptions of public engagement. Where they regarded engagement as a means of nurturing public understanding of the Council, its policies, and its constraints, they tended to evaluate success in informational terms. Engaged citizens, in this sense, were conspicuous when they understood what the Council did and why they had to do it. Where public engagement was conceived as being consultative and dialogical, the criteria of success were more closely related to forms of communicative relationships in which an interactive exchange of perspectives was more conspicuous.

## **Method and project**

This article is part of a wider research project which used LCC as a case study to investigate public engagement in local democracies in the UK. The main research method used a semi-structured interview schedule to focus interviewees on the public engagement efforts of LCC. Twenty-three face-to-face interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed in the summer of 2012.<sup>1</sup> Actors from the Council were selected to represent a range of functions within the Council, each differing in their relationship to the public engagement process. The 14 Council

interviewees included elected politicians (Councillors) (3), Council Engagement strategists (2), members of the Council communications team (3), Heads of Directorates (2), Frontline Council workers (2), and, as the lowest tier of local government, Parish Councils (2).<sup>2</sup> In addition, and to gain the perspective of another group of actors who are important in engaging the public, we interviewed two locally based youth NGOs (2). Outside of the Council the sample focused on media actors from the mainstream local news media and new digitally based forms of citizen-led media. This included four mainstream news journalists (2 BBC, 2 *Yorkshire Evening Post*), two citizen journalists, and one civic-orientated blogger.

It is important to explain how the term ‘digital media’ was defined to interviewees. For the purposes of our research, we are primarily interested in the informational and interactive capacity of those digitally based media that are widely accessible to the general public. In practice, this means internet sites, email, and online social networks, with each having the dual capacity to be consumed or produced by citizens – and often both at the same time. Most of our interview questions were designed to explore perceptions of the use of digital media in current engagement activities from a constructivist approach. Thus, rather than asking interviewees explicit questions about digital media, we attempted to detect how they understood the role of digital media from their articulated perceptions and evaluations of broader questions about engagement. This included asking interviewees to give examples of successful and failed public engagement exercises, asking about ways in which the Council’s ways of engaging with the public have changed in recent years, and inviting interviewees to consider what engagement might look like in the future. We also designed a set of questions that were specifically designed to elicit thoughts about the significance of digital media as a technology of democratic engagement. However, the research was not designed to attempt to quantify or measure the success of the Council’s use of digital media against some kind of benchmark of democratic enrichment. Rather we sought to explore actors’ reflections on the changing dynamics of relationship between governing bodies, the media, and citizens through an organizational analysis. The following discussion is based on a detailed reading of the transcripts from which a set of common themes were identified.

### **The role of digital media in public engagement**

Despite their potential uses, digital media were not perceived to have been one of the most significant influences on the Council’s engagement strategy in recent years. According to those closest to the Council’s engagement activities, it is a recognition that engaging with the public is vital to contemporary governance that has stimulated the most important change in the Council’s approach to public communication. An increased pressure to engage has been prompted by statutory requirements for councils to consult with those affected by decisions. According to a senior engagement strategist, this has been a significant motivating factor in the Council’s level of engagement:

I think there’s greater awareness of the need to do it [engage]. Risk of challenge, I think, has been the real driver. The performance indicators we talked about earlier have been created really because of risk of challenge. It’s an audit trail indicator. (Engagement strategist, Senior)

A senior member of the communications team described how the Council’s engagement activities had increased significantly over the last decade, prior to which they did not undertake much work of this kind. Rather than talking about changes to the communications environment, he perceived structural changes to the organization of the Council, such as the creation of local area committees to have had a positive effect in making it easier for citizens to engage: ‘I think there was a time when we didn’t really seek out the views of the local people; we made it quite difficult for them to engage with us (Communications team, Senior). Actors outside the Council, including both

NGOs and journalists, had also noticed an increase in the Council's engagement activities, especially 'a willingness to have community meetings' (Local youth NGO) and an 'improvement in their participation and evaluation tools to include service users such as families on panels for tendering processes' (National youth NGO). Interestingly, much of the Council's legally required engagement with citizens is still being conducted offline.

The methods of delivery might change a bit and I think people will start to become a bit more creative but because it is statutory that might slightly hold people back in that they have to prove that they've done things to the required standards. (Communications team, Press)

The 'required standards' most often involve face-to-face meetings with interested parties and a duty to provide information through the mainstream local media, especially newspapers.

When asked to give examples of successful and failed engagement exercises, interviewees from all backgrounds suggested that the *process* of engagement is far more important to success than the *tools* used to reach people (Coleman & Firmstone, 2014). The Council's approach to public engagement is much more determined by what 'engagement' means in specific contexts than which tools and technologies are available. The majority of examples of successful engagement exercises referred to instances where effective consultation or, in fewer instances, empowerment, was the key aim rather than one-way informational engagement. Successful examples included creating dialogical relationships with young people from the inception of planning for a new museum and consulting with groups who would be directly affected by cuts to adult services. These kinds of exercises predominantly used offline engagement tools, such as written consultations, face-to-face meetings, workshops, or dialogue facilitated by the third sector. Similarly, instances of failure to engage were most often attributed to faults in the process rather than weaknesses in the tools chosen for engagement. Indeed, the most common criticism of failed engagement exercises was not that citizens could not be reached, but that they did not trust the Council to take any notice of them. As one local journalist put it,

They'd [the Council] be advertising a consultation on that project, a public consultation, but the perception to the public is, well the decision is already made and actually you are just paying lip-service to the word consultation and that is often reflected in the low turn-out and the low participation rate. (Senior reporter, YEP)

This was echoed by the head of one of the Council's policy Directorates:

One of the things that happens quite often – and this is what young people will complain about, and it's well documented, – is that consultation comes to young people about services or provision or ideas and no feedback ever happens. So what we tend to hear from young people is I've been consulted all the time but nobody ever tells me what happens as a result of those consultations. (Head of Directorate)

None of the actors we interviewed gave digital forms of engagement as examples of best or worst practice, nor did they mention the use of the mass media in their examples. As we will see, the Council's current uses of digital media are restricted to informational modes of engagement. Dialogical, interactive uses of the internet are largely confined to visions of future democratic engagement.

### Digital media for 'informational' engagement

Questioning interviewees on the advantages and disadvantages of digital media, and the contribution social media have made to public engagement, further demonstrates that digital media are predominantly used to facilitate informational forms of engagement. While there is a clear

recognition among the Council's communications team that digital media present plentiful opportunities for dialogical interaction with citizens, they also acknowledged that they do not currently have the skills or resources to fully utilize such interactive features. There was an overall perception, both within and outside the Council, that it has only just begun making a concerted effort to incorporate digital media into its engagement activities. Most examples of engagement through digital media that were cited related to providing public information through one-way communications, such as Tweets or the posting of press releases on the Council website. This emphasis upon the informational function of digital communication led some interviewees to suggest that any actions likely to increase the public's knowledge about the Council would be important first steps to more interactive, consultative forms of engagement. For example, one elected Councillor regarded the dissemination of information to the public as a prerequisite for local democracy:

Well, an engaged democracy would be, [if] the majority of people actually understood what the system was and I think that's part of the issue, it's people don't understand the system. And then actually it would be relatively easy for them to engage with the system. (Councillor C)

A senior member of the Communications team noted that the Council did not yet have the skills to engage interactively with citizens via social media, but that even if these media were only used to send out information to the local public it would be a valuable starting point:

Has it [social media] yet resulted in improved engagement? On the edges it must have done, because we have 7000 or 8000 followers on Twitter for our Council and for our press team account, so there are, in theory, that many people out there looking at all the press releases and the news, and if they're, in any way, looking at it, they're getting a feel for what's happening in the Council. (Communications team, Senior)

Far from being a space for interactive communication between a representative institution and represented citizens, the Council's website was predominantly perceived as an extension of service-related communication, with its main function being to allow the public to access information about council-based services or to carry out service-based transactions such as making payments online.

### **A fragmented use of digital media**

The Council's use of different digital tools of engagement was highly fragmented. Its website and its strategy for using social media are organized separately from one another, with the website principally designed to facilitate service-related informational engagement; the Council-branded Facebook page run by the website team; the Council's main Twitter account run by the website team and a secondary Council Twitter account run by the Press Office (LCC\_News). While the first three are seen as sources of official information provision, the LCC News Twitter account is regarded as a tool for reputational management. It is used to communicate with journalists and for some very limited direct engagement with the public. In addition, there are numerous Council Twitter accounts and Facebook pages managed by individual directorates or individual employees. There appears to be no overall digital engagement strategy and citizens approaching the Council could be forgiven for not knowing the difference between these diverse and incoherent spaces.

As well as being housed in another part of the city from the main Council buildings, the LCC website is organized, managed, and resourced by a website team that is separate from mainstream communication functions, which are principally coordinated through the Press Office. The public

engagement strategy is run by yet another dedicated team. The main function of the website is to support the Council's delivery of services and its manager described it as the equivalent of an online call centre. The site is designed to help save the Council money by facilitating common interactions between citizens and the Council, such as filling in forms, paying 'Council Tax', and finding out swimming pool opening times. The main driver for this technology is cost-cutting:

It's cheaper for us to manage stuff online, obviously, because people can self-serve, so we look at the types of stuff that the Contact Centre upstairs are getting phone calls about as well. So, for example, a lot of calls about bins, constantly, so we need to make sure that our information is the same as what they're saying upstairs, that kind of thing. (Communications team, Website)

The website manager talked about the important role the site plays in public engagement because it is 'the shop window of the Council online' and said that the site had recently been re-designed with the clear intention of providing the kind of information that can enable citizens to 'help themselves'.

Social media use is divided between the website team, the Press Office, and some individual directorates and services. For example, libraries and museums run their own Twitter and Facebook accounts and some directorates also have their own blogs. In the absence of an overall social media strategy, the website team and Press Office give help and advice to individuals or departments wanting to use social media, but beyond this they have little input or control. Whereas the Council has a very clear policy to ensure that all contact with the mainstream media is coordinated through the Press Office, much of the social media content related to Council issues is published independently of the communications team:

I suppose people are starting to discover the benefits of online a bit more. It's very much a piecemeal process through the Council. Some people engage with it, some don't, so it does depend on the individual department and section how much they bother with that. Some are very traditional; some are real social media advocates and online fans. (Communications team, Press)

Using social media effectively on behalf of the Council was perceived as requiring a specific set of skills – and these skills are not expected of everyone. Rather than requiring people to use Twitter, the communications team runs social media surgeries to encourage Council staff to engage and has guidelines on how to speak on behalf of the Council. Here we can see how inequalities in digital skills are not only relevant to how the public engages with political institutions, but also to how government officials and elected representatives engage with the public:

The disadvantage is that not everyone uses it, not everyone is au fait with it, and that has the same impact in the workplace as well. [ ... ] You've really got to know what you're doing with it to understand its capability and how you might use it in an effort to engage local people; you've got to be really skilful with it. (Communications team, Senior)

Although the Council's approach to social media is under development and a more coherent strategy is likely to emerge at some point, the 'piecemeal' approach poses a challenge to the existing role of the communications team and to those responsible for coordinating public engagement. The lack of a requirement to coordinate social media use through the Press Office makes it more difficult for the communications team to control messages appearing in the communication ecology in the name of the Council. For example:

For me, in my job, the biggest disadvantage is that traditionally it was only us who spoke on behalf of the Council and now suddenly there are potentially thousands of people who are and it's how you keep tabs on that without dampening people's enthusiasm and stopping them engaging ... because a lot of them are engaging with people very well. (Communications team, Press)

The need to develop a more coherent social media strategy in order to harness the dialogical potential of the internet for engaging was evident to actors outside the Council:

They're starting to pay more attention to social media ... there are many Council employees and people who are paid to do so who actually pay attention to things like Twitter and Facebook and they're willing to engage in dialogue with people on those platforms instead of just being a way of shouting out press releases. That does seem to be working. They could do better. (Citizen Journalist B)

Several Council actors explained how, in addition to its main aim of targeting press releases at the mainstream media, the press office is now using the Council website and Twitter to communicate its press releases directly to the public. The Head of the Press office described how this is perceived as an increasingly important communications channel for the Council and noted that they had even started producing their own audiovisual material and posting it on YouTube. By circumnavigating the mass media, the Council is able to potentially reach citizens who are not consumers of mainstream news. For example:

With social media now it's opened it up direct to the public ... any major announcements or changes in what the Council does do come through us and increasingly the public are finding out about that directly via us rather than us just using the media as a conduit. (Communications team, Press)

This direct contact with the public is changing the role of the Press Office to one where they need to be prepared not only to deal with a greater quantity of responsive enquiries, but to be prepared for challenges and debates stimulated by the messages they are sending out. The Council's perception of the need to tailor their Tweets and messages suggests that, in the same way that demands from journalists for communication which is adapted to appeal to a 'media logic' have effected a 'mediatization' of political communications (Hepp, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), digital media are creating an additional challenge to tailor messages to appeal directly to the sensitivities and logic of the public. Perhaps we could think of this as a sort of civic demediatization where the media plays a less dominant role in exerting pressure on the communication strategies of governing bodies, and the role of citizens is heightened (Hepp, 2009). The concept of civic demediatization calls into question the strength attributed by mediatization theory to the 'media as agents of change and holders of power' (Billig, 2013, p. 111), and suggests that our view of how governing bodies communicate with the public needs to be re-thought. This requires a stronger conceptualization of the types of mediated and unmediated communication that bypass mainstream channels of news via digital media. For example, the role of Twitter and Facebook in direct communication with the public requires clarification to address questions such as – how does the way the public and organizations interact with such information represent a mediation of the information? In addition, one could argue that citizen journalists (in the four forms mentioned earlier) simply represent an emerging form of mediatization as new types of mediators imbued with a different 'media logic'. However, we have yet to resolve the question of whether and how citizen journalists should be considered as mediators and if so what logic they demand of communicators. Such a conceptualisation of citizen journalism requires a more in-depth understanding of the factors that drive and shape citizen journalists' communication of local political issues than is currently available. The following quote also highlights the need for a greater understanding of the way that unmediated information and opinion about civic issues such as press releases is negotiated and consumed by the public. Speaking of these new opportunities for direct communication, one interviewee from the Press Office stated:

It does create a lot of extra demand for us, but it kind of makes us have a much greater eye for how things are directly received by the public rather than through the filter of the media. You have

to be really clear about stuff because it's easier for people to misinterpret it. (Communications team, Press)

The uncoordinated treatment of social media, exacerbated by the organization of the Council's communication operation into a Press Office, a website team, and a public engagement team, is indicative of a division in the Council's approach to public engagement via digital, interactive technologies. While efforts to engage citizens via mainstream news media are perceived as mainly informational, attempts to communicate with the public through social media and the website are not only perceived and organized as something distinct from its 'media strategy', but as somehow locked into a notion of public engagement as a one-way flow.

### **The democratic potential of digital media**

Regardless of the Council's current use of digital media, many interviewees perceived there to be several question marks over the ways in which digital media might enrich democratic engagement, due to an overwhelming concern about inequalities of access. On balance, more weight was given to consideration of the disadvantages and challenges posed by digital media than its benefits. In general, digital media were not perceived to have the potential to overcome the common difficulties associated with engagement, such as motivating citizens, enabling efficacy, and creating the communicative richness of face-to-face engagement. Most interviewees felt that the Council was not yet in a position to realize the potential benefits that digital media can bring to public engagement. Perceptions of the potential ways in which digital media might enhance democratic engagement included generic technological characteristics such as 'immediacy' and 'speed', and three more substantive benefits: (1) increasing the efficiency of engagement; (2) enabling two-way communication; and (3) enhancing the role of citizens as sources of public opinion and expertise.

The majority of interviewees recognized that digital media could serve as technologies of public engagement. For example, online communication is immediate: 'The advantage is you can hit a lot of people very quickly relatively cheaply; you can also present quite a modern-looking kind of face' (Online journalist, BBC) and provides greater efficiency, 'just in terms of cutting paper out where it's not going to cause barriers to people taking part ... We wouldn't have our Citizens' Panel if we didn't have that platform, we just couldn't afford it' (Engagement strategist, Senior). Only a handful of interviewees mentioned the potential for two-way communication – and those who did acknowledged that it yet to be realized: 'It should make it easier to have some sort of communication, in theory, and it should be easier to have a two-way communication, or indeed more than two-way' (Head of Directorate).

The most important perceived implication for the relationship between citizens and political institutions seemed to be as a source of tapping into public opinion and local expertise. The Council's communications and engagement specialists were aware of the possibilities for mining data generated on social media, online forums, and web-based feedback forms for information on how the public is 'talking' about Council issues. The Council has very few skilled staff or resources available to pursue such opportunities and are only able to undertake very basic analyses of these big data. Between them, the press and website teams 'keep an eye' on Twitter and relay information to relevant departments as and when discussions take place that concern them. In keeping with their specific roles, the Press Office monitors social media in pursuit of information relevant to reputation management (what people think about the Council) and the website team looks for issues that will contribute to efficiencies in service delivery. For example, the website team monitors feedback boxes on the website and Twitter conversations on issues such as refuse collection. During a strike by local refuse workers, the Council turned to Twitter and

Facebook as a key source of information about how citizens were being affected and attempted to improve the service by relating citizens' concerns directly to the refuse department. Exploiting the internet in this way is something they would like to become more skilled at in the future. For example, in response to the question, 'What do you do with this sort of information?', we were told:

Not a lot, actually, and I think we could do a lot more with it... We do as much as we can with it, gently with the service areas, but we probably do need to get to the point where we're using it much more efficiently, and that's something that we're basically in the process of setting up. (Communications team, Website)

The Council's enthusiasm for digital media as a form of consumer surveillance has important implications for the way that it conceives citizenship. As several previous studies have shown, governments have tended to conceive the interactive affordances of digital communication in terms of customer relations management (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Lee & Kwak, 2012; Norris & Reddick, 2013; Richter & Cornford, 2008; West, 2004). To say that consumers of local government services who contribute to discussions about the Council in online public forums are unwittingly fulfilling a civic function may be true, at least in terms of a rather parsimonious conception of active citizenship, but we would argue that to blur the distinction between consumption and citizenship is to impoverish the democratic quality of the latter. A key question arising from the predominant Council approach towards interactive relationships with citizens is how the use of such technologies might be expected to rebalance current political roles, that is, to enable citizens to offer more inputs to decisions and opportunities for policy co-production and to help governments do better at listening and learning. Clearly, at the heart of such a reconfigured relationship would be the creation of more fluid and efficient channels of citizen-government dialogue. While more dialogical uses of the internet were mentioned by a few interviewees, they were mainly regarded as unachievable in the near future due to resource constraints. For example:

That [the new website] will result in more people being able to do more for themselves and it will be more interactive for them. It brings together, in one place, a lot of really useful features around 'where I live', that sort of thing, which I think a lot of people will find useful. So I hope that that's a first step. And then I think it's about how innovative we can be, or how good we can be, at copying best practice elsewhere in the world on using it to stimulate even more interest and involvement of people, rather than ... I mean it still has to function as a place that people go to just pay their council tax or get something done, but it could easily be a place where people get encouraged to participate in something, get enthusiastic about something, and get engaged! (Communications team, Senior)

Ideas about live online forums, blogs and crowd sourcing were mainly mentioned in terms of how these technologies could empower citizens to 'do things for themselves'. However, we question whether the motivation for such interaction is to improve democratic accountability or to save money on supporting service provision.

While digital media were regarded as having some advantages for public engagement – mainly in the future tense – several interviewees expressed the view that digital technologies in themselves would be unlikely to motivate citizens to become engaged in local issues or to overcome long-standing barriers to political efficacy. Many interviewees pointed to the need for citizens to have a clear motivation to engage with the Council, whichever medium may be used, and many were sceptical about the capacity of digital media to overcome the efficacy problem – namely, that most people do not believe that what they say or do will have much influence upon government policy or their surrounding social environment (Coleman, Morrison, & Yates, 2011; Sheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Zhou & Pinkleton, 2012). Several interviewees suggested

that dialogical engagement with citizens through digital media does not always result in useful contributions to policy debates – for example:

During one of the Leeds Vision consultations he [a blogger with a site about Leeds United Football Club] just put up a throwaway line like ‘What do you think Leeds city centre needs to make it better?’ Someone said ‘A KFC.’<sup>3</sup> It’s a disgrace we don’t have a KFC.’ (Blogger)

Feelings of efficacy are key to citizens’ evaluations of engagement as successful and to their motivation to engage (Jung, Kim, & de Zuniga, 2011; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Morell, 2005). Digital media were perceived by some as offering hope of more meaningful feedback from the Council, perhaps taking into account the specific experiential testimonies of policy-affected citizens. But some Council actors regarded these enhanced expectations as a serious challenge:

The speed of interaction is both a positive and a disadvantage. In terms of dealing with and getting responses back, brilliant. In terms of dealing with the expectations that speed causes, because our processes are still pretty old-fashioned in parts ... , I think the speed at which issues emerge and snowball and gather ... and catch us out. (Engagement strategist, Senior)

The head of a policy Directorate observed that

There is a practical difficulty, which is that it tends to encourage the idea that there’s an instant response and there’s somebody on the end of the computer who can reply instantly, and the reality is that’s not true, particularly when you get beyond the basics. (Head of Directorate)

Some interviewees gave examples of engaging with the Council through digital media and then either not receiving a response or not being offered feedback on how their contribution had contributed to decision-making. Not having structures in place to utilize the dialogical features of digital media can actually harm the reputation of local government as a democratically accountable institution. For example:

You’ve got a 15-year strategic plan [as a result of the Vision for Leeds online consultation] that doesn’t really say very much and many of us can’t see the relationship between that and what we saw going on in the online forums they [the Council] put up. A lot of us feel things that were being debated on the website didn’t make it into the vision, so why bother? (Blogger)

It can be a one-way street. You can just ... you can email the Council all you want in some departments and you won’t get a single word in return [...] but it seems where it’s a public service that often comes under a lot of flak [such as refuse collection] they’re less willing to engage in dialogue and you just wonder where that data goes. (Citizen journalist A)

Several of our interviewees thought that digital media should be used in addition to other engagement tools rather than as a replacement for face-to-face interaction with citizens.

Technology has a massive part to play, particularly in helping to plan, design, have dialogue in advance of face-to-face meetings and also following them up. I still think fundamentally that if we’re trying to have real dialogue and explore each other’s positions and really understand each other, particularly if we have a local neighbourhood-based council, then it is about getting people into the same physical space. We have to look at the whites of their eyes, talk and check they’ve got a pulse as it’s a very human interaction. (Blogger)

Face-to-face interaction is perceived as particularly important for some disadvantaged or vulnerable sections of society who are unlikely to have the skills or confidence to engage digitally: ‘This is where websites and access break down for me; you always have to have human contact,

because most people who are in need have real baggage of social problems and mental problems, I have to say (Councillor, Labour). The Council recognizes this and, even in the future, plans to use technology to enhance current offline practices rather than replace them entirely:

Well, I think technology is going to play a part. I think we haven't yet really got into how social media, etc., might be exploited to help us do this. I don't think we'll ever get to a position where you lose the importance of physical interaction in that meeting and getting to know communities and organisations is lost, but I do think that we're going to have to think about how we use technology perhaps to reach groups that we haven't reached very effectively in the past. (Communications team, Senior)

Several characteristics of digital media, such as allowing too much attention to be given to those who have the skills to 'shout loudest' online, as well as inequalities in access to the digital media, were perceived to pose a significant challenge to democratic public engagement. Interviewees suggested that existing inequalities in the voice of citizens do not miraculously disappear online: 'There's a few well known bloggers and tweeters who I think personally have a disproportionate amount of attention. I think it's because we haven't quite grasped how to deal with them' (Engagement strategist, Senior). The Council communications team has come to regard certain key online mediators as political actors who cannot be ignored:

So if we look at people, if someone's Tweeting us about a certain problem or question, then we look at that person's account and we sort of see how influential they are, we can do that using Clout or whatever, and see how many followers they've got, see how much reach they've got, and then we kind of make a call then as to how to respond, or not to respond, or just watch, just watch it unfold. (Communications team, Website)

Although interviewees mentioned the digital divide and inequalities of access, many also pointed out that even with access to digital media, certain sections of the population do not have the necessary communicative skills to contribute to this form of governance. Digital technology is therefore seen as a way of improving engagement with those citizens who are already more likely to engage with the Council:

I think they're probably engaging with the same people or the same group of people, but doing it better. I know I could have gone and found Council papers to find out what was happening at a meeting but would never have bothered to ring up and ask something to be sent to me or anything, but I can go and look online and find it. So the people who are already engaged would engage. And it's probably expanded that group a bit, but it's broadly the same people. (Citizen Journalist A)

The blogger observed:

It's not just that they don't have access to the internet, it's a whole range of cultural factors that mean people like us don't talk with people like the Council because our opinions won't be listened to and the things we're interested in don't fit with the right agendas. (Blogger)

That the interactive features of digital media might enable predominantly middle-class citizens who are already engaged – 'the usual suspects' – to be further empowered at the expense of those citizens who are already difficult to reach such as the old, the young, and the vulnerable was of much concern to actors outside the Council. The following quote sums up these perceptions:

... as I keep saying, it's very easy to include the usual suspects: those that are motivated, those that have got the skills, the education. In our experience, you may have seen some clients that are

sometimes the most vulnerable with no engagement whatsoever in the local authority services and usually have things done to them rather than done with them. So I think it's a massive challenge to be inclusive across the board. (Local youth NGO)

## Conclusion

LCC, like most local authorities in the UK, is treading warily into the digital age. Those trying to enhance the quality of the Council's relationship with citizens accept that digital technology 'makes communication easier', but go on to acknowledge that 'communication doesn't necessarily result in engagement'. This is an important distinction. Traditional approaches to civic communication have tended to focus upon a one-way message flow which we have called informational engagement. There is a sense within the Council that a more interactive and dialogical relationship with the public 'could be powerful, [but] we've yet to understand and develop how we can make it powerful and ensure it doesn't become something that actually isolates loads of people because they're not using it and that sort of thing' (Communications team, Senior).

Our interviews with a range of Council and non-Council actors revealed a willingness and desire to nurture such interactive relationships, but a lack of expertise and an absence of cohesive strategy. The development of such a strategy entails a focus upon more than technological potential. While much of the discourse around digital communication is highly techno-centric (and this was largely true of our interviewees), the most challenging questions to address relate to the role of citizens within contemporary local democracy; the distinctions between modes of agency associated with market consumption and civic equality; and the political adjustments involved in thinking of democracy as an ongoing dialogical relationship rather than a periodic disruption to routine rule. Even when these questions have been addressed at the political level, skills are developed at the technical level, and coordination is improved at the administrative level, there are no grounds for expecting digital media to displace existing channels of public engagement. Digital media are most likely to be used as additional tools of engagement, at least at the informational level. The mainstream media, particularly the local press, will remain a crucial technology for the dissemination of vital civic information. The dialogical potential of digital technologies would seem to possess greatest potential in opening up spaces for citizens to respond to, reflect upon, challenge, and act upon such information.

Perhaps the most significant implications of digital media will be in helping to define and reconfigure the role of citizens within local governance. There is evidence that this is beginning to happen in three ways. First, digital media enhance opportunities for governing institutions to tap into existing social networks as a source of public opinion, and in some cases, as a means of consulting the experience and expertise of local citizens and communities. Second, digital media have the potential to give some citizens, or groups of citizens organized collectively online, a 'voice' in the communications ecology, thereby placing some citizens in the position of influencers and leaders of public opinion. A less positive implication is that this could exacerbate existing sociopolitical inequalities by giving a disproportionate voice to the more confident, articulate, well resourced, and digitally skilful. At the same time, certain groups – youth, the housebound, the over-employed – might find digital engagement a more efficient and meaningful way of making themselves noticed. Third, although we have not had an opportunity to reflect on this here, it may be that digital engagement permits a greater plurality of styles and genres of political communication, allowing the terms of discourse between government and governed to be re-articulated. As Blumler and Coleman have pointed out, 'the mid-twentieth-century media's appeal to an imagined homogenous citizenry, largely reflecting or aspiring towards its own elite values, has increasingly been perceived as constraining and condescending' (2013, p. 178).

Unless local governments come to understand not only the technology, but the culture of digital interactivity, they could risk making the same mistake and becoming further distrusted. Conversely, if they are able to devise strategies that can enable them to *engage with* citizens, as opposed to *engaging* them as a consuming audience, the opportunities for local democracy could be significant. Future research could help in this regard by exploring citizens' use of digital media to engage with local issues and considering the communication logic that such use requires councils appeal to. Finally, the insights presented in this article would be complemented by an investigation into citizens' perceptions of the role of digital media in facilitating enriched democratic engagement.

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2. See the appendix for details of interviewees.
3. Kentucky Fried Chicken fast-food restaurant.

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**Appendix. Table of interviewees: conducted July–September 2012**

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3 × Elected Representatives (Councillors: Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat)
2 × Council Executives (Engagement strategy)
2 × Directorates (Youth/Leisure)
2 × Frontline Council workers (Youth/Leisure)
3 × Communications Team (Head of Communications, Head of Press office, Head of Website)
2 × Parish Councils (one with an online presence, one without)
2 × Youth NGOs/Interest groups (one local, one with a nationwide remit)
4 × Mainstream local mass media (TV – BBC, Online – BBC, Press – YEP ×2)
3 × Citizen Journalists (Non-mainstream media: 2 × Hyperlocal sites, 1 × blogger)

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Note: All interviewees were given anonymity.