



Organising Online

What do digital social networking tools mean for engagement and cohesion in our societies?

11 June 2010

Organising Online

What do digital social networking tools mean for engagement and cohesion in our societies?

Victoria Collis and Matt Kent

Notes

Government Office for the South East

GOSE and the SE Community Cohesion Network recognise that there is increasing reliance on social networking and cyber communications to spread both positive and negative messages that may have a relevance to the Community Cohesion agenda. While much of this activity is centred on national security and cyber crime, we would like to explore the potential benefits and challenges to virtual networks in promoting cohesion.

To this end, GOSE engaged River Path Associates to undertake an initial scoping exercise to explore the use of electronic networking in order to foster positive intercultural links, identify potential community tensions or hate crime, and encourage increased meaningful interaction.

The outcome of this scoping work would be to propose the best ways that this area of work might be developed further to identify more about the impact virtual networking can have on community cohesion, and to enable us to determine if we need to explore this communication tool further as a source of intelligence.

River Path Associates

Founded in 1997, River Path is a knowledge consultancy based in Dorset. It works with large organisations in the public, private and not for profit sectors, in the UK and internationally.

For over a decade River Path has been pioneering projects that use new social networking technology. In the early 2000s it created and funded *Sluggie O'Toole* (www.sluggertoole.com), the well-known blog on Northern Irish politics and community, as it helped shaped the way in which citizen media has developed. More recently, the team has run a series of *Web 2.0 Bootcamps* for young professionals in Pakistan and other developing countries, with the aim of liberalising media and public engagement.

Victoria Collis is managing director of River Path and previously worked in the public relations industry, where she specialised in consumer-facing IT projects. At River Path she focuses on cultural relations and public diplomacy, intercultural dialogue and active citizenship. In 2008, she devised a successful social network-based approach to convening and developing a group of young activists from 18 countries across the Balkans and CIS. Aimed at encouraging discussion and campaigning on issues of cultural identity and commonalities, this project formed part of a wider British Council initiative, supported by the Council of Europe in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

Matt Kent has been a Research Analyst at River Path since 2009. His recent projects have ranged from research on *Time to Stop Betting the House*, a paper on resilience and the UK mortgage market published by Long Finance, to a forthcoming publication on Nigeria's baby boom generation, and its potential social and economic impacts on the country and West Africa as a whole.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Social capital, engagement and cohesion.....	5
Social networking and accessibility	10
Working through digital social networking	15
Conclusions and recommendations	24

Introduction

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead, cultural anthropologist (1901-1978)



Figure 1: Facebook Campaigns

In 2007, several hundred students from across the UK organised to protest against HSBC’s decision to abolish interest-free overdrafts for new graduates. The weight of the protest, and the widespread publicity it attracted, eventually forced the bank to reverse its decision.

In 2008, 2,000 people gathered in Trafalgar Square to march in protest against what they believed to be an unacceptable rise in knife crime among young people in London. The government and Metropolitan Police reacted with fresh advertising campaigns and knife amnesties.

In 2009, 700,000 people got together to ensure that, for the first time in four years, the UK Christmas number one would not be determined by talent show The X-Factor. Their chosen rival track, by Rage Against the Machine, outsold its rival by 10% to take the top spot.

On the surface, these events may be unrelated, but they have several important points in common. All three are examples of how people who might otherwise never have met can use a shared goal to form a coherent group, and

Introduction

work productively together to realise it. Moreover, each one of these campaigns was organised by people who recognised and harnessed the potential of Facebook, one of the best known emerging digital social networking applications.

At the same time, the exponential growth in the numbers of people involved in each campaign, from hundreds, to thousands, to hundreds of thousands between 2007 and 2009, goes some way to illustrating the speed and ingenuity with which people are adopting new ways of communicating with one another – and by doing so are transforming both their ability to organise, and the tools themselves.

Digital media is changing the way we experience many everyday things quite profoundly. Consumption of news and opinion, for example, has been transformed not only by online versions of newspapers, but also through the development of ‘citizen media’, through blogging and, increasingly, micro-blogging. And likeminded people, with interests ranging from computer gaming to roses, have never found it easier to connect with others like them from across the world.

What is currently less certain is what this change will mean for individuals and the communities in which they live and work, in the medium and long term. There is a strong policy focus across the UK on safeguarding and renewing a sense of cohesion and identity in its communities. This means not only finding ways to tackle issues like racism and hate crime, but also encouraging people everywhere to develop their sense of place – and renew the importance of their neighbourhood as part of their identity.

If individuals who have never met can work together online, united by a common cause, ranging from tackling knife crime to securing a Christmas Number One, there is certainly scope to work with digital social networking tools to enable greater community engagement and cohesion. However, settling for simply transferring current activities like community newsletters or public consultations, to a digital format, would be to underestimate grossly the potential of many of the new tools for social engagement.

Scope of paper

It is for these reasons that the Government Office for the South East has commissioned this scoping paper on the relationship – current and potential –

Introduction

between community cohesion and engagement and digital social networking applications. GOSE recognises that these tools have the potential to transform the work, not only of specialists working in this field across South East England, but also of the ability of the communities they serve to take direct action – positive or negative – in response to events, also both positive and negative, in the places where they live and work.

This paper does not set out to provide a blueprint for action. Rather, it aims to raise and explore the main issues that professionals working in the community cohesion and engagement space need to be aware of when considering how to work with digital social networking tools. Its purpose is to spark debate and encourage members of the community cohesion network for South East England – and elsewhere – to explore possibilities, share experiences, and above all, to experiment with the possibilities and limitations of these new ways of communicating and organising.

With this in mind, we have organised the paper into four main parts:

First, we consider the nature of community, and the specific difficulties faced by 21st century society in adapting to increased demographic complexity and mobility. This part of the paper draws on social capital theory, as well as policymaking on the decentralisation of power and community development. The principal aim of this section is to map the context within which professionals and members of communities alike are seeking to use digital social networking tools to aid cohesion and group action.

Second, we seek to make the central point that digital social networking tools should be considered as the latest step in a series of disruptive technologies, developed over many centuries, that have had significant impact on people's ability to communicate, organise and take action in groups. The first aim of this section is to consider digital tools in their historical context, as something that means people will do things differently in the future – but that this is something that should be seen as part of an evolution in the way humans communicate with one another, rather than a revolution that is dangerously hard to control. Its second purpose is to focus on the potential of disruptive technologies to transform the way that people are able to organise, again, with a focus on a historical perspective.

Third, we discuss a range of potential opportunities and threats raised by digital social networking tools for those working in community cohesion. Here the paper focuses on the potential they offer individuals and groups for

Introduction

organising, and discusses ways in which this could be used for negative purposes, including terrorism and hate crime, as well as the potential for applying new ways of working to developing community cohesion in South East England and elsewhere.

The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for action for GOSE and its partners in supporting and helping to deliver active, united communities across the region. The main aim of this short concluding section is to stimulate debate and experimentation with new ways of working across South East England's Community Cohesion Network.

Part One

Social capital, engagement and cohesion

21st century communities in context

“The core idea...is that social networks have value. Social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.”

Robert Putnam, Bowling Alone (1996)

Social capital in today's communities

In his seminal book, *Bowling Alone*, Professor Robert Putnam, an economist at Harvard University, identified a wide range of indicators for social capital for communities across the USA, from the incidence of local bowling leagues and other clubs, to participation in the democratic process at all levels.

He demonstrated that in almost all cases, there was a steady decline in levels of participation throughout the 20th century, leading him to draw a direct correlation between people sharing experiences and activities with their neighbours, and communities that are characterised by strong levels of social capital and cohesiveness. Increased mobility of people, characterised by both immigration and the incidence of families dispersing geographically, as well as the spread of urban centres to create suburbs, are among the factors that Putnam identified as having had a negative net impact on levels of social capital in the USA.

Both increased mobility and the spread of urban centres are recognised as important in current debates on engagement and its implications for community cohesion in the UK. The 2008 DCLG white paper, *Communities*

Social capital, engagement and cohesion

in Control discusses, among other issues, the fact that people from minority ethnic backgrounds (as well as women and young people) remain chronically under-represented in local council chambers across the UK. While our society has become demographically diverse, democratic representation has not kept pace in this respect, and it is hard to see how many local councils can truly “[shape] and [deliver] services, [speak] up for people, [champion] their areas, and [keep] our democracy alive in every part of the country” at present.

However, it is clearly extremely important to move beyond the idea, expressed by Putnam in his work, that diversity in communities, and the impact of personal mobility on traditional family and other structures makes it harder to achieve cohesive, active communities. Given these factors in 21st century communities in the UK and elsewhere, it is clearly important for policymakers, professionals, and public alike to find new ways of promoting principles of engagement and inclusion.

Building social capital online

We believe that finding new and effective ways of developing ‘bridging’ social capital is an important concept for the community cohesion and engagement debate in the UK, where many neighbourhoods are increasingly ethnically diverse, and where a host of other factors, from the pressures and uncertainties of seasonal economies, to the relationship between young and older populations also have significant impacts.

In *Communities in Control*, the UK government expressed a desire to ‘shift power, influence and responsibility...into the hands of communities and individual citizens...[to enable them to] take difficult decisions and solve complex problems for themselves’. It is evident that if our communities are to be in a position to achieve this, there is an urgent need for the people living and working in them to find effective ways of communicating and collaborating with their neighbours. Not only does this mean that it is important for citizens to understand, respect, and trust one another’s differences and points of view, but also that the idea of commitment to a *place* must become once again as relevant to individuals and groups of people as other reasons for organising and working together to achieve common goals.

Social capital, engagement and cohesion

There are many excellent examples of groups of people using online spaces to organise events and activities specifically designed to bridge the gaps between groups in our communities and stimulate cohesion and engagement. In 2009, for example, over 8,000 Big Lunch events took place across the UK, organised by groups of citizens who wanted to bring together people in their neighbourhood. Organisers made use of resources available online, and many of the events were organised, and publicised, through social networking channels.



Figure 2: Snapshots of Big Lunches held in Abergavenny and South London in 2009

A subsequent evaluation of The Big Lunch found that 84% of people who took part said they felt closer to their neighbours as a result, while 36% said that their party had brought together people from different ethnic backgrounds, and 85% that it had brought together people of different generations.

Campaigning on local issues using social networking sites like Facebook has also become increasingly popular, and can be seen as a fresh opportunity to involve people who do not fit the current profile for high levels

Social capital, engagement and cohesion

of engagement. However, it is important to understand, and accept, that such discussions are likely to include a broad spectrum of opinion, and may, in some cases, lead to difficult decisions for those working to develop cohesion in our communities.

For example, on 10th March 2010, councillors in Camberley rejected a planning application to build a mosque on the site of a listed Victorian school building that has been used as an Islamic Centre since 1996. This application was the subject of considerable local opposition, which included the creation of several pressure groups on Facebook. The largest of these attracted 7,600 members, which would equate to about 25% of the town's total population, had all members been local to the area.

Much of the opposition made to the application was on the grounds of the existing building's listed status, and its place within the historical and social fabric of Camberley. However, it is clear from the front page of *Say NO to mosque in Camberley!!!* that this group attracted a large number of members whose primary motivation was not the local issue, but a wider agenda. While the summary information for the group states that its aim is to provide constructive criticism of the application, the reality includes links to articles and discussions asserting that Islam threatens British ways of life, and making a clear connection between this issue and the wider debate on inward migration to the UK.

There are two main points to be drawn from the example of this planning application and the way the debate has developed online. The first focuses on the nature of online organising, and how it differs profoundly from non-virtual approaches. The second focuses on the potential of new online social networking applications to transform the ability of ordinary citizens to engage and influence what happens in their local area.

The way in which *Say NO to mosque in Camberley!!!* developed, and in particular the adoption of this cause by individuals and possibly organised groups of anti-Islam campaigners, demonstrates the ease with which online campaigns can be infiltrated and developed in directions different from the one their organisers intended. In a situation where members of a group do not meet face-to-face, and anyone is free to join, the risk of this happening is considerably increased. So if online groups are unable to express clearly the norms by which they wish to operate, or to take action to embed the culture and values they wish to work by, the risk becomes even higher.

Social capital, engagement and cohesion

The Camberley example, like many others, is a demonstration of the potential for direct engagement in local issues and decisions that online spaces can offer ordinary citizens. Increasingly, debates are not organised or orchestrated by policymakers or elected officials, but instead by individuals and groups, motivated by a specific issue or concern. This presents both enormous opportunities for, and challenges to, the way in which our democracy works. And for policymakers and other professionals in the community cohesion and engagement space, many of the opportunities are to be found in observation and working with existing groups, as we shall discuss in Section Three of this paper.

On the one hand, online social networking applications have already massively increased the potential for people outside the formal fabric of government to make their point and mobilise others to action, which presents a major opportunity to realise DCLG's vision of community focused decision making.

On the other, the freedom of expression that online spaces offer is set to make the aim of developing more cohesive and engaged communities across the UK more complex to achieve, as differing, and sometimes directly opposing, views from across the spectrum of opinion become more visible. In the next section we therefore examine these possibilities and dangers in more detail, and also aim to provide the historical context against which we should judge current levels of excitement and concern about online social networking.

Part Two

Social networking and accessibility

The role of disruptive technologies

“If God spares my life, I will cause the boy that drives the plough to know more of the scriptures than the Pope himself.”

William Tyndale, pioneering translator of the Bible, 1494-1536

The evolution of social networking

Current levels of interest and fear about the long-term social implications of the internet and digital social networking tools are running high. Commentary in the print and broadcast media frequently refers to ‘the digital revolution’; features stories about children obsessed with computers, or adults who leave their families after rediscovering a childhood sweetheart online; and even warns that the fundamentals of our way of life are under threat.

For every commentator who evangelises that online ways of communicating will transform us all, there is another who believes the licence and anonymity of the internet is highly dangerous.

It is, we believe, important to recognise that this situation is not a new one. In 1450, the invention of the printing press profoundly transformed people’s ability to communicate with one another. For the first time, it was possible to mass produce written material, enabling people to share their thoughts and concerns, and to mobilise others to action. With hindsight, the tendency is to see this technological transformation as an unqualified good. But at the time, there were far ranging consequences for society, many of

Social networking and accessibility

which ran counter to the interests of presiding elites, and particularly the Catholic Church in Germany, England and elsewhere in Europe. Yet, it is worth noting that literacy largely remained the preserve of the rich for some centuries after the production of the first printed books.

There have been other highly important staging posts in the development and democratisation of social networking tools. In 1700, the first daily newspaper was published in England, a development widely linked with the Enlightenment and subsequent Industrial Revolution that transformed the UK's economy and paved the way for social reform, from free education to significant public health improvements. Newspapers meant more frequent commentary on important issues, and the ability to put increasing pressure on politicians and rulers.

Similarly, the introduction of radio, and then TV, in the early decades of the 20th century led to fresh possibilities, including a closer connection between viewers/listeners, and far flung events, ranging from royal weddings to wars. Again, for many people these new technologies were too expensive and complicated to be readily accessible for at least a generation. One contributor to a BBC web page on the coronation of Elizabeth II describes an experience of TV shared by many people across the country: "*I was taken to grandma's house... actually I was more interested in the TV she had bought especially for the occasion... neighbours were invited, a lot wore their Sunday best...*" Yet by 1952, the BBC had already been broadcasting regularly for 20 years.

This last point mirrors the views of Clay Shirky, a leading commentator on the digital 'revolution', on the process of embedding and realising the full opportunity of new technologies. In his 2008 book *Here Comes Everybody*, he argues that 'communication tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring'. In the same way that most people don't think about how their television works, but focus on what it can deliver to them, he believes that the internet is in a process of transition between being about how technology works, to becoming a regular tool in the armoury that human beings have to express themselves and make things happen.

Tools like Facebook, YouTube, Posterous and Twitter sit on the cusp of that transition. Designed initially as a way for college friends to stay in touch with one another, Facebook now has a 'population' that would put it in the top five most populous nations in the world if it were a country. Figures

Social networking and accessibility

released a year ago claimed that it was growing by 700,000 users every day, 70% of which were located outside the USA. Meanwhile, the summary of growth from December 2008 to December 2009, set out at Figure 3 below, shows increases in the frequency of visits, and of the ground covered by users within Facebook. These granular data suggest an increase in people using the tool in innovative ways, including the current trend for campaigning and organising.

Facebook.com	Dec-08	Dec-09	% Change
Total Unique Visitors (000)	54,552	111,888	105%
Average Daily Visitors (000)	13,396	37,679	181%
Total Minutes (MM)	9,265	27,624	198%
Average Minutes per Usage Day	22.3	23.7	6%
Total Pages Viewed (MM)	17,868	44,891	151%
Average Usage Days per Visitor	7.6	10.4	37%
Average Minutes per Visitor	169.8	246.9	45%
Total Visits (000)	913,814	3,071,137	236%
Average Minutes per Visit	10.1	9	-11%
Average Visits per Visitor	16.8	27.4	64%

Figure 3: Facebook, December 2008/2009, Source: ComSCORE, January 2010

Digital inclusion

Concern among policymakers about groups of people at risk from exclusion from new ways of communicating access the online world are justified, but should be seen in the historical context we have set out earlier in this section. In its 2008 report, *Digital Exclusion*, DCLG points out the huge potential benefits of the internet for socially vulnerable groups, ranging from enhanced self-sufficiency and community cohesion, to indirect benefits through greater efficiency and efficacy in the delivery of public services.

At the same time, it demonstrates a strong correlation between social and digital exclusion. According to an ICM poll quoted in the report, 50.4% of those with no access to the internet are aged 65+, 49.2% are classified in the DE socioeconomic group, and 65.8% have no educational qualifications beyond secondary school (see Figure 4). In summary, the

Social networking and accessibility

digitally excluded in the UK tend to be elderly, and, relatively speaking, poor and lacking in education.

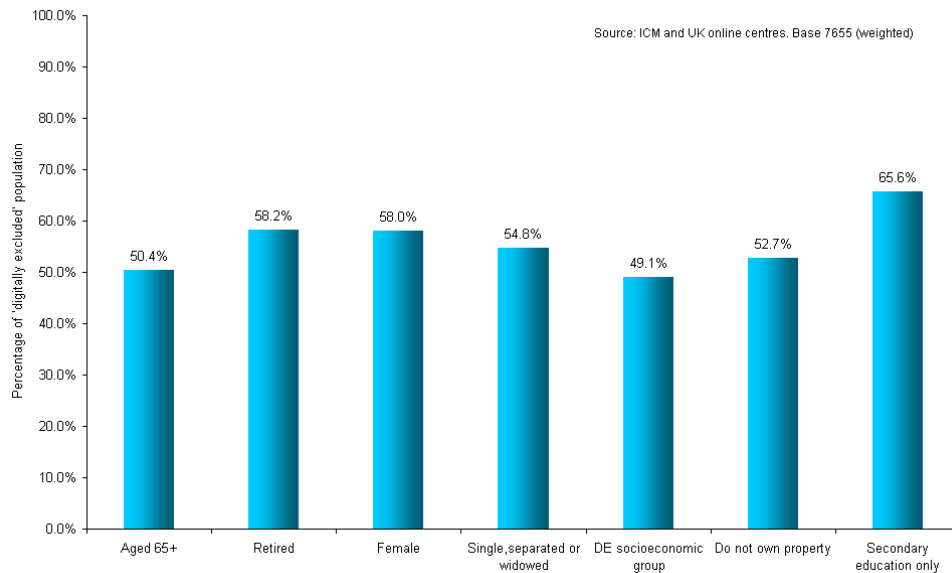


Figure 4: Profile of digitally excluded population in the UK

There are two key points to be made about the profile of the population most at risk of digital exclusion. First, older people are more likely than others to be in this category, a finding that is in line with the adoption of most new technologies. The reason this finding is noteworthy lies in the fact that older people tend to be much more likely to be actively engaged in their local community (particularly in the case of serving councillors), than younger people.

This presents both a problem and an opportunity for those working in the community cohesion and engagement agenda. If older people, who tend to have stronger sense of place and to become actively involved in their communities, find it difficult to access online resources, and social networking technologies, there is a danger that they will become increasingly excluded from organising and campaigning, and even information sharing, as it moves online.

Social networking and accessibility

This means it is important to support older people towards inclusion online, given their current propensity to engage actively at a community level. At the same time, digital social networking applications offer a fresh opportunity to engage with other groups in society on the development and cohesion of the places in which they live and work.

Second, the data from the ICM poll suggests a strong correlation between other indicators of social exclusion (such as economic and educational disadvantage), and digital exclusion. This is also an issue of serious concern, likely to be linked not only to people's fear that they won't be able to use digital technologies effectively, but also to the question of being able to afford them.

This asymmetry in accessibility has clear implications for the community cohesion and engagement agenda, and for the danger that social networking tools become agents of bonding relatively well-off, and well-educated groups in society together, without enabling them to communicate effectively with others and developing the bridging social capital, and the sense of place, required to promote engagement, and cohesion, across the board.

The inferences of recent work commissioned by DCLG and others is that the gap in access to new technologies is narrowing in the UK, and that over the medium term, digital social networking tools and other online applications will come to inhabit a space in people's lives as 'normal' as television, the telephone or even printed books. However, it is equally clear that these new ways of self-expression, communication and organising are changing the rules of engagement profoundly, and have the potential to support a more direct model of democracy at a local level.

In the next section of this paper, we therefore explore some of the main opportunities and challenges posed by recent developments in the evolution of social networking.

Part Three

Working through digital social networking

Opportunities and challenges

“The revolution in digital technology means that people are engaging with services at their own convenience and in the manner, medium, and at a time which suits them.”

Nick Keane, Local Policing & Confidence Unit, in Engage: Digital and Social Media Engagement for the Police Service

Democratising communication

While it is important to place digital social networking in the context of other historical developments in mass communication, it is also clear that the new tools offer ordinary people opportunities to express themselves, organise and work in groups on a brand new scale.

Facebook and Twitter, for example, both have extremely low barriers to entry, in the sense that it's not necessary to have any technical skills to operate them, nor is any special equipment beyond an internet connection and a device to link to it required. And, crucially, these applications and many others like them, are free to use. At the same time, while it is the case that some parts of the population run the risk of digital exclusion, DCLG's own research suggests this is a comparatively small group that is shrinking rapidly (particularly when compared historically with the spread of literacy, or of access to broadcast media).

At the same time, digital social networking tools represent a giant leap forward in the democratisation of mass communications. While books,

Working through digital social networking

newspapers, radio and television were all important developments; they worked on the basis of few to many communication, the principle of broadcasting the views of some individuals and organisations to many others.

The key difference in the case of digital tools is that they are frequently, and increasingly, based on many to many communications models, or at least the principle that anyone, if they wished to, could use them easily and without requiring significant resources. In the past five years alone, it has become clear, for example, that for many individuals and organisations it is often more effective to use a platform like Facebook to get a message across, or to mobilise others, than it is to go to the trouble and expense of designing a website or creating a blog from scratch, only to be faced with the problem of how to publicise it and attract a following.

The new activism

Clay Shirky neatly summarises the situation we find ourselves in when he writes that ‘now the highly motivated people can create a context more easily in which the barely motivated people can be effective without having to become activists themselves.’

This is an important point to make. In the case of all three campaigns we referred to at the beginning of this paper, all that was required of most participants was to join a group on Facebook. 700,000 people joined the campaign about the Christmas Number One, but there were only 500,000 sales of the alternative single. Several thousand people joined the knife crime campaign, but only 2,000 needed to turn out to demonstrate. So, to add to the advantage of low barriers to entry, and the many to many communications focus, is the vital point that new digital networking tools allow people to get involved at different levels of commitment, from ‘signing up’ to an idea, to taking part in a real life activity, to organising a whole campaign themselves.

The ease of organising has many positive implications for community engagement and cohesion, and for those who work to promote this agenda. Many of these mirror policy thinking about wider digital inclusion and the drive to enable and empower local communities, including: ‘enhanced self

Working through digital social networking

sufficiency and greater community cohesion', as well as indirect benefits like increased value for money in publicly funded programmes.

There is great potential for local groups of individuals to make extensive use of tools like Facebook to organise, and to bridge the kinds of gaps identified by Robert Putnam in his analysis of social capital in 21st century communities. At the same time, as we discussed in the opening section of this paper, it is important to recognise that the fundamentally democratic nature of online spaces means accepting that freedom of speech applies right across the spectrum of opinion.

There is clearly scope for local government structures, including councils and development agencies, to work with groups to seed new ways of organising and campaigning, and to involve ordinary citizens more actively in the community cohesion agenda. However, it is extremely important to note that such attempts must be made with subtlety, thought and planning.

Online communities tend to be deeply sensitive to obviously implanted ideas and groups, with the result that these can often be ostracised, or ridiculed in the atmosphere of easy and plain speaking that characterises the online space. As Robert Putnam observed in his book *Making Democracy Work*: 'the most successful local organisations represent indigenous, participatory initiatives in relatively cohesive local communities'. Nowhere is this more true than online.

One example of good practice is the work the National Police Improvement Agency has been doing to support forces and individual officers as they seek to make the most of what online social networking tools have to offer. The NPIA has held two conferences on social networking so far, and has also created and published *Engage: Digital and Social Media Engagement for the Police Service*. This short guide contains hints and tips, as well as case studies from forces across the country, that are already engaging with the public online. Perhaps most inspiring of all, *Engage* was developed by a team of contributors over a two week period, using a Wiki to draft, comment, and improve collaboratively on content and text.

In its 2007 paper on the PREVENT strategy, *Preventing Violent Extremism*, DCLG set out the shared values that people in the UK should defend and promote, 'respect for the rule of law, freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, respect for others, and responsibility towards

Working through digital social networking

others'. It is our view that digital social networking technologies present a uniquely powerful way for communities to achieve this over the long term. However, it is important to recognise that this will not be without issues and challenges.

As demonstrated by the case of the mosque planning application in Camberley discussed elsewhere in this paper, it is important to accept that sometimes groups may be infiltrated by extremists, turned from their original purpose, or simply established to make points that many would consider divisive and offensive. While the fundamental democratic right of freedom of speech makes it difficult to prevent this possibility, following the development of online pressure groups, and any changes in their prevailing atmosphere, should be at the centre of strategies on local tension monitoring, as well as being used to spot opportunities for engagement.

Working with social networking tools

We have tried to establish in this paper the relevance, pervasiveness and game changing nature of online social networking technologies for the community cohesion and engagement agenda. It will therefore be increasingly important for local councils and other relevant public sector organisations to develop more open access strategies for sites like Twitter and Facebook for their staff, given their importance as an intelligence gathering and communications tool.

Clearly it is also important to ensure that such access is not misused, but as *Engage* puts it: 'Officers might spend all their time online chatting to their mates... They might, but this is an issue for supervisors and line managers. Most media users understand the difference between the media they use for contacting friends and the media they use for work'. In our view, this is an issue that it is especially important to see in the context of history, and that the problem of misuse will seem less important as users and organisations become more accustomed to the online world.

At the same time, we believe there are three key issues that those seeking to build community engagement and cohesion in the UK must consider when looking at ways to work with digital social networking technologies.

Working through digital social networking

First, it will be important to tackle issues of digital inclusion and communities seriously. It is notable that at present the profile of those who tend not to have access to online media, correlate strongly with those who are currently at the forefront of current communities, either as local councillors, or through involvement in, for example clubs, churches and other places of worship.

The converse is also true, in the sense that those most likely to have access to – and feel comfortable working with – digital media tend to be only loosely connected to their local community. As we have remarked elsewhere, it will be as important to convince these people that *place* is something they need to engage with, just as they engage with people with whom they share common ground in other aspects of their lives.

Second, the low barriers to entry, and democratisation of communication that digital social media represents is available to everyone, whatever their views, or aims, and this will have consequences for communities. A 2008 campaign launched ‘just for fun’ by a student online urged everyone to go out and buy carrots on a particular day. At one point, it looked as if this frivolous idea, which gained a lot of traction, could lead to a significant supply issue, which could have had real implications for the whole supply chain, from growers to consumers.

It is easy to see how an idea like this could be applied by groups of people wishing to foment civil unrest, for example, or to engage in low-grade acts of vandalism or even terrorism. It is difficult to overestimate the potential of any sort of trend developing, particularly among young people, who tend to be early adopters of new tools and to be ready to subvert them, as the use of mobile phones and YouTube demonstrated several years ago at the height of the ‘happy slapping’ craze.

Third, it is vital that organisations wishing to engage with digital social networking tools to promote community engagement and cohesion (as with any other organisational aim in this area) recognise that by doing so they forfeit control over what happens from the outset. As we have noted elsewhere, one of the most striking features of these new ways of communicating is that they are profoundly democratic, in the sense that anyone can say or do anything with very few barriers to access or entry. It is simply not possible for any organisation to control what people say to one another on a many to many communications model.

Working through digital social networking

At the same time, it is extremely easy, and also common, for people online to act anonymously, or under an assumed persona, which often has the effect of freeing them from social norms about interacting with other people. It will not be possible for local councils, or other groups working professionally to build community engagement and cohesion in the UK, or elsewhere, to police, or overturn this inbuilt feature of new social networking applications. Instead, it will be important to work to equip people to manage their interactions with one another effectively, enabling the communities they exist to support and serve to participate and demonstrate that there are 'few problems so knotty that they cannot be tackled and solved by the innate common sense and genius of local people'.

We conclude this section with three case studies drawn from across South East England, each of which seeks to illustrate an important facet of engaging with digital social networking applications.

The first, from Littlehampton, explores the compressed timescales and low barriers to entry of online organising, and the important lesson that not all campaigns will gain critical momentum.

The second, from Gravesham, focuses on the importance of understanding that activism, especially online, is at its most powerful when driven by ordinary citizens, assisted, rather than driven, by policymakers and local government.

And the third, from Southampton, considers the importance making the most of low barriers to entry and resourcing requirements to drive experimentation over a period of time.

In the final section of the paper, we set out three core conclusions and recommendations for further discussion and collaboration between officers and organisations working to promote community cohesion across South East England.

Case Study: Littlehampton

In January 2009 Natasha Finneran-Arm, prompted by the news that a million pounds was to be spent on the 'longest bench in Europe' to spruce up Littlehampton's seafront, set up the **Save Our Town Centre** Facebook group.

Within a few weeks, over **1,000 local people** had joined and were debating a range of issues faced by the town. Features included an ongoing debate about shopping locally, and how to attract a better range of retailers to Littlehampton, and a series of concerns about how funds for regeneration projects, had been spent by Arun District Council.

Council officers noticed the group and invited its founder to attend and speak at a meeting. At the same time, Natasha was invited to put the views of Save Our Town Centre across on local radio, and other initiatives in the area were beginning to cross-publicise their activities on the group page.

However, after a few more posts, activity began to fizzle out. By January 2010, the page was dormant, and an opportunity for a community to act together – and for the Council to work with its constituents had passed.



There are two important lessons to be taken from the experience of Save Our Town Centre:

Seize the moment: News travels fast online. Ideas and campaigns can go viral within a matter of hours. This means campaigners need to be ready with a clear plan of action from the start, and those who want to engage with them also need to be ready to move fast.

Easy come, easy go: Setting up an online campaign is not only quick and simple; it also has the potential to be completely cost free. Lowering barriers to entry means many more campaigns get started – but also that campaigners are more likely to let things die out.

Case Study: Gravesham

Gravesham is one of six neighbouring boroughs in Kent characterised by **growing minority ethnic communities**, and relatively high levels of **social exclusion**.

Council officers have long championed a **demand led approach** to improving community cohesion, starting with the development of a healthy living drop-in centre in 2001, initially supported by the Big Lottery Fund. Today, they believe the fact that Gravesham is home to the Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara, the largest Sikh temple in northern Europe is a marker of the confidence and cohesion of the whole community.

More recently, local, and particularly young local people, have been coming to the council to ask for support for projects that have been made possible by the advent of new social networking and other online tools. One recent project saw local young people making a short film about the 1950s estate they live on, and the older people who have lived there, shaping the social fabric of the community from its inception.

Meanwhile, in 2008, Gravesham organised and hosted its first Gifted Young Gravesham show, an initiative that has subsequently focused on local schools and their students through the Gifted Young Gravesham programme (named by young participants themselves). Auditions take place online via Facebook, while many auditions and clips from the shows are also available at YouTube.



There is one important lesson to be taken from Gravesham's experience:

Bottom up: While Council officers and other professionals can and should get involved in social network based activities, it's important to support groups of people seeking to do things themselves, rather than attempting to design and propagate projects from the top down. While this means relinquishing total control of the situation, the rewards in terms of real progress could be significant.

Case Study: Southampton

At Southampton City Council, there is a small unit of communications specialists who are working to **explore the possibilities** of using the internet, and in particular, social networking technologies, to support the community engagement and cohesion agenda. The team cheerfully admits that it's 'feeling its way', and is grateful to have an enlightened boss who grants them work time access to sites that might otherwise be blocked by the council's firewall.

Over the past year, experiments have included working with both micro-blogging site Twitter, and Facebook, where the team has started to transfer some of its paper communications to the online space. They have also made two short films on volunteering, both of which are available online at YouTube. Future plans include an exploration of mobile platforms, including the possibility of using a location sensitive technology like Bluetooth to alert local people to community events taking place near them.

Officers note it's important to think about issues like **language** – what works in a letter, or a newsletter can seem stilted and overly formal online. They also stress that **not every experiment they undertake will work** – but that the accessibility and flexibility of new online social networking applications mean they can keep working to identify the approaches that get the best results.



There are two important lessons to take from Southampton's experience:

Don't replicate, innovate: Digital social networking tools are not an extension of other communications methods. From language to social norms around publicity and messaging, people play by different rules online. Focus on understanding, and working with them.

If at first you don't succeed: The fast changing, resource light nature of many social networking applications online means you can afford to experiment. So do – and keep trying until you find approaches that really work.

Part Four

Conclusions and recommendations

Topics for discussion and shared exploration

“You want people to feel connected to their communities. Proud of their communities. Then you give people a real say over what happens in their communities. And the power to make a difference.”

Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, 10 June 2010

The main aim of this paper is to stimulate debate among officers and teams who are part of GOSE’s Community Cohesion Network. We have therefore identified three key lenses and sets of stimulus questions that we set out here as starting points for discussion and innovation.

Transforming engagement

Millions of people across South East England, the UK and the world, are already using online social networking applications in ways that would have been unimaginable even five years ago. Tools like Twitter, You Tube, Posterous, Facebook and Flickr allow them to express themselves, share their views, and, increasingly to mobilise others on a whole new scale.

We believe this change represents a huge opportunity to achieve government policy in the area of involving ordinary citizens in debate and

Conclusions and recommendations

decision-making at a local level, and potentially to revive interest in active democratic participation.

Starting points for discussion in this area could include:

- Where are local pockets of digital exclusion located in South East England located, and how might they best be tackled?
- How can we ensure that people who are currently engaged with their local communities remain so as information and organising moves increasingly online?
- What are the opportunities for us to engage with citizens who are not currently typically active in their communities?
- How can we best track and offer support to local groups who organise online?

Understanding communities

Exploring and understanding what a wide cross-section of people think about core issues connected with community cohesion, from migration to employment and local infrastructure, is easier now than it has ever been.

Qualitative information that was once only available by commissioning expensive bespoke research is now free and simple to access online. We believe this is important for those working in the community cohesion and engagement space for two main reasons.

First, it allows officers to find, and potentially to work with, citizens who are already organising themselves around specific local issues. And second, it presents an opportunity to those engaged in activities like tension monitoring to work with a new methodology for tracking and gathering intelligence on potential problems for their communities.

Starting points for discussion in this area could include:

- How can we reconcile the basic issue of accessing online spaces, with concerns about ensuring the most effective use of work time and resources?
- What is the optimum balance to strike between leading, observing and supporting when engaging with online groups?
- What are the opportunities for intelligence gathering – and to what extent is this kind of surveillance morally acceptable?

Conclusions and recommendations

Understanding the territory

Digital social networking tools represent an unprecedented opportunity for ordinary citizens to become more closely involved in the ways in which their communities develop in the future. It is therefore important that those working in community cohesion and associated areas develop a good working understanding of the online space, its potential and its pitfalls.

As we have discussed elsewhere in this paper, we also believe that experimentation is key to maximising the potential of these applications, and that it is important to accept that not all approaches will be successful.

Starting points for discussion in this area could include:

- What are the examples of good practice around us, and what can we learn from them for the future?
- What are the experiments that we and others have tried that have not worked well – and why is that?
- In what ways does the online social networking space demand that we make changes to the way in which we currently communicate?

