

'Civic Conversations' facilitated by social media can help to reshape the relationship between citizens and local government

By Democratic Audit UK

*Amidst heated contemporary policy debates about the shifting roles and responsibilities of local government and citizen-local state relations, it is timely to ask if social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter afford opportunities for new forms of interaction. **Nick Ellison** and **Jo Orchard-Webb** explore the idea of 'civic conversations' as a means of understanding the potential role that social media might play in re-shaping localized political/civic engagement between citizens and local authorities.*



Can social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter enhance citizen engagement, especially at local level? There is now a substantial history of research into the potential of the internet as a means of enhancing citizen-state democratic engagement, but, until recently, enquiry was largely dominated by two strands of investigation. The first was concerned with the role of the Internet as an information-provider – 'e-government', for example, essentially involved platforms that 'pushed' information about (local) services and in so doing contributed to developing conceptions of citizenship as primarily about service consumption. The second focus took the form of a preoccupation with large-scale government e-democracy models such as national and regional scale consultations, e-petitions and online voting, and led to important debates about how these (non-reciprocal) mechanisms could – or should – contribute to democratic decision making.

Clearly the advent of Web 2.0 technologies with their capacities for open source, many-to-many communications offer possibilities of reconfiguring local citizen engagement in ways that create space for more reciprocal forms of political exchange. However, hopes for some sort of *Habermasian* dialogical ideal may be premature because online, social-media-driven engagement can be every bit as complex and exclusionary as more traditional forms of liberal democratic participation. That said, though, it may be that social media can encourage particular types of engagement that, while neither achieving full deliberative potential, nor replacing formal democratic institutions, can go some way towards developing citizen-local state dialogue.

We use the concept of 'civic conversations' as a means of understanding the possible role of social media in the development of local citizen-state relations. Online civic conversations between citizens and local government are characterized by their informal, flexible, open-ended and day-to-day nature. These are dialogues about local civic issues ranging from service quality, through the social justice implications of service cuts, to wider issues of democratic representation and the structure of local governance. The policy, planning and political implications for

this form of engagement lead to currently unanswered (social) policy questions that form the outline of this analytical approach and prompt questions such as:

- When and where (i.e. which social media platforms and in which communities) are civic conversations emerging and why?
- What issues trigger these conversations?
- Who does and does not take part (in terms of both citizens and members of local government), and why?
- What challenges/ barriers do both local government personnel and citizens face in order to engage in this form of conversation?
- What new expectations or demands do these conversations create for local politicians, civil servants and citizens in terms of the practical delivery and future forms of local civic engagement and participation?
- What is the impact for both citizens and local government of (not) engaging in this emerging democratic space?
- How does this form of engagement complement, supplement, hybridize or displace traditional routes to participation such as town hall meetings?
- Finally, and importantly, what do these answers mean for the equality of engagement in local politics?

There is a clear need for empirical data around contemporary examples of local government use of social media to engage citizens in order to better understand the critical space between the optimism of some libertarian commentators and the cautionary tales of the post-political counter-argument. In terms of our own research, it became evident through a series of initial scoping meetings with local authority (LA) and third sector partners that there is an appetite for gaining a fuller understanding of the engagement potential of local authority social media use and the relations and cultural norms such usage disturbs or develops within local politics. Our partners have indicated that they are using social media to engage citizens in a number of forms (predominantly via Twitter and Facebook), but are aware that they are not as yet fulfilling the transformative potential of this medium of engagement because they remain stuck in 'broadcast' mode.

Part of the reason for this apparent lack of progress, according to our partners, relates to fears within local government about who 'manages' social media communications, who controls the 'message' and the potential difficulties created when councillors or council officers make inappropriate comments in online public forums acts as a barrier to a more progressive, conversational approach to social media use. Despite these problems, however, our partners have observed that practical emergency communications via social media between the LA and citizens (for example during localised floods and snow blocked roads) can act as catalysts for further engagement at a more political and strategic level.

Going further, some councils are now using social media to open up the political process itself, with one authority introducing web-streaming of LA formal meetings and a Twitter wall at the meeting to extend the dialogue via questions from Twitter users. Again, another LA recently introduced live uncensored Facebook 'Question and Answer' sessions with local Councillors, which generated considerable interest from local citizens. What is not clear, as yet, is which citizens are using these conversational forms and why. Further critical attention is needed to explore how social media might be eroding or embedding pre-existing barriers to engagement – and our scoping partners are keen to gain insights into this core question.

In terms of extending social media use in local authorities beyond the communications team itself, partners noted that as a younger, more 'social media-savvy' generation of councillors and officers emerges, fears about the potential damage to the council's reputation from loose or inappropriate comments are beginning to diminish. Indeed our partners confirmed that they expect social media to play an increasing role in local politics, as a 'digital by default' generation shapes new forms of local government-citizen dialogue. This shift is by no means a painless or even process, of course, with partners referring to examples of politico-cultural clashes among different interests. For instance, the increased transparency, pace, and accessibility of social media conversations can result in older council members resisting proposals that have developed as a result of them. Rather differently, councils/councillors are having to learn how to deal with the aggressive personal attacks on Twitter or

Facebook that can follow social media-driven forms of engagement.

Our scoping exercise further highlighted that both LA and third sector are finding that normal partnership models of engagement based around traditional forms of democratic participation are becoming increasingly moribund, as citizen-volunteers demand more fixed time-frame/fixed-topic consultations rather than the slow-moving deliberations associated with lengthy consultation periods or citizen surveys. Third sector partners also expressed concerns about the time premium for 'active citizens' and the dangers of consultation fatigue that traditional models of consultation can pose. In this respect partners were hopeful that civic conversation-led public engagement could have the potential to ease this problem by substituting a more informal tone, temporal and place-based flexibility, cost-savings, ease of access to information and rapid response potential.

There is much to play for in the world of local citizen engagement. Hyper-connectivity is a key factor that can be expected to shape citizen identity and practices in the UK over the next decade – and in our view citizenship – certainly in the local context – is already moving beyond its erstwhile association with voting and the traditional institutions of liberal democracy. Civic conversations have significant potential in this shifting universe although whether they actually constitute a feasible engagement strategy for local authorities needs careful consideration.

Attention must be paid to the risks associated with civic conversations, not least the well-known exclusionary tendencies associated with social media, as well as the potential they may hold for enhanced citizen participation. This line of enquiry introduces broader questions about the potential for a new local politics aligned to a restructured citizen-local government relationship facilitated in part by openly engaging with citizens in a reconstituted – and 'conversational' – local public sphere.

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