

**What is the role of social media in
UK local government communications?**

**Research project submission for
CIPR Diploma in Public Relations 2007-8**

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INTRODUCTION

The public sector communications environment has typically been characterised by Grunig and Hunt's public information model (1984), where the priority has been one-way dissemination of information to the organisation's publics.

The development of social media tools, such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, image and video sharing services, over the past five years presents a challenge to this characterisation. Social media gives the opportunity for publics to communicate more frequently and more effectively with other members of the same public, other publics and with government bodies themselves.

This study aims to understand the extent of current use of social media in local government communications, consider the factors that encourage and discourage such use, and identify the main roles that social media should play in local government communications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Local government communications

Since the early 20th century public relations has played an increasingly important role for local authorities in the UK. L'Etang (2004) traces the origins of the public relations profession to "developments in local government, both in terms of the growth of public relations work and in terms of the professionalisation of civil servants".

Harvey (1995) identifies six objectives for public relations in contemporary local government. These include a responsibility for "corporate character and identity" as well as an extremely broad remit to keep customers informed about the activities of local government. He also identifies a specific role for responding to criticism of local government, identifying the balance of local government communications, particularly in media relations, being responsive to media agenda that is critical to local government.

Harvey also identifies an important internal role for communications in local government. As the professional communicators within an organisation, comprising a myriad of professional, skilled and semi-skilled workers, it falls to the communicators to educate colleagues about the value of communicating with customer groups and the importance of being responsive to customer needs and opinions.

The first five roles identified by Harvey are relatively tactical in nature. They are primarily focussed on supporting the organisation's activities with a communications response. His final objective articulates the strategic value of communications which is becoming increasingly important and recognised among professional observers (Karian & Box, 2007).

These objectives reflect the breadth of challenges that exist in local government communications. For them to be fulfilled successfully modern day public relations practitioners working in local government typically use two types of communications campaigns: public information campaigns and public communications campaigns (Yeomans, 2006). The distinction between these two types is that "information" campaigns involve one way (sender to receiver) communications, while "communications" campaigns involve two way communications (sender to receiver to sender).

Information campaigns, by virtue of their one-way nature, fit into Grunig and Hunt's public information model of public relations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). This characterisation is reinforced by the requirement for accuracy in local government which is consistent with the importance of truth in the public information model.

It has also been argued (Dozier et al, 2001) that public communications campaigns can be considered as examples of two-way asymmetric communication, where the sender's intention is to influence knowledge, opinions and actions of the target audiences. The increasing responsibilities of local government to engage with publics and stakeholders are likely to support increased two-way asymmetric communication and in some cases development of new two-way symmetric communications. The rate of adoption of social media among some target audiences represents an opportunity in this respect (OFCOM, 2007). For example the 16 to 24 age group is a challenging audience for local government to engage with and encourage participation (Iacopini, 2007). Research shows 71% of this age group regularly make use of social media tools and there is therefore a good case for the sensitive use of social media for local government to reach this group.

However it is debatable whether this shift extends to the more attitudinal aspects of the two-way symmetric model or will remain focused on the mechanics of providing balanced two-way communication flows between local government and its publics. Has social media led to a genuine desire for mutual understanding between local government and its publics, or is it just a new channel through which dialogue can take place but over which the traditional degree of control is still strived for?

Considering the objectives of such campaigns, various authors (Dungan-Seaver, 1999; Henry & Rivera, 1998; Coffman, 2002) have drawn a distinction between campaigns that aim to change individual behaviour and those that seek to influence public will and in turn, support for policy change. However UK local government communicators need to be careful when seeking to influence public will where it relates to policy decisions, as the code of recommended practice on local authority publicity (CLG, 1988) stipulates that "local authorities...should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy."

The importance of appropriate use of internet-enabled communications tools within the local government communications mix is highlighted by Andrewes (2006). She notes that communications functions that are considered strong typically do not rely on traditional print media alone to communicate with external stakeholders. Such strong functions typically develop innovative initiatives and place a high priority on electronic communications. While not writing about social media specifically, the high levels of adoption of social media require local government communications functions to understand and use social media as part of the overall communications mix. This is particularly the case among younger people (OFCOM, 2007), although social media use is by no means limited to this age group. Use of

social networks in particular is growing across all age groups. The branding and targetting of different networks has led to a congregation of certain age groups on certain social networks (Nussbaum, 2007). This is also due to the method by which networks grow, following existing real-world social networks that tend to comprise peers of similar ages.

Bentivegna (2002) provides a further endorsement for the use of the internet as part of local government communications, noting that the internet has potential to enable democratic communications with a broader range of participants than is possible in traditional media. In such situations the media owner acts as a gatekeeper to more open communication. There is evidence that use of the internet can contribute to increased participation in the democratic process, although it should be acknowledged that use of the internet is not the sole factor in increasing such participation (Kann, Berry, Gant & Zager, 2007).

This opportunity is particularly pertinent given the decreasing participation in the democratic process in the UK, demonstrated by low turnout at recent local and national elections (Gammon, 2005, Hansard Society/Ministry of Justice, 2007).

The internet and social media

In the context of internet communication Fawkes and Gregory (2000) note two main groups of communication models in modern public relations thinking: the transmissive system and the participative system. Models belonging to the transmissive system involve the transmission of information, ideas or emotions from one actor to another in a linear fashion. They also note that while much professional public relations is in essence built upon such linear thinking, these models are questioned in academic spheres for oversimplifying a complex communications landscape. Models in the participative system focus on “meanings and mutual understanding” (Fawkes and Gregory, 2000).

The authors highlight the importance of the internet in the participative system. While the internet can act as a conduit or channel for messages under the transmissive system, the internet, and in particular social media, facilitates new types of participative communication that were not possible before the availability of internet-enabled social media tools. These tools enable two-way interactions between individuals and groups and formation and development of participatory groups across spatial and social boundaries that were not previously possible. Mass communication theory typically assumes spatial boundaries (McQuail, 2005) which are rendered less relevant by the globally pervasive nature of social media.

The role of the internet can be considered to be broader and more significant than simply a new channel for communication. Vercic, Razpet, Dekleva and Slenc (2000) describe the internet as a "new environment" that will change the definition of public relations, as it is changing definitions of economy and society". Dutton and Peltu (2007) reinforce this importance attached to developments in internet-enabled communications, seeing social media as "the latest in a continuing stream of ICT digital innovation to which many profound and mundane sociotechnical changes are tied". Some observers are less strident in the importance they attach to social media by classing it as a new form of technology that amplifies existing human sociological characteristics rather than fundamentally changing them (Solis, 2007).

Definitions of social media are numerous and, to a degree, inconsistent. Most observers appear to define social media either through the activities that it comprises or the tools that are used. Within these two main types of definitions, the inconsistencies are typically in the activities or tools at the fringes of what the observer considers as social media. This lack of consensus on a definition of social media reflects the relative infancy of this group of internet tools and services and its continued rapid evolution. Wikipedia (2008) identifies social media as "an umbrella term that defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words and pictures. This interaction, and the manner in which information is presented, depends on the varied perspectives and "building" of shared meaning, as people share their stories, and understandings."

Scoble (2007) identifies a number of defining characteristics that identify a platform or service as social media. The characteristics are being able to change or correct information publishing, interactivity, real-time feedback, provision of a persistent archive, use of a mix of media types together, little or no editorial control on content that is published, infinite scalability (compared to traditional media where there are time or space limits on what can be published), reusable (where content is easily and quickly republished and analysed) and mashable (meaning it can be easily combined with other forms of content to provide a valuable new form of content).

Meadows-Klue (2008) produced a similar set of defining characteristics and notes that social media "represents paradigms of communication unique to the digital networked society". The author suggests that the changes being caused in communications by social media are fundamental sociological changes, in line with the arguments made by Dutton and Peltu (2007).

While many definitions of social media, including those identified here, have much in common, there is no universally accepted definition of social media or consensus on what does or does not constitute a social media platform. For the purposes of this research I will adopt Constantinides and Fountain's (2008) typology of social media that identifies five types of social media activity:

1. Blogs / podcasts
2. Social networks
3. Content communities (eg video, images, bookmarks, encyclopedia)
4. Forums / bulletin boards
5. Content aggregators (services allowing users to customise content they wish to access)

This definition has been chosen for my research as it provides clear boundaries for the field of social media, using terms that are relatively well-known among the audience for my research, while at the same time the definition is broad and flexible enough to include many of the newer social media that are relevant to this research. It is acknowledged that by using a tool-based definition rather than an activity-based definition, some of more fundamental sociological trends may be less obvious than if an activity-based approach to research was taken.

Ruck (2008) suggests that social media represents a form of mass communication in terms of the number of active participants. However, social media differs from mass communication in that the mass communication models typically envisage a small number of message initiators sending messages to a large, anonymous and usually heterogeneous audience (Lane, 2000). This divergence of social media from mass communication is reinforced by the enabling role of social media in allowing anyone with internet access the opportunity to become a message initiator and the lack of anonymity in most social media activity. In many forms of social media, transparency of sender identity and message is fundamental. This is particularly the case in corporate and professional use of social media such as company blogs/podcasts and professional social networks (eg LinkedIn). However such transparency is not universal within social media – some social media tools, for example the Second Life virtual world, actively prevent users from being active under their true identity.

Within the body of mass communications thinking, the theory of diffusion of innovations (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet) would seem to bear more relevance to social media.

Rogers (1995) summarises this theory as "the spread of abstract ideas and concepts, technical information, and actual practices within a social system, where the spread denotes flow or movement from a source to an adopter, typically via communication and influence". This approach would seem to be more applicable to the emerging communication dynamics of social media.

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1968) also suggested that the flow of mass communication is mediated by opinion leaders, alluding to a two-step flow from mass media, through opinion formers, to recipients. This model would appear to be relevant to selected social media tools, such as blogs and podcasts, where a social media actor plays a part in message transmission. This application is noted by Tomaszewski (2006).

However, the two-step flow theory would not appear to be relevant in the context of social media where the communication does not have its origin in the mass media. In these forms of social media, the message does not originate from mass media, instead being originated from the actor himself. An example of this would be image or video sharing where, while some content is "remixed" from mass media content, other content is created independently by the actor.

Phillips (2000) considers the role of information in the context of internet communications. He notes that information gains value as it is applied and its exchange between actors is facilitated. The role of social media tools in this context is as an agent for the exchange of information and the creation of new information which has its origins in multiple sources of information published and shared within social media networks.

Developing this concept further, Wejnert (2002) considers the importance of social status of such actors within the diffusion of innovation using the internet. She notes that the prominence of an actor's relative position within a population of actors determines the likely adoption of an idea, concept or message among a population of relatively culturally homogenous actors. Among blogs this idea is manifested through the concept of "A-list bloggers" who are followed by large numbers of readers who presumably share a high degree of commonality with the blogger and who are linked to by a number of less influential bloggers. Such "A-list bloggers" in communities play the role of thought leaders influencing the blog agenda in a similar manner to the role of traditional media in agenda setting.

Weimann (1994) identified that opinion leaders within a two-step flow context hold a central position in a social network, and actively make their opinions and views known, presumably to the influence of other lesser actors within the network. While there is no research that

appears to validate these two applications of theory in the context of social media, it would be reasonable to assume that Wejnerts' and Weimann's assertions are relevant to social media.

METHODOLOGY

This study will use primary and secondary research techniques to determine the current and future roles for social media in local government communications. Primary research will be used to provide the core findings for the study, while secondary research will be used to provide a degree of triangulation of results. It will also be used to illustrate specific aspects of the study's findings and to enhance insight revealed by the primary research and give additional perspectives beyond the scope of the primary research.

There are two broad schools of world view that influence the approach taken to public relations studies of this type (Daymon & Holloway, 2002): the interpretive or realist paradigms. This study follows the realist paradigm by taking an objective and independent view of current practice within local government communications. While the author's employment within this sector could reduce the objective nature of the study, the primary research method selected is designed to reduce the potential for reduced objectivity.

The primary research for this project will comprise an online survey of communications practitioners working within local government. Secondary research will comprise relevant information from academic textbooks and journals, industry reports, white papers, newspapers and online material, including blogs.

Before starting the research for this project, a list of tasks was compiled to help shape the parameters for the primary research:

- The purpose of the survey is to identify current awareness and use of social media tools among councils. It will also consider future planned use of social media and variables that may be related to planned future use of such tools. The variables tested have been derived from initial online fact finding and from previous research identified in the literature review.
- The target audience for the research will be individuals working within local government communications in the UK. This will include respondents for whom communications is a part or all of their professional role. Respondents will be asked for their job title and organisation in the survey to allow manual exclusion of data from respondents deemed outside of the target audience.

- The online survey will be made publicly available and distributed to the target audience using a number of means including direct email to named contacts in local authorities, postings on relevant online forums, blog postings and through personal contact.
- Survey respondents will be offered a copy of the project report as an incentive for completing the survey. This will help increase initial response rates and completion of all pages within the survey.

Primary research

The primary research comprises a quantitative online survey of communications practitioners in local government. A quantitative approach to primary research was selected because of its fit with the realist nature of the research question and the practical benefits of this approach identified below.

This part of the research methodology used non-random sampling of the local government communicator population. The availability and size of email lists of existing local government communicators and the relatively small size of the overall population meant that using random sampling could not be used effectively in this project. The methods used to distribute the survey were most consistent with the convenience sampling approach (Deacon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock, 1999).

The survey was built and managed using the Survey Monkey online service (www.surveymonkey.com). It mainly used questions with rating scale responses that looked at frequency of usage or planned usage of social media tools in several contexts.

A question with a more traditional scaled quantitative response was used to determine the relative importance that respondents attached to factors that are used to consider choice of communications channels in local government. Such a question is a direct way of measuring the respondent's view and is particularly helpful when looking to compare relative perceived importance across a number of different factors.

The online survey approach to research has many advantages for a project of this type. It can be quickly put together and distributed to a large number of recipients at very low cost. Respondents are usually able to complete the survey themselves without need for an interviewer or other assistance with completion. The survey can be completed at a time that suits the respondent, increasing potential response rates compared to surveys that need to be completed by appointment.

The online service ensures that questions are asked consistently in each instance of the survey, avoiding any potential for interviewer interpretation, bias or other unforeseen interviewer effects. The analysis of an online survey comprising mainly closed questions is relatively straightforward as much of the compilation of data is done automatically.

There is also evidence that online surveys achieve better response rates than are achieved by offline surveys, most probably due to the ease of response for recipient (Coombes, 2001).

The approach is not without disadvantages though. With a remote survey of this type there is the potential for questions to be interpreted differently by respondents and the meaning of the question may not be conveyed as the author intended. In this project, the survey was pre-tested with three respondents to reduce the potential for misinterpretation that could reduce the validity of the results.

A further risk of a quantitative survey with closed questions is that relevant information, insight or responses may be lost because they were not considered as a potential response in the development of the survey (Babbie, 1990). In this survey, while the majority of questions involved closed answers, an option for open-ended responses was provided to minimise the potential for this happening.

The use of an online survey in research about online activities such as media has the potential to introduce structural bias into the survey results because the survey respondents will naturally tend to be those people who have access to and are familiar using computers and the internet. However this research makes the assumption that all members of the target audience (local government communications) have access to the internet and are familiar using email and websites. This is a reasonable assumption given the universal online presence of UK local government organisations following the delivery of 2005 e-government targets and use of email as a day-to-day tool for councils in the UK.

RESULTS

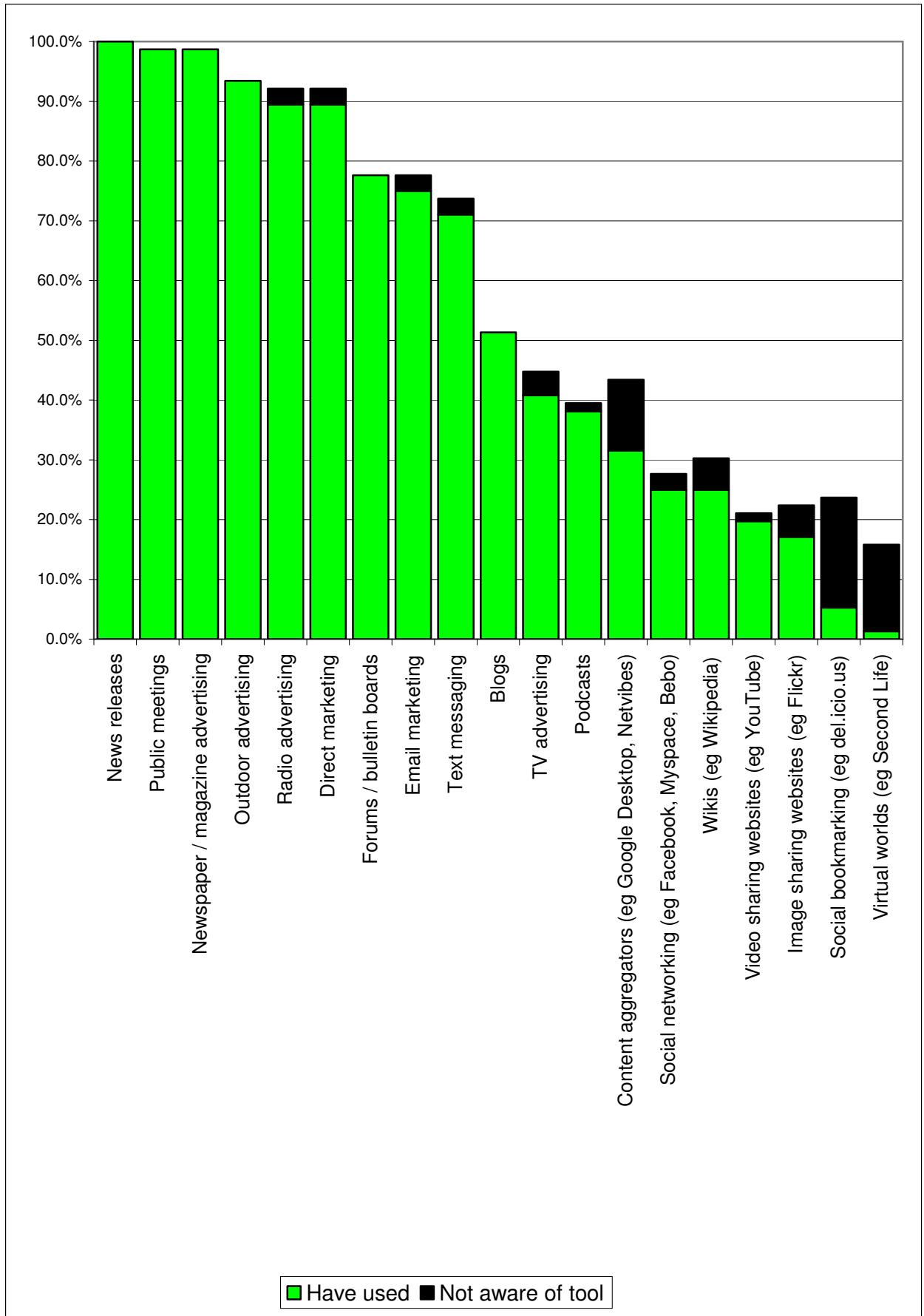
The online survey was completed by 93 respondents, 82 of whom completed all questions and were within the intended target audience for the survey. Responses were received from communicators working in 61 councils, representing 13.8% of all 442 councils identified by the Local Government Association in England, Wales and Scotland.

In attempting to identify roles for social media in local government communications, it is important to first assess the scale and nature of current usage of social media tools in this context. The public sector, and local government in particular, is typically regarded as a laggard in the adoption of new communications techniques (Dickson, 2008).

The primary research conducted for this project sought to test this assumption in the context of professional and personal adoption of social media by local government communicators. It also looked at the links between personal use of social media tools and the application of such tools in an individual's day-to-day work as a communications professional. This aims to test the underlying hypothesis that professional communicators are likely to favour communications channels that they are personally familiar and comfortable with.

Communications channel mix in local government communications

The mix of communications channels in use in local government communications appears to be dominated by traditional communications tools. The news release is ubiquitous in its use among respondents to the survey. Public meetings and paid-for advertising (including press, radio and outdoor) complete the five communications tools in most widespread use among local authorities in the UK:



The common element to these five most used tools is that they are untargetted in their approach – they deliver messages to significant groups of people (for example readers of a specific newspapers or people passing a single outdoor advertisement) rather than being able to be targetted to publics or homogenous market segments.

| Most common communications channels in use in local government communications | Have used (% respondents) | Not aware of tool (% respondents) |
|--|----------------------------------|--|
| News releases | 100.0% | 0.0% |
| Public meetings | 98.7% | 0.0% |
| Newspaper / magazine advertising | 98.7% | 0.0% |
| Outdoor advertising | 93.4% | 0.0% |
| Radio advertising | 89.5% | 2.6% |

It is interesting to note that these untargetted channels have been in use for an extended period of time in both the private and public sectors. It could be argued that this in itself supports the argument that the public sector is slower to adopt new communications tools than the private sector as shown by the top tools currently in use. However this would be an oversimplification as it ignores the breadth of communications objectives held by local authorities. These include a requirement for communicating with all residents (whether as a single public or broken down into smaller publics within the overall population) about universal services, such as waste collection or highways, as well as communicating with targeted smaller publics about issues that are only relevant to that group, such as localised community safety messages or a planning application relevant to a particular neighbourhood. This breadth of objectives requires a broader mix of communications tools, including a bias towards untargetted tools, that is less likely to be required in the private sector where communications are typically more targetted towards specific publics (or market segments) to achieve specific commercial objectives.

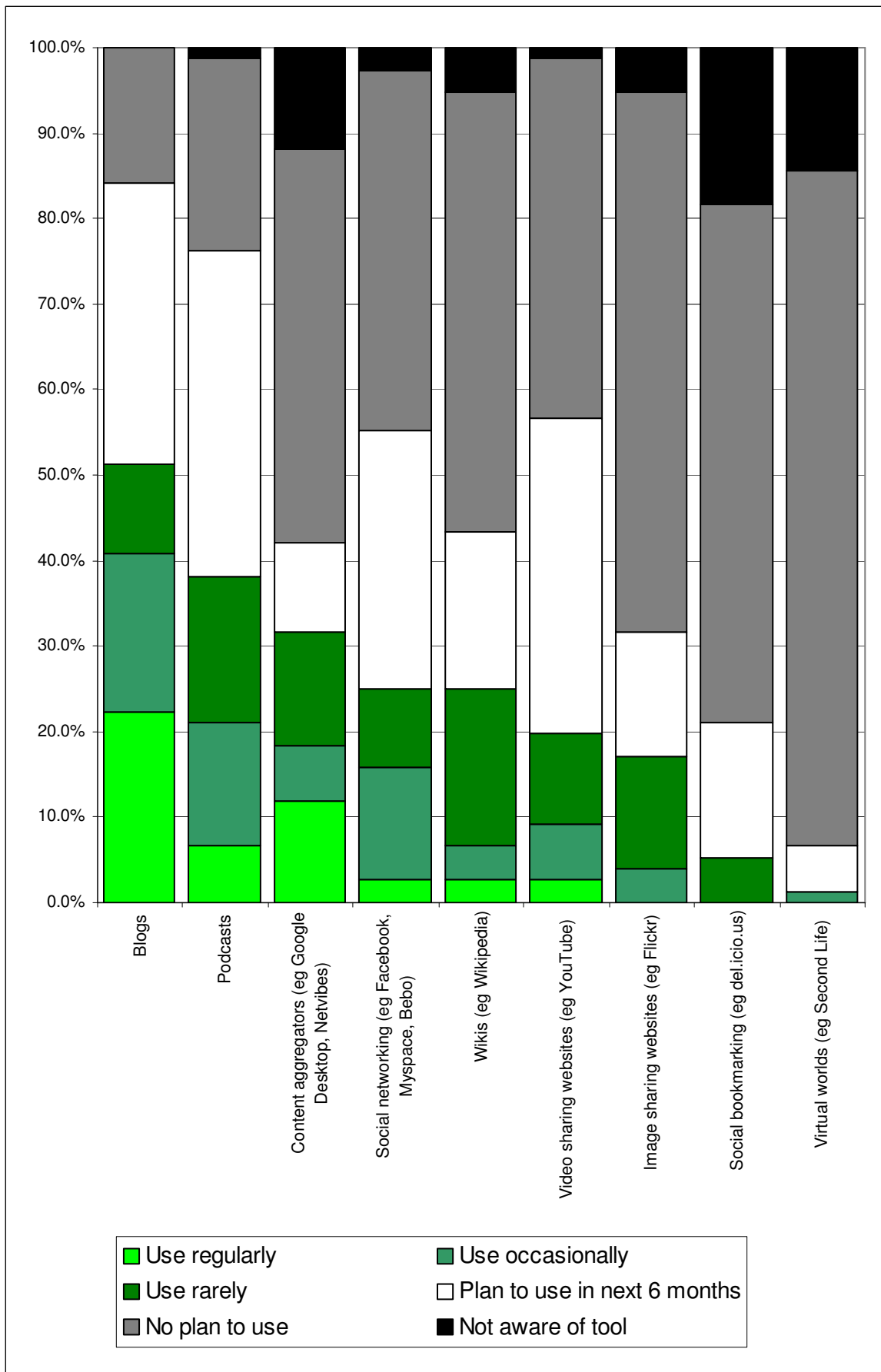
These most commonly used channels are also all one-way in nature. They do not lend themselves easily to delivery of a two-way communications campaign such as envisaged by Yeomans (2006) in her public communications campaign typology. The scale of usage of such one-way channels suggests that the “return path” for communications is either seen as separate from the initial delivery path for the communication or non-existent. The latter implies a low level role for social media in local government communications because of their inherently two-way nature.

However while the communications mix is dominated by untargetted communications tools, the level of adoption of social media tools in local government communications was surprisingly high. More than 50% of respondents are using blogs in their council communications and almost 40% are using podcasts. This level of usage may be considered surprising given the apparent low level of visibility of usage among councils, although it should be noted that this usage level includes use within organisations (internal communications) as well as for external communications.

It is also worth noting the claimed frequency of use of these most used social media tools. Although more than 50% of communicators surveyed used blogs regularly, occasionally or rarely, just 22.4% of communicators used blogs regularly. Similarly almost 40% of communicators used podcasts as part of the communications mix regularly, occasionally or rarely, but only 6.6% of communicators were using them regularly.

As the research has looked at the use of social media tools as part of a communications mix managed by a single communications professional, it is not possible to conclude with certainty that the majority of social media tool use by councils is sporadic rather than continuous, this is a reasonable assumption to make. The nature of social media means that building an audience and a community conducive to effective two-way communications takes time (Brazier, 2008), making the use of effective short-term social media activities difficult.

Use of other social media tools, while less widespread, was more prevalent than expected. Social bookmarking sites and virtual worlds were the least used channels, reflecting a lack of understanding of these tools in a communications context and low use among practitioners surveyed.



Looking beyond the current usage of social media tools, the research evidence shows a clear intention to increase usage of four types of social media tools within the next six months in local government communications:

| Social media tool | % councils plan to use in next six months |
|---|--|
| Podcasts | 38.2% |
| Video sharing websites (eg YouTube) | 36.8% |
| Blogs | 32.9% |
| Social networking (eg Facebook, Myspace, Bebo) | 30.3% |

These specific tools are among the most widely known and used among UK internet users (Heisler, 2008). This potentially explains why these tools are the ones that are planned to be used to the greatest extent in the next six months. As they are the most commonly used, it is worth exploring whether personal use among communicators correlates with use of the same social media tool in a professional capacity in a communications mix.

This research sought to test the hypothesis that communicators who used social media tools in a personal capacity were more likely to use such tools in a professional capacity in their roles as local government communicators. The survey data was used to evaluate the relationship between personal and professional use of the four social media tool types that are most commonly used at present; namely blogs, podcasts, content aggregators and social networks. Linear regression analysis was undertaken for each tool to assess the level of personal usage of the specific tool against the level of professional usage. This showed that while there is a correlation between personal and professional use for each tool, the correlation is weak when considering the frequency of personal against frequency of professional usage:

| Social media tool | Co-efficient of determination (R^2) for personal use against professional use for selected social media tools |
|--------------------------|---|
| Blogs | 0.1047 |
| Podcasts | 0.0468 |
| Content aggregators | 0.0932 |

| | |
|-----------------|--------|
| Social networks | 0.0473 |
|-----------------|--------|

However when considering the data at an aggregated level across all tools that ignores frequency of use (personal and professional), a firmer conclusion can be drawn:

| | Do use social media tools professionally | Don't use social media tools professionally |
|--|---|--|
| Do use social media tools personally | 44% | 56% |
| Don't use social media tools personally | 15% | 85% |

This shows that use of social media tools in a personal capacity does not appear to strongly influence whether such tools are used in a professional capacity as part of the communications mix. However non-use of social media tools in a personal capacity does appear to strongly negatively influence a professional's propensity to employ such tools as part of a council's communications mix with 15% of respondents who don't use social media tools personally using social media in their council's communication mix, compared with 44% of respondents that do use social media tools personally.

The primary research also considered what factors respondents considered were most and least influential in their choice of channels in their communication mix. The most significant factors were "use of the channel among target audience" and the linked determinant of "appropriateness to my communications objectives" – both these factors were rated as very important by 65% or more of respondents. Cost was also cited as a very important factor by 40% of respondents:

| Determinant of channel choice | % respondents rating determinant as "very important" |
|---|---|
| Use of the channel among target audience | 72% |
| Appropriateness to my communications objectives | 65% |
| Cost | 40% |
| Ease of access to appropriate technology | 27% |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Support from line manager | 27% |
| Support from senior officers | 23% |
| Reputational risk from critical coverage/responses | 21% |
| Personal level of knowledge/experience of the channel | 16% |
| Support from elected members | 15% |

While there will be an inevitable discrepancy between claimed determinants of channel choice and those that are actually used, it should be noted that the high rating of “use of the channel among target audience” should be a driver for use of social media tools for local government, particularly where there is a requirement to communicate with the demographic groups among which participation social media usage is highest – typically younger age groups (Li et al, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

Existing use of social media in local government communications

The research has considered the current levels of use of social media tools within local government communications and assessed the intended future use of such tools among local government communicators. The results show that a proportion of local authorities are using a range of social media tools in their communications, although the numbers using such tools regularly are small. There also appears to be an appetite among a larger number of local authorities to use the most popular social media tools in their communications within the next six months.

However there is a significant proportion of local authorities that have no plan to use social media tools in their communications mix. This proportion is greatest when considering social media tools beyond blogs and podcasts and ranges from 42.1% (video sharing and social networks) to 78.9% (virtual worlds).

Communicators that do not use social media tools personally are much less likely to use social media tools in their work than those that do use them personally. There is also a correlation between a communicator's age and their personal use of social media tools, meaning that councils with older communicators are less likely to be using social media than those with younger communicators. However there is not a strong correlation between level of personal use of social media tools as a whole and level of professional use within a council communications mix. This implies that there are other reasons why social media is not used beyond personal familiarity with the tool.

Using an appropriate tool for a campaign's objectives and one that is used by a campaign's target audience were ranked highly as factors in channel choice for campaigns. It could be argued that this will account for a proportion of the non-usage among councils, especially due to some of the relatively distinct demographic groups using certain types of social media tool. However this argument is challenged strongly by the fact that most councils have a duty to communicate with a variety of different publics, a number of which will be those that do have high levels of social media usage. There are therefore a significant number of councils with a responsibility to communicate with social media-using publics that are not using social media tools in their campaigns.

The research suggests a number of other challenges exist for communicators wishing to use social media in their communications. The most commonly cited barrier to use of social

media was the lack of support from ICT teams within councils. This was due to factors including a lack of technical knowledge of the tools being considered, apathy and, in some cases, active blocking of social media tools through firewall policies.

The majority of communicators surveyed considered reputational risk from critical coverage/responses as an important factor in channel choice. It could be argued that this concern about critical coverage, probably linked in part to the political nature of the local government environment, presents a challenge for local authorities wishing to use social media tools. Such tools inherently reduce or eliminate the ability of councils to influence coverage of their organisations message. Considering traditional media relations with mainstream media outlets, the perception of control within councils is probably greater than the actual control that a council can exert. However the use of social media requires a much more significant shift in organisational attitude to allow councils to cede the perception of message control and engage in conversations with publics that may be difficult in terms of relationship with policy, subject matter or tone. While some of these risks can be mitigated through clear “rules of engagement” for social media participations and moderation, they do not fundamentally change the shift in organisational attitude that is required.

The broader environmental context for local government in the UK is shifting. The 1999 Local Government Act gave councils a duty to consult with publics on matters of policy. There is also a clearly recognised link between councils that are effective in communications with publics and those that are highly rated by their residents (Local Government Association, 2007). This alone presents opportunities for the use of social media to enhance existing consultation and communications activities.

Lyons (2007) put the concept of place shaping at the heart of the future for local government. Place shaping is enshrined in the new local area agreement and other assessment frameworks for local government. The place shaping concept describes how “local government can work with residents to develop and deliver high-quality public services that meet the needs and preferences of local people” (I&DeA, 2008). Social media tools would appear to be eminently suitable as means for local government and its partners to engage in two-way dialogue with local publics about place and the impact on public services. The online participatory nature of such tools is likely to extend the range of such communications beyond members of publics that will typically attend public meetings and engage with other commonly used local government consultation techniques.

However it is also worth noting the concept of digital exclusion. Councils have a duty to engage with publics that will include members that do not have access to online services such as social media. While councils have sought to reduce the impact of this through provision of free online access, for example in libraries, it is acknowledged that this divide still exists (Simpson, 2007). This means digital exclusion must be considered when using social media as part of the communications mix.

In July 2008 central government published the “Communities in control: real people, real power” white paper. This wide-ranging white paper seeks to enhance the ability of communities to influence the delivery of local services more strongly and, in turn, strengthen local democracy by increasing participation. It aims to “helping citizens to get involved when they want to on their own terms” (CLG, 2008). This policy agenda will further enhance the importance of social media tools as a means to engage with a broader range of publics using means that they are familiar with and active using.

Four roles for social media

This research proposes four types of role for social media within local government communications. These types of role are intended not as an absolute description of the finite uses for social media in local government communications, but more as consecutive steps for local government to take to develop the use of social media as part of an overall communications mix.

Role one: environment scanning

Regardless of whether a council is already using social media or not, there will be user generated content already in existence relating to the organisation or its area. Councils should use commercial or freely available tools to monitor social media to help aid their understanding of public perception within their area. Such monitoring could also help councils in identifying issues that may cross over into mainstream media. This is increasingly pertinent given the emerging relationship between coverage in social media and the mainstream media (Collister, 2008).

Role two: public information

This role envisages the use of social media tools as one-way broadcast channel. The nature of such one-way communications will be familiar to councils given the ubiquity of the news release, but will become increasingly important given the decline in penetration of traditional local media (Bell, 2008) and increasing reliance on online sources for news and information

(REF). This role also represents an opportunity for councils to reduce the role of local media as a gatekeeper (Bentivegna, 2002) and will be particularly relevant where a council has a local traditional media environment dominated by one or most inherently hostile media organisations. However this role fundamentally under-uses the potential of social media to facilitate dialogue between an organisation and its publics and between members of its publics as well. Some social media proponents would also contend that use of social media as a public information tool is not genuinely social media as it does not satisfy the shared or collaborative nature of some definitions of social media. However such a role could still fulfil many of the criteria within definitions discussed earlier in this project.

Role three: public communications

In this role social media is used to its greatest extent, enabling publics as well as the organisation to create a conversation that is mutually beneficial to all participants. This role represents a significant opportunity to engage with publics and benefit from increased participation and subsequent reputational benefits from increased resident satisfaction. However as discussed earlier this role demands that councils accept the potential for reputational risk from critical or difficult conversations. The degree and speed of scrutiny that social media can demand will be a new challenge for council communicators to meet. In this role it would be incumbent on the communicators in councils to prepare the council as a whole for engaging in a more open and transparent way than may have happened previously.

Role four: internal communications

While this project has focussed primarily on external communications for local government, there is also a clear role for social media in improving organisational performance through more effective communications among employees. For example the work of Kent County Council in creating Communities of Practice, effectively internal social networks focussed on knowledge sharing, innovation and communication, has shown potential for greater application of such tools in the future (Hatch, 2007).

Further research

Given the scope of this research, it has been necessary to take an overview of social media as a set of tools that are available to communicators, rather than researching the practical application of any specific tool in depth. This has led to the development of a typology of four

roles for social media in local government communications that provides a framework for further more detailed research.

In practice, social media cannot be seen as a single homogenous set of tools available to communicators. The different tools within the scope of those considered as social media have different facets that make them suitable to differing communications tasks. In addition the speed at which new social media tools emerge and gain adoption among different publics mean that research struggles to keep pace with the practicalities of using social media in communications practice.

Further research in this area should focus on the key tools that are currently use in local government communications and those that are likely to be most used in the future, such as blogs and podcasts. It would also be interesting to research how receptive publics are to the participation of public sector organisations in the social media space. There is evidence that the communities that emerge through social media do not actively welcome corporate participation in what is seen as a person-to-person environment. It could be argued that this could reduce the effectiveness of local government use of social media or may require public sector communicators to adopt different tactics to their private sector counterparts.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire sample

[reproduced content from online survey, format below does not represent how survey appeared online]

1. What is your first name?
2. What is your surname?
3. Are you male or female?
4. Which age group are you in?
15-19 20-24 25-34 35-44 45-54 55+ Prefer not to say
5. What is your email address? (this will not be shared or passed on)
6. What is your work contact telephone number?
7. To say thank you for your time in completing my survey I would like to send you a copy of my final research report when it is completed. You will not receive any other email and your address will not be sold or given to anyone else. Would you like to receive a copy of my report by email?
8. What is the name of the local government organisation you work for?
9. What type of organisation do you work for?
County council District council Metropolitan council
Unitary authority London borough Parish, town or community council
Other (please specify)
10. Which of the following tools/websites/services do you use personally (whether at home or at work)?

| | Regularly | Occasionally | Rarely | Not so far, but plan to in next 6 months | Not so far and don't plan to | Not aware of tool |
|--|-----------|--------------|--------|--|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Email | | | | | | |
| Text messaging | | | | | | |
| Instant messaging (IM) | | | | | | |
| Blogs | | | | | | |
| Podcasts | | | | | | |
| Social networking (eg Facebook, Myspace, Bebo) | | | | | | |
| Video sharing websites (eg YouTube) | | | | | | |
| Image sharing websites (eg Flickr) | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Social bookmarking (eg del.icio.us) | | | | | | |
| Wikis (eg Wikipedia) | | | | | | |
| Forums / bulletin boards | | | | | | |
| Content aggregators (eg Google Desktop, Netvibes) | | | | | | |
| RSS reader (web-based or desktop) | | | | | | |
| Virtual worlds (eg Second Life) | | | | | | |
| Other (please specify) | | | | | | |

11. How do you rate your personal understanding of the following tools/websites/services?

| | No understanding | Understand enough to use them personally | Understand enough to use them professionally in council communications | Don't know |
|--|------------------|--|--|------------|
| Email | | | | |
| Text messaging | | | | |
| Instant messaging (IM) | | | | |
| Blogs | | | | |
| Podcasts | | | | |
| Social networking (eg Facebook, Myspace, Bebo) | | | | |
| Video sharing websites (eg YouTube) | | | | |
| Image sharing websites (eg Flickr) | | | | |
| Social bookmarking (eg | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| del.icio.us) | | | | |
| Wikis (eg Wikipedia) | | | | |
| Forums / bulletin boards | | | | |
| Content aggregators (eg Google Desktop, Netvibes) | | | | |
| RSS reader (web-based or desktop) | | | | |
| Virtual worlds (eg Second Life) | | | | |
| Other (please specify) | | | | |

12. Which of the following tools does your organisation currently use in its communications?

| | Regularly | Occasionally | Rarely | Not so far, but plan to in next 6 months | Not so far and don't plan to | Not aware of tool | Don't know |
|----------------------------------|-----------|--------------|--------|--|------------------------------|-------------------|------------|
| News releases | | | | | | | |
| Public meetings | | | | | | | |
| Newspaper / magazine advertising | | | | | | | |
| Radio advertising | | | | | | | |
| TV advertising | | | | | | | |
| Outdoor advertising | | | | | | | |
| Direct marketing | | | | | | | |
| Email marketing | | | | | | | |
| Text messaging | | | | | | | |
| Instant messaging (IM) | | | | | | | |
| Blogs | | | | | | | |
| Podcasts | | | | | | | |
| Social networking | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| (eg Facebook, Myspace, Bebo) | | | | | | | |
| Video sharing websites (eg YouTube) | | | | | | | |
| Image sharing websites (eg Flickr) | | | | | | | |
| Social bookmarking (eg del.icio.us) | | | | | | | |
| Wikis (eg Wikipedia) | | | | | | | |
| Forums / bulletin boards | | | | | | | |
| Content aggregators (eg Google Desktop, Netvibes) | | | | | | | |
| RSS reader (web-based or desktop) | | | | | | | |
| Virtual worlds (eg Second Life) | | | | | | | |
| Other (please specify) | | | | | | | |

13. What media monitoring does your organisation currently undertake?
(answer order randomised for all surveys)

| | Regularly | Occasionally | Rarely | Not so far, but plan to in next 6 months | Not so far and don't plan to | Not aware of tool | Don't know |
|----------------------|-----------|--------------|--------|--|------------------------------|-------------------|------------|
| Press cuttings | | | | | | | |
| Broadcast monitoring | | | | | | | |
| Online monitoring | | | | | | | |
| Web search | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| alerts | | | | | | | |
| RSS feeds | | | | | | | |
| Other (please specify) | | | | | | | |

14. How important are the following factors in determining your choice of communications channel? (answer order randomised for all surveys)

| | 1 Least important | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Most important | Don't know |
|---|-------------------------|---|---|---|---------------------|---------------|
| Personal level of knowledge/experience of the channel | | | | | | |
| Appropriateness to my communications objectives | | | | | | |
| Ease of access to appropriate technology | | | | | | |
| Support from senior officers | | | | | | |
| Support from line manager | | | | | | |
| Support from elected members | | | | | | |
| Reputational risk from critical coverage/responses | | | | | | |
| Use of the channel among target audience | | | | | | |

15. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your organisation and the use of social media in local government communications?

Appendix 2: Organisations

The list below shows the qualifying local government organisations from which one or more completed surveys were received:

| | |
|--|--|
| Aberdeenshire Council | Islington Council |
| Bath & North East Somerset Council | Kent County Council |
| Birmingham City Council | Kerrier District Council |
| Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council | Lancashire County Council |
| Bolton Council | Leeds City Council |
| Bournemouth BC | Lewisham Council |
| Bournemouth Borough Council | Lewisham Homes |
| bpha (Bedfordshire Pilgrims Housing Association) | Lincolnshire County Council |
| Bracknell Forest Borough Council | London Borough of Bexley |
| Buckinghamshire County Council | London Borough of Lewisham |
| Caerphilly county borough council | London Borough of Waltham Forest |
| Canterbury City Council | Mansfield District Council |
| Cardiff Council | Medway Council |
| Castle Point | Monmouthshire County Council |
| City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council | Neat Port Talbot CBC |
| County Durham Partnership | Newcastle City Council |
| Coventry City Council | Norfolk County Council |
| Derby City Council | North East Derbyshire District Council |
| Dumfries and Galloway Council | North Lincolnshire Council |
| Fenland District Council | North Yorkshire County Council |
| Fife Council | Northumberland County Council |
| Gateshead Council | Papworth Trust |
| Gloucestershire County Council | Portsmouth City Council |
| Gosport Borough Council | Sheffield City Council |
| Greenwich Council | Southampton City Council |
| Herefordshire Council | Trafford Council |
| Hertfordshire County Council | West Sussex County Council |
| Hillingdon Council | Wiltshire County Council |
| Homes for Haringey | Wokingham Borough Council |
| Hull City Council | Wrexham County Borough Council |

Appendix 3: Secondary research

The list below details the secondary resources consulted during this project:

- American University Center for Social Media (www.centerforsocialmedia.org)
- Chesterblogs (www.chesterblogs.co.uk)
- Communities and Local Government website (www.communities.gov.uk)
- Digital Dialogues (www.digitaldialogues.org.uk)
- EPolitix (www.epolitix.com)
- FutureGov (www.futuregovconsultancy.com)
- Government on the Web (www.governmentontheweb.org)
- Harvard Family Research Project (www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/pubs/onlinepubs/pcce/)
- I&DeA Communities of Practice (communities.idea.gov.uk/welcome.do)
- Institute for Public Relations (www.instituteforpr.org)
- International Centre of Excellence for Local e-Democracy (www.icele.org)
- Local Authorities' Gateway to National Support (www.local.gov.uk)
- Local Government Analysis and Research (www.lgar.local.gov.uk/lgv/core/page.do?pagelId=1)
- Local Government Association (www.lga.gov.uk)
- Ofcom website (www.ofcom.org.uk)
- Oxford Internet Institute (www.oii.ox.ac.uk)
- PR Books Wiki (prbooks.pbwiki.com)
- PR Week (www.prweek.com/uk)
- Public Relations Institute of Australia (www.pria.com.au)
- Society for New Communications (www.newcommreview.com)
- Tim Davies blog (www.timdavies.org.uk)