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## **Social media and local government in England: who is doing what?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents research on the use of social media by English local authorities. It presents quantitative data on the extent to which unitary authorities in England use social networking services such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to communicate with interested parties. A more qualitative analysis is carried out on a sample of the bodies in terms of the types of information they are pushing out through these services. The research presented in this paper shows a considerable range in the usage of social media by these bodies and raises interesting questions about why this might be the case. The paper provides some tentative answers to these questions and offers practical advice to local authorities wanting to better understand this area and how it might help them in their relations with the communities they serve.

Keywords: social media, local government, egovernment, web 2.0

## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 English Local Government**

The structure of local government in England is relatively complex with several tiers of bodies each with varying levels of authority. It is worth noting that the system in England differs to that found in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. At the highest level in England there are 9 regional bodies which vary in authority from the London Assembly that has elected members and a Mayor to less powerful bodies that do not elect members and are more concerned with regional development issues. Below these 9 regional authorities are the county and then district level bodies which comprise 369 councils varying in size from the 6 large metropolitan counties down to far smaller district councils. This paper focuses on the 55 unitary authorities that cut across county and district level bodies and range in size from 39,000 constituents to over 500,000, representing over 12 million citizens in total. Most of these 55 bodies were established from the 1990s onwards and have responsibilities ranging from education and housing to transport, waste collection, leisure, recreation and libraries. Significantly, they also have revenue collection powers via the system of council tax. These wide-ranging responsibilities and fiscal duties give unitary authorities a high public profile, particularly in the current climate of budget cuts from central government. Many of the austerity measures being implemented by the current British coalition government will be most visible at the local level as libraries and leisure facilities are cut back and, in some instances, closed. Elected leaders of the unitary authorities and other local bodies will be under increasing pressure to explain to their constituents why the cuts are being made and what measures are being adopted to minimise their impact on front-line services. It is within this context of budgetary pressures and the increasing expectation by citizens of more transparent public bodies that the research described in this paper has been undertaken. Social media offers organisations of all types cost effective channels to communicate with individuals in a more interactive way than has been possible with more traditional media.

### **1.2 The State of Social Media**

The term social media refers to a range of web-based services which emerged out of the second wave of internet innovation, often referred to as Web 2.0. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010):

“Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” (page 61)

They use the term, User Generated Content (UGC) to describe one of the key differences of social media and Web 2.0 services from the first generation of internet services. The first wave of internet services were less dynamic and often resembled traditional media in that information was broadcast out via websites from centralised producers of content. Following the dotcom bust of the early 2000s, a new wave of web services emerged that offered far more interaction with users and, in many cases, relied on their users to generate much of their content. A good example of this is YouTube that hosts hundreds of millions of videos, many of them uploaded by individuals. Facebook also relies on UGC as it offers a platform for individuals and organisations to communicate and share information. Without the content that is uploaded by users, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace and other social media services would not exist. It is the rapid growth of many of these services and their daily use by hundreds of millions of people across the world that has attracted the interest of organisations, public and private. Communicating with large numbers of people, whether for public service or commercial marketing reasons, has traditionally been an expensive and often inefficient process. Printing and sending out leaflets and brochures, advertising across traditional media or conducting telephone marketing campaigns is costly in time and money and beyond the budgets of many organisations. The internet and, more specifically, social media offer a chance to bypass the old media gatekeepers and to communicate directly with customers, voters or any other social media users at no or extremely low cost. Mui and Whoriskey (2011) point out that Facebook in mid-2010 had over 500 million active users, a number that had doubled in less than 2 years. For many people now, Facebook and other social media sites provide their primary interaction with the internet and are increasingly attracting public organisations, including local government bodies. Of course, the dynamic and rapidly changing nature of the internet means that services such as Facebook and YouTube come and go and organisations can be swept up in the general enthusiasm to have a presence on these sites. However, the extent to which the internet and certain social media services are now a part of many people’s lives is a sign that they or whatever new services replace them are significant channels for communication. Gibson (2010) argues, in the context of local government and social media, that:

“...not engaging now represents a far greater risk than engaging. Citizens will still use these networks to talk about you, whether you add your voice to the conversation or not....The challenge for all councils now is to move social media off their list of challenges, and on to their list of opportunities.” (Page 5)

While Gibson has practical experience in the use of social media to promote causes and organisational objectives and is broadly enthusiastic about its potential for enhancing democracy, it is important to beware of adopting a technologically deterministic approach to studies of social media use and impact. Technologies can be transformative but organisational changes are usually achieved in conjunction with other factors whether social, political or economic. Bertot et al. (2010) point out that the use of social media tools by government bodies can help increase transparency but the political will for change needs to exist first and that the technology comes second to aid the process.

## **2 The Study**

A key objective of the research described here was to measure the extent to which the 55 unitary authorities in England use social media in their external communications. The methodology adopted was a detailed analysis of the websites of these bodies to determine what social media profiles they linked to and the level of engagement with these services. This analysis was carried out on the 26 October 2010. Engagement with any social media services were looked for during the data gathering stage and, after examining all 55 websites, the following social media services were found to be used: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr as well as the syndication technology RSS for updating users

of new content being posted to the websites. The level of activity by the authorities on each of these services, where they were being used, was then measured to determine how engaged they were. These measures took the form of the number of tweets on Twitter, regularity of posting, number of videos uploaded to YouTube and number of views, number of photographs posted to Flickr and number of “likes” and members of Facebook pages and groups. A score was allocated to each authority based on whether they used any of the 5 social media services listed above. Giving a point for each service used, Figure 1 summarises the distribution of points awarded.

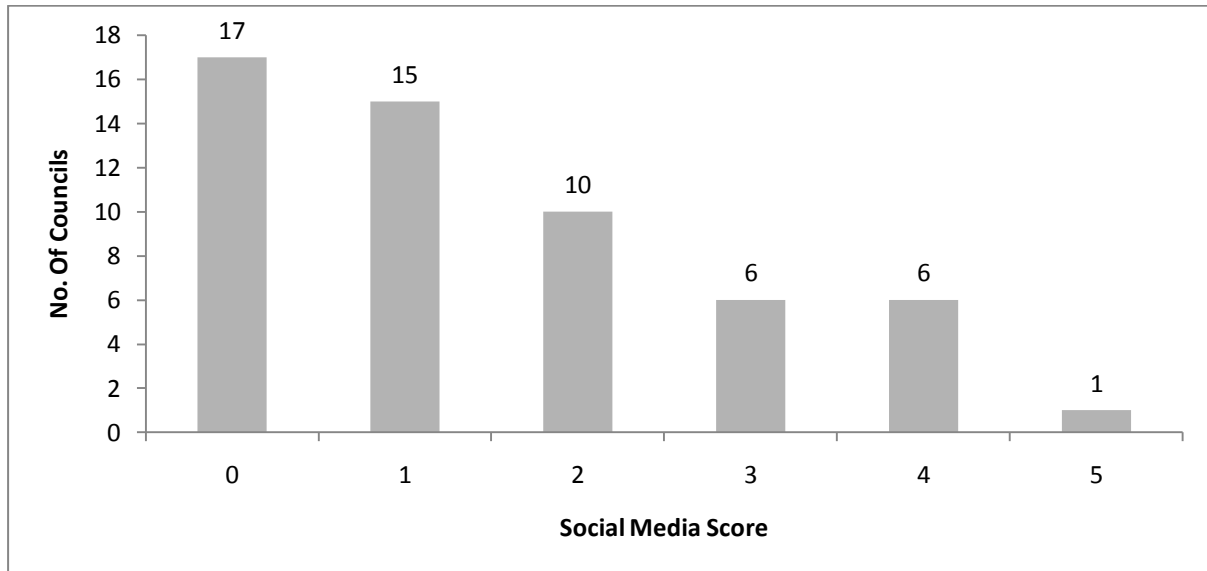
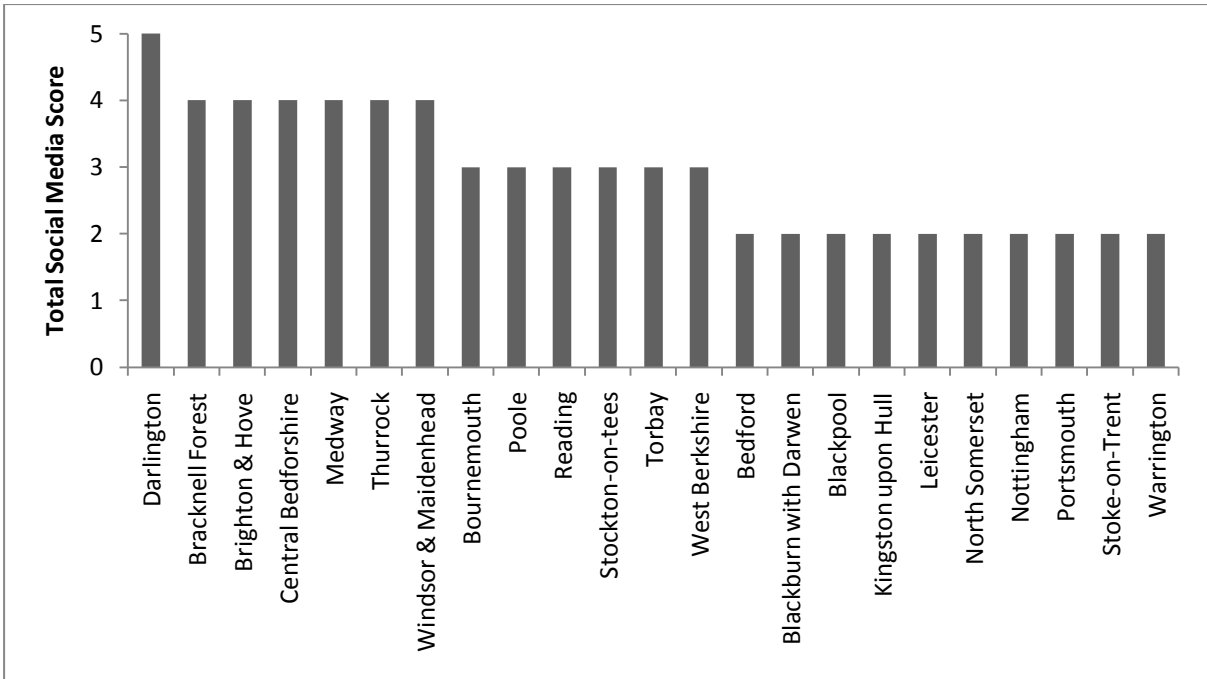


Figure 1 - Aggregate Social Media Scores

As Figure 1 shows, only one unitary authority was found to be using all 5 of the social media services while 17 were not using any. Twitter was the most popular service with 27 authorities using the microblogging service followed by RSS (20 authorities), Facebook (16 authorities), YouTube (8 authorities), Flickr (8 authorities). A statistical analysis was carried out to look for correlations between the size of authorities, in terms of both the geographical areas covered and populations served, and their social media usage but no statistically significant correlations could be found. The 23 authorities that scored 2 points or more in their aggregate social media usage score are shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2 - Most Active Social Media Users**

The ways in which the authorities use social media varies quite significantly but a common theme seems to be using these channels to make announcements relevant to their constituents. The most active council in this space, Darlington ([www.darlington.gov.uk](http://www.darlington.gov.uk)), uses Facebook and Twitter to post announcements about council meetings, news-worthy stories about local schools and council initiatives as well as job postings for the bodies they are responsible for. The local nature of these postings means their appeal is limited primarily to local people but for this group their relevance is significant. In terms of multimedia, Darlington uses YouTube to post public information videos it has been involved in producing while it uses the image sharing site, Flickr, for sharing photographs of local events as well as the entries to local photography competitions.

One of the issues that many organisations face when starting to use social media to communicate with stakeholders is being able to sustain the maintenance of their online presence. Opening a Twitter or Facebook account only takes minutes but creating a successful and thriving profile requires steady and sustained input from those responsible. A Facebook or Twitter page that has not been updated in weeks or even days may be worse, in terms of public perceptions, than not having a social media presence at all. This is particularly true with Twitter that is used by many people as a notification service. Unlike a blog where visitors may spend the time reading archived posts, Twitter posts which are more than a day or two old are seldom looked at. The frequency of posting to Twitter was considered in the analysis of unitary authority social media usage by looking at the number of tweets posted in the previous 7 days. The average was 13 tweets but the range went from 0 to 69. This wide variance may be an indication of the novelty of such a service with authorities still experimenting in terms of optimal activity. Of the 8 authorities with their own YouTube channels there was also a considerable range in the extent to which they posted videos as well as the number of viewers for their videos. One council's YouTube channel had received over 126,000 views while another had only 300. These variances are partly explained by the length of time the council had been on YouTube but the frequency of updates and how the main council webpage promoted the

channel also seemed to play a part. A closer look at the content of the videos posted to YouTube by the councils offers the greatest clue to the popularity of their channels. The YouTube channel with the lowest number of views was dominated by relatively dry interviews with councillors while the channels with significantly higher views had a broader range of videos that looked at council activities such as library and welfare services. While 20 authorities offered RSS feeds of updates to the content posted to their websites, the visibility and utility of these feeds varied. Cheshire West and Chester's website, for example, offered 4 clearly marked RSS feeds covering news, events, its Twitter posts as well as one for information about its cold weather initiatives such as road gritting. Other councils offered RSS feeds for job vacancies, press releases and road works updates. Most of the councils that provided RSS feeds also had a webpage explaining what the technology was and how people could use the feeds as well as, in some instances, providing links to RSS feed readers.

### **3 Benefits of Social Media to Local Government**

By its nature, much of the content uploaded to social media sites is of limited utility and appeal to most people. The conversations and images that are shared are often very personal in nature and not intended to be viewed or read by users outside the social circles of the people that posted them. However, organisations are beginning to realise that the amount of time many people spend on these networks and their wide reach offer opportunities for communication and sharing information that can be of mutual benefit to all (Agichtein et al. 2008, Qualman 2010, Scott 2010, Weber 2007). Large corporations such as Starbucks, Coke and Nike have created and developed large online communities around their brands and, to varying degrees, been successful in building customer loyalty through engaging in conversations with those purchasing their products. However, the potential of social media to directly connect with customers can also be a double-edged sword. Kiley (2009) describes the marketing challenge for Dominoes Pizza in the United States when 2 employees posted a video of themselves at work to YouTube showing them performing unsavoury acts with the pizzas they were making. Although Dominoes fired the employees and eventually restored consumer confidence in their products, the video did have an immediate impact on pizza sales as well as confirming the worst fears of many managers about the dangers of social media.

While media coverage on the success and failure of high-profile social media initiatives tends to focus on the activities of large companies, less attention has been paid to how smaller and less visible organisations are engaging with these new technologies. Park and Cho (2009) and Kuzma (2010) point to the opportunities that social media offers public bodies in terms of connecting with their stakeholders and developing trust. This could be seen as particularly important at a time when politicians in many economies are increasingly viewed with suspicion. The personal nature of many social media services allows human voices and real personalities to be seen and heard as opposed to the faceless corporate messages of traditional public relations initiatives. However, as with the Dominoes example mentioned earlier the potential for public bodies and officials to be embarrassed by these channels is also a reality. The recent Wikileaks releases of confidential documents relating to the Iraq and Afghan wars is evidence of this.

As well as using social media to develop trust between local government and their electors, there are also financial benefits from migrating services to the web. According to Gibson (2010), research by the Society of Information Technology Management concluded that customer service interactions cost on average 27 pence when conducted via the web, £3.22 by phone and £6.56 face-to-face. Gibson (2010) sees a broader role for social media in this context and believes:

“...the really exciting cost-savings will come from restructuring the existing processes entirely. Social media allow far more people to contribute to solving a problem, which means potentially far greater efficiency overall, even given the increased burden on communicating and responding to the public.”  
(page 10)

The heavy snow that fell across the UK in January 2010 showed the value of social media and Twitter, in particular to local councils in their attempts to help residents with transport problems. Cartmell (2010) describes how Brighton and Hove used Twitter successfully to appeal to residents with 4x4 vehicles to help with meals on wheels deliveries while Kirklees Council and Essex Council used Twitter to broadcast messages about the status of road gritting. Following the snow and in an attempt to deal with the resulting potholes in the roads, Birmingham City Council encouraged its residents to contact them via Twitter with details of the location of holes in the road.

#### **4 Best Practice for Deploying Social Media**

In terms of making the most of social media initiatives, the lessons for local government are often no different than for any organisation. Drawing on literature from digital marketing and social media practitioners, there are some key factors that need to be taken into account:

- Although it will probably evolve once a council starts experimenting with social media, it is important to set objectives for what it hopes to achieve. This will help in the selection of the most appropriate social media platforms (Hay 2011);
- Employees need to know who is responsible for posting information and responding to messages and time needs to be allocated to them for these tasks. Unless working with social media is seen as part of someone's job description it is unlikely it will be taken seriously across the council (Safko & Brake 2010);
- Before creating profiles on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or other services, it is worth experimenting in a low-key way to develop a feel for how those platforms work and the ways that users interact with them. Observing the types of messages and information that are being posted and looking at the discussions that take place online help develop an understanding of what people value (Fox 2010);
- Where appropriate, try to inject a personal touch into the information and messages that are posted. Simply posting press releases onto Twitter or Facebook is unlikely to be of much interest to constituents. However, posts that show a genuine concern by council employees for the services they provide can break down barriers. This does not need to be applied in all instances as sometimes just a straightforward information broadcast is most appropriate such as pushing out travel updates or cold weather warnings (Fox 2010);
- Without being too prescriptive it is important that a council sets out some broad guidelines for what is and is not appropriate as subjects for posting online as well as expectations in terms of style and tone (Elser & Lee 2010);
- Monitor the success of social media initiatives by using free tools such as Hootsuite for tracking Twitter postings. It is important to know which initiatives are generating the most interest so efforts can be focused on those and away from activities that are not working (Kaushik 2009).

One of the problems that many councils have when starting to use social media is determining which are the most appropriate. This will largely depend on what the body wants to achieve but it is important that they tread carefully and not be seen as acting inappropriately. 16 of the 55 unitary authorities surveyed in this research were using Facebook to share information but some argue that Facebook, in the way it is used by private individuals, is often not the best place for councils to be online. The Head of Communications and Marketing for Medway Council, Simon Wakeman ((Wakeman 2009)), believes Facebook users identify with specific services that their council provides but are not generally interested in the council itself:

“In Medway we’ve not created an official Facebook presence for the council, but we have used Facebook groups to promote festivals and theatres – as we know that the customers for these services do have a sense of belonging with the service and so there’s a basis for an online community to form.” (Wakeman 2009)

## 5 Conclusion

The rise of social media is a very recent phenomena with most of the high-profile services such as Facebook and Twitter only gaining a mass base of users in the last several years. The rapidly changing and dynamic nature of the sector means that new services will come and go; the rapid decline of MySpace and Bebo are evidence of that. However, the hundreds of millions of people that engage with social media on a daily basis mean that any organisation wanting to develop closer ties with its stakeholders needs to, at the very least, be aware of the potential of these services to strengthen links. Assuming that social media is a fad and only something for young people might be similar to someone in 1995 dismissing email as a viable communications tool. Local government, in particular, may have a lot to gain from using these platforms to get closer to its electors and enhance the services it already offers. As Gibson (2010) states:

“Citizens will expect their council to engage with them on their terms, via their channels, and to be openly available online. In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that if councils don’t use these tools, the citizens will do it for them, and bypass the council entirely.” (page 5)

As someone who makes his living by consulting on social media for organisations, Gibson could be accused of exaggerating the potential dangers to local government from neglecting to use these tools in their communications with electors. It is obviously in the interests of such consultants to encourage a perceived need for their services amongst potential clients. It is certainly true that many public sector investments in information and communications technology projects do not have a good track record (Gauld & Goldfinch 2006). However, the fact that the social media services described here are already being used by a significant proportion of the English population and, in most cases, cost little or nothing to deploy might indicate there may be real value in their use. The research described here is a preliminary step to developing a better understanding of how social media is being used by local government and what its potential might be for enhancing democracy. Further studies are planned to explore some of the more qualitative aspects of social media use through interviews with both local government employees deploying these services as well as members of the public interacting with them. It is hoped these interviews will allow a better understanding of the value being derived from using such tools. The research methodology presented here will also be repeated at the end of 2011 to determine the extent to which the use of social media tools by English unitary authorities is increasing or declining.

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