'Hyperlocal e-democracy'? The experience of Scotland's Community Councils

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Abstract: Although community or hyperlocal levels of democracy are potentially of great importance, they are arguably under-researched. This paper examines the state of e-participation in Scotland's Community Councils, its lowest (and voluntary) tier of democracy. Under a quarter were found to maintain an updated online public presence. Most Community Councils websites hosted one-way communication, with only a small minority hosting online discussion and opinion-gathering. Only 4% make planning content easily available online, despite their key importance in the planning process. More positively, it seems that real community control of website content makes the difference between having no presence at all, mediocre presences and informative, content-rich presences that may serve citizens well. Factors that may drive this state of affairs are explored and further research is proposed.

Introduction

Community or hyperlocal-level democracy is important; it has a place alongside hyperlocal media and other local third sector and campaigning groups. This is the non-'political' level of politics, where residents talk about local planning, street lighting, annual fêtes, potholes and road crossings. Following partially from Metzgar, Kurpius and Rowley (2011) we define the emerging term 'hyperlocal democracy' as 'the smallest official levels of democracy: geographically-based, community-oriented, and intended to promote civic engagement'. This definition serves to distinguish these units, which must be given audience by higher tiers of democracy, from pressure groups which can be ignored by those in power (McIntosh, et al., 1999, p. 37).

In the light of the opportunities offered by the internet, especially those offered by social media, and of other European examples of its use by community-level government, we became interested in how Scotland's Community Councils are using the internet to engage with citizens. The core questions addressed in this paper relate to the ways in which Community Councils are manifesting online; the extent of their online presences, how well are these set up to allow communication with citizens, and the scope for further useful innovation

This paper addresses these questions in two ways. Firstly, Community Councils – and some of their democratic deficits – are introduced. Next we consider what might be expected of Community Council internet presences by considering equivalents in two other European countries similar to Scotland, Community Councils' representation-only roles and how Community Councils may be affected by factors such as geography and the context of other tiers of government. We then present findings from a survey of all Community Council websites.

So this paper has two purposes: firstly to inform and secondly to form an agenda for further work.

Background and literature review

This section starts with an overview of Community Councils in Scotland and a brief comparison to their equivalents in two other European countries. Broadly following on from the classic description of levels of e-participation (Macintosh, 2004), it goes on to address areas of interest in three possible levels of community-level or hyperlocal e-participation: communication (informing citizens), consultation and participation (a channel for speaking to power) and service delivery (achieving community objectives). It concludes with a comparison to local third sector organisations as they operate in a similar participatory area.

Community Councils in Scotland

This paper focusses on the lowest level of local government in Scotland, a semi-federated constituent nation of the United Kingdom. Scotland has a population of 5.3 million; local government being divided into 32 Local Authorities (LAs) with populations varying between 20,000 and 600,000 and ranging between densely populated urban areas and remote rural communities (Scottish Government, 2012).

The purpose of Community Councils is to represent small areas within Local Authorities. Although detailed arrangements of hyperlocal government vary across the United Kingdom between England, Wales and Scotland and Northern Ireland, they share a common model – that is Community Council members are unpaid volunteers, they have small to non-existent budgets (Bort, McAlpine, & Morgan, 2012), and their powers are limited (UK Government, 1973). In terms of funding, their average annual income is around £400, mostly from Local Authority grants (Bort, McAlpine, & Morgan, 2012) – enough to hire a monthly meeting room, pay for some stationery and precious little else. In terms of impact, Community Councils have had mixed success at best (Goodlad, Flint, Kearns, Keoghan, Paddison and Raco (1999), Local Communities Reference Group (2012)).

In 1999, potentially 1390 CCs could exist, but only 1152 were active (83%), covering 83% of the Scottish population (Goodlad, et al., 1999, p. 21). By 2011, the figures were nearly unchanged at

1369, 1156 and 84% respectively (Ryan & Cruickshank, 2012, p. 18). Uncontested elections have been a feature of CCs throughout their existence as candidate numbers have very often been less than the number of places available – in 1999, the number of Community Councillors was around 65% of the potential number, and only 17% of CCs had contested elections. Community Councillors were generally aged over 40, and often were not representative of the demographics of their areas (Goodlad, et al., 1999). All this has combined to reduce their democratic legitimacy.

The Scottish Government and before that the UK Government have made several attempts to invigorate Community Councils, for example (Scottish Government (2005), Scottish Government (2012)).

Research has been carried out in the past to develop websites that allowed Community Councils to host discussion of issues with constituents, and Community Councillors to converse privately online (Whyte, Macintosh, & Shell, 2006). This experiment showed that web-based tools enabled and encouraged more people to have their say, that there was significant appetite for such tools and that electronic documentation is readily used given web access and relevant skills. This experiment finished in 2006 and the tools were not maintained. Despite this, most of the CCs involved are still online in various ways.

In summary, Community Councils have a function as 'representatives', but little or no function in delivering (state or government) services. This creates a challenge for fitting in with conventional models of democracy and government. In terms of the use of technology, we have potential for e-participation without e-government.

Others' experiences: expectations of the use of the internet

In many other European countries, municipalities are more active in using the internet to communicate with their citizens. In 2008, 98% of Austrian *Gemeinden*[1] had websites. Of these, 80% were under the 'official' Austrian Government '.gv.at' domain (Centre for eGovernment, 2009). As early as 2003, 90% of Norwegian *kommuner*[2] had websites (Haug & Jansen, 2003) and by 2011, 58% of *kommuner* had social media presences – the major provider was Facebook, used by 38% of *kommuner* (Volan, 2011). Despite this, online engagement by citizens has not been widespread (Saglie & Vabo, 2009) showing that being active online should not be expected to be a panacea.

An appetite for online engagement by citizens certainly exists: 14% of UK adults have taken part in online discussions of civic or political issues (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

Communication: hyperlocal news and hyperlocal politics?

The initial rung of e-participation is *information*, as a one-way relationship in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens (Macintosh, 2004). In this area, the often close relationship between local representation and community/citizen journalism needs to be remembered (Bruns, 2010): the topics that are addressed overlap with Community Council

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[1] Austria is not too dissimilar to Scotland, having a population of 8.3 million and a large proportion of remote mountainous regions. Austria has 9 *Bundesländer* ('federal states'), divided into 84 *Bezirke* ('districts') and 15 Statutarstädte ('statutory cities'). *Bezirke* are subdivided into *Gemeinden* ('parishes'), of which there are 2346

[2] Norway has a population of 5.0 million. Its local government structure has 19 *fylker* ('counties'), divided into 434 *kommuner* ('municipalities').

interests, for example local planning. The role of a pre-prepared platform (e.g. myHeimat.de) can be important in allowing representatives to focus on communication, rather than the details of technology. Such platforms can also provide resources to engage, motivate and train contributors – accepting that levels of activity will differ, and will vary over time. This model may particularly apply in small towns and rural communities – residents of larger cities do not have the same identification with their suburbs. (Bruns, 2010).

There needs to be recognition that most people use the internet as an information source rather than a medium for conversations or a tool for change: although they appear to 'lurk' (Cruickshank, Edelmann, & Smith, 2010) a lack of evidence of online engagement is not evidence that there is no interest. There also needs to be an awareness of the multiplicity of channels on and offline, public and private that communication be taking place on (Saglie & Vabo, 2009).

Consultation and participation

Community Councils have three statutory *representative* roles: community opinions, planning and (alcohol) licensing, but these often lead to conflict with powerful interests such as developers and higher levels of government who often see community objections as blocking their agendas (Cotton & Devine-Wright (2010), Parker (2008)).

Technology has often been found to provide further channels for the self-efficacious to communicate with power (Saglie & Vabo (2009), Cruickshank & Smith (2009)), thereby *reinforcing* the digital divide. A further challenge is therefore for society is to empower local government such as Community Councils in deprived and marginalised areas of the country (Bochel, 2012). This includes dealing with their geographical range (Saglie & Vabo, 2009).

Larger geographical size (and numbers of constituents) can provide motivation for representatives to use technology by creating efficiencies of scale (Saglie & Vabo, 2009). On the other hand, citizens in smaller communities have been found to have higher incidences of internet-based participation, despite relatively poor connectivity. Younger and more educated people are more likely to use internet technologies.

At the hyperlocal level, the motivation to become a Community Councillor might be different from political representation: for instance joining a Community Council can be a good way to get to know people (Nyseth & Ringholm, 2008).

Service delivery

Democratic government is about improving citizens' lives through delivery of services, but Community Councils have no obligatory service-provision duties. In Scotland, service-provision is associated with Local Authorities, central government and the outsourced organisations funded by them such as development companies and third sector organisations (Scottish Government, 2011).

By contrast, the equivalent local government units (often generically labelled *municipalities*) in other European countries generally provide services, and raise income to enable this. For example, Austria's *Gemeinden* provide services such as water, sewerage and recreation facilities. *Gemeinden* are funded from federal taxes, local taxes and charges, and even have a strong voice in European matters (Österreichischer Gemeindebund, 2013).

Similarly, Norwegian *kommuner* provide services such as primary and lower secondary schools, nurseries and kindergartens, some social services, local land-use planning, roads and harbours, and work on agricultural and environmental issues. In 2003, *kommuner* spent approximately £20 billion on these services. *Kommuner* received 42% of their income from local income and property taxes and 47% from grants from local government and other sources (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2003).

Community councils - a kind of voluntary organisation?

Given the limitations of Community Councils, maybe it is better to look at other community groups for models of online engagement. Community Councils are largely composed of volunteers and exist in a context of other local groups, official and unofficial, competing for space with NGOs and other governments agencies, which are often established at local level but exclude Community Councillors. This 'new governance process' has been characterised by deliberative processes, informal channels and multiple organisations (Bingham, Nabatchi, & O'Leary, 2005).

Many charities have websites. Most of these are about raising awareness and providing information, rather than acquiring new supporters, raising funds or allowing beneficiaries/clients to interact (Goatman & Lewis, 2007). Charity websites can be useful for staff and fieldworkers, e.g. for submitting reports. Others have specific functions such as providing information about the charity, contact details, downloads, newsletters and news, feedback, links to other websites and campaigning and lobbying.

It seems clear that many of these are similar to the uses of an 'ideal' Community Council presence. For example, considering the lack of contested elections, Community Councils may well want to recruit new members and to provide information and feedback. They might use member-only systems to discuss confidential items outside of meetings, while the CC analogy to project pages would be areas discussing planning issues. Small charity website development is subject to similar pressures to those facing Community Councils, such as decisions over whether (and how) to outsource development or to keep it in-house. A significant difference is that charities do need to compete for attention and donations (Winterich, Zhang, & Mittal, 2012); competition between Community Councils is inherently limited.

Research approach

Probably reflecting their low profile, there has been a lack of concrete data on the actual activity of Community Councils online. Before further detailed research is possible, it is necessary to have some facts in place. Therefore, to gain an initial understanding of the actual level of use of the internet by Community Councils, a survey of their visible internet presences was carried out. In July 2012, lists of Community Councils were used to search Google. If a relevant-seeming hit appeared in the first two pages, the URL was investigated and the hosting and content categorised using a simple framework: presence of minutes, local area information, news and planning process. To ensure completeness, Local Authorities' Community Council Liaison Officers (CCLOs) were asked to validate the lists of Community Councils as some LAs listed online only those which were active. This led to the identification of additional websites.

Websites were then reviewed for timeliness and hosting arrangements, using the categories summarised in Table 1 below. Websites were deemed up-to-date if they had been updated in the previous two months, to allow for summer breaks and minutes not being put online until they had been approved at succeeding meetings.

Table 1: Main dimensions of analysis

Dimension	Main categories
Timeliness	Updated in previous two months.
Content	News, local information, minutes, Information on planning documents
Hosting	Own website, local community site, LA-provided

To investigate the drivers behind this data, representatives of seven Community Councils were interviewed; this also enabled limited follow-up of previous research (Whyte, Macintosh, & Shell, 2006).

Findings and discussion

Level of activity

The results of our survey are summarised in Table 2 below[3]. 1166 CCs were found to function to some extent, of a potential 1369 (i.e. 85% exist). Of these 658 (57% of existing CCs) are online in any way; only about a quarter (307 or 27%) of all existing CCs were found to be up-to-date online.

Table 2: Community Councils' online presences: total

	Inactive CCs	Active with online presences…			Total CCs
		missing	out-of-date	up-to-date	
Total number	213	498	351	307	1369
Percent of all	*16%*	*36%*	*26%*	*22%*	*100%*
Percent of active	*NA*	*43%*	*30%*	*27%*	*100%*

Of the 'out of date' websites, an additional 6% had last been updated within than 6 months of the survey, taking the total with some viable activity to one third; this would still leave around a sixth of the websites surveyed being totally out of date, in addition to the 52% that are either not online or non-existent.

This level of use of websites compares adversely with the 98% of Austrian Gemeinden and 90% of Norwegian kommuner.

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[3] A more detailed analysis is available elsewhere (Ryan & Cruickshank, 2012)

Variations between LAs and between Community Councils

Given Scotland's geographic and demographic diversity, a range of characteristic behaviour would be expected, and this was the case. Table 3 below illustrates the range of data found: the proportion of up-to-date online Community Councils within individual Local Authorities varied between 88% and 3%.

Table 3: Community Councils' online presences: top and bottom Local Authorities (R=rural, U=(sub)urban)

Local Authority (ranked by proportion of up to date presences)	Popul-ation ('000)	In-active CCs	Active with online presences…			Active CCs	
			missing	out-of-date	up-to-date	on-line	up-to-date
Moray (1) R	87.1	4	0	2	14	100%	88%
East Renfrewshire (2) U	89.5	0	0	3	7	100%	70%
Edinburgh (3) U	486.1	4	0	18	24	100%	57%
Falkirk (4) U	153.3	0	0	9	9	100%	50%
Dumfries & Galloway (28) R	148.2	17	72	9	9	20%	10%
Orkney (29) R	20.1	0	0	18	2	100%	10%
East Dunbartonshire (30) U	104.6	0	8	4	1	38%	8%
Eilean Siar (31) R	26.2	4	22	3	1	15%	4%
East Ayrshire (32) U	120.0	5	26	3	1	13%	3%

A simple review of the data shows that factors to explain this variation must include more than geography and demography – for instance also policy and personality: it may be that some LAs have particularly effective Liaison Officers, or have a more proactive attitude to supporting their Community Councils.

Hosting decisions

It was found that up to date internet presences can be naturally grouped into two categories that cover the majority of circumstances (19% out of the 22% which are active). Figure 1 below illustrates the relationship between hosting arrangements and the currency of their contents. The largest and most up to date segment is where the Community Council maintains its own content (118 out of the 307 up-to-date websites). A further 61 actively maintained sites are associated with local community groups.
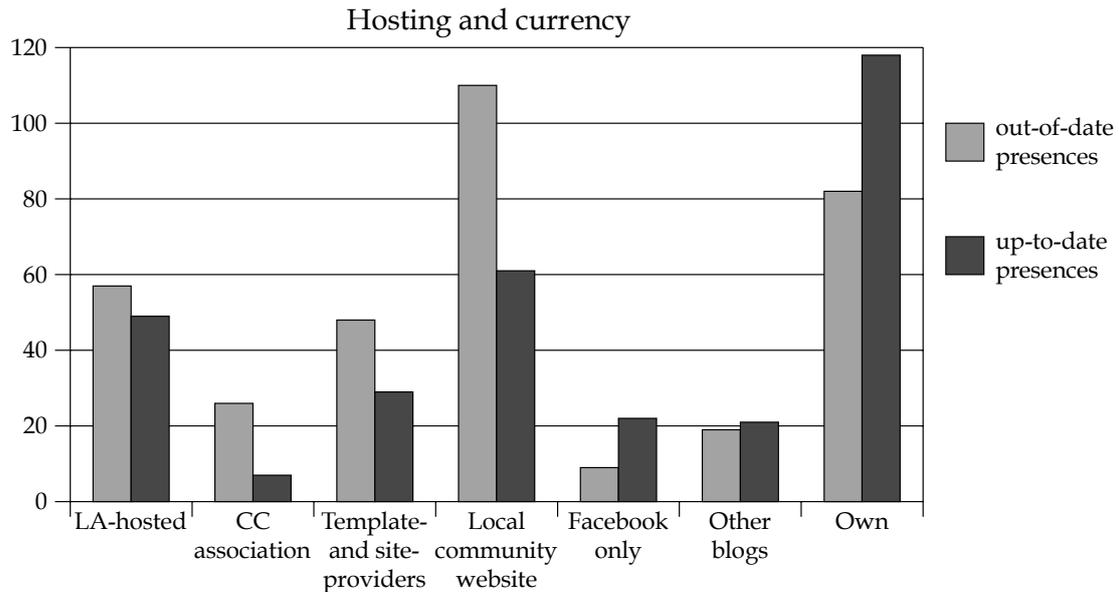
Figure 1: The relationship between hosting arrangements and currency of content

Firstly, *up-to-date, community-driven*: the online presence was under the direct control of the Community Council or members of the local community. 15% of up-to-date Community Council presences fell into this category. Community-driven presences had a wide range of content and almost all (93%) were updated monthly. One interpretation is that Community Councils who have the drive to keep their sites up to date are similarly empowered to have wider ranges of content, hence informing their constituents and others outside their area. Secondly, *up-to-date, LA-hosted*: Here, the online presence that was hosted on its local authority's website. 4% of all Community Councils (sited in six LAs) fell into this category. LA-driven presences almost always contained only minutes and contact details, and were updated monthly. In short, although up-to-date, the content was limited and inflexible.

Content analysis

Looking at the content Community Councils with active web presences chose to include, content could be categorised into five main classes: minutes (recorded on 267 or 87% of active online sites), local area information, news (139 had all of these). Only 38 (12% of active online sites) had information to support engagement with the planning process which is core to Community Councils' mission.

LA-hosted presences tended to have only minutes and CC contact details. Only 50 (4%) of all CCs had Facebook pages - compare this to the 58% of Norwegian kommuner which use social media; these pages tended not to have minutes.

Discussion and conclusion

In conclusion, we found little evidence of activity, and much evidence of inactivity. Although the methodology was not designed to explore or evaluate the drivers and inhibitors behind the raw figures, it is now possible to start to set a research agenda. Revisiting the earlier themes, it can be seen that there is some evidence that the internet is being used for *communication* – and there is

some evidence that Community Councils work best in the context of other hyperlocal media activity.

Community Councils are largely not using the internet as a tool for *consultation or hence (e-)participation*. In particular, the areas where there is a clear duty to gather and represent community viewpoints to other levels of government – planning and licencing – the internet's potential to engage is not being used at all (visibly at least).

Service delivery: as would be expected, no was evidence found – but evidence (e.g. of voluntary activities) was not specifically sought.

Scotland's Community Councils provide an unusual example of representation without taxation or government duties. It may be that the consequences can be seen in low levels of citizen engagement with the Councils, and low levels of engagement by Community Councils with new open forms of communication provided by the internet. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this paper will be a contribution to the emerging study of hyperlocal democracy, if only to highlight some of the restrictions and limitations that can be encountered at this level.

It might be expected that the majority of Community Councils would use online methods to connect with citizens where possible – acknowledging that they are still obliged to connect with offline citizens – if only because this could increase efficiency and decrease operating costs. Yet the opposite seems to be the case (Cruickshank, Ryan, & Smith, In Press).

Although this is more than a problem of e-participation, it seems likely that there are lessons from this field that could be applied to 'improve' the process from the bottom up, even while a broader dialog on the purpose and function of Community Councils continues.

Research limitations

The approach taken in designing the research can be situated in the e-participation tradition, which historically has had an assumption that technology can be used to solve problems (in this case) with democracy, and that direct participatory democracy is superior to representative democracy (Susha & Grönlund, 2012). Models of success of e-participation also tend to measure technological maturity models rather than impact on citizens' lives or democratic practices. All of these notions are highly contestable.

This research may be argued to have some of these weaknesses – in particular, there is no clear line between increasing observed internet presences and empowering Community Councils, which is a political process that this research was not designed to address. Further, it cannot be assumed that a weak or non-existent online presence automatically implies that a Community Council does not have a good engagement with citizens in other ways. However these unspoken assumptions have had the advantage of keeping things simple, which was one of the aims for this small-scale exercise. It is for political scientists to explore the wider issues and consequences of the constitutional situation.

Further work

These results open up a number of avenues for future research. Although we are satisfied we achieved full coverage of Community Councils' internet presences, it is possible that online

activity also takes place elsewhere. In particular, it may be that closed mailing lists or Facebook groups are used. A related point is that it is arguable that the data gathering focussed too much on websites and not enough on social media (which allows for sharing with the local community rather than the 'whole world'): a further project could explore this area. This could be combined with a resurvey to see how the situation is evolving. Research could look at the extent to which demographic and geographic factors are associated with the differences in online activity, allowing comparison with previous research in similar contexts, for example (Saglie & Vabo, 2009).

Further work could provide analysis and explanation at the institutional and individual level; both need to be addressed (Saglie & Vabo, 2009). This could include the processes and factors behind the choices made by individual Community Councils and Councillors to use internet technologies – and their relationship with local third sector and community groups.

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