Old rules for new technologies: institutional responses to social media use by local councillors

Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which elected councillors in England are using social media communication platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to reframe their roles as representatives largely outside the formal local government structures. A detailed study of practice in four local authorities, urban and rural, shows that although local councillors are traditionally ‘institutionally embedded agents’ (Lowndes, 2005, Bell 2011), the challenging external context created by the rapid rise of social media use by citizens means that some politicians are developing new ways of working which are outside the institutional environment.

The paper calls attention to the failure of the current institutional responses to political social media use at the local level and asks whether new informal rules in use (Ostrom, 1986, 1999, Lowndes and Wilson 2003, Lowndes et al 2006) are beginning to emerge. The current formal constitutional arrangements which shape and constrain councillors’ public behaviour, it is argued, have not provided a clear set of rules for social media use and in the subsequent uncertainty new forms of policy development have arisen, driven by the politicians themselves rather than by council managers. Through case study analysis this paper shows how councillors’ social media use is largely decoupled from institutional arrangements and it adds to an understanding of how technological change is influencing councillors and local democracy.

Keywords: social media, local government, councils, new institutionalism

Introduction

The notion that the study of social media has a serious role to play in political science is still striving to gain credibility in the literature and certainly its influence on democratic activity is contested with Benkler (2006:272) and Castells (2011), for example, have argued that the Internet democratises and allows all citizens to change their relationship with the public sphere while other writers such as Coleman and Blumler (2009) have counselled against technological determinism and advised caution about over-hyping the impact that the new media will have on democracy. Other writers have seen the assertions about the impact of the Internet as a type of epochalism and have argued that the arguments about technology driving societal and structural change fall into a kind of technological determinism which is not borne out by practice (Margolis and Moreno-Riaño (2009). Dutton et al (2009) suggest that:

‘The Internet does not have a set of pre-determined outcomes. It does not make people more sociable or lead people into civic engagement. However, it does provide a resource for people to pursue their interests in seeking information, communicating with others, and

1 Social media is defined here as a group of web-based technologies which support and facilitate collaboration, interaction and user participation. The types of applications which might be covered by the descriptor ‘social media’ includes social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.
being entertained in ways that could well advantage them over those who choose not to use the Internet’. (OXIS 2009:27)

This paper maintains, without accepting the technological determinism argument, that social media is already having an influence on the practices of politics and is beginning to reshape the behaviour of politicians. The paper examines what is really happening when two cultural paradigms come together – the historic, bureaucratic and hierarchic institutions of government and the open, transparent, meritocratic and often messy world of social media?

Focussing on politics at the local level the paper considers how elected representatives are using social media in practice and, using case study material, illustrates how some councillors, those who were early adopters of the new technologies, are reshaping their practice. It also uses the material gathered to make the case that the very existence of social media is calling forth a range of institutional responses, from banning to active encouragement and that these responses are beginning to reshape the landscape of local politics.

The challenges for local government of the external context created by the extensive use of social media by citizens in the U.K. since the development of Web 2.0 since 2005 are outlined and the paper goes on to look at how current institutional norms have shaped and constrained the behaviour of elected representatives as well as whether those rules are adapting.

The findings section of the paper describes and analyses some of the emerging social media practice of ‘leading edge’ councillors which was uncovered by the study and explores how social media allows councillors to develop ‘impression management’ (Goffman 1959) and ‘symbolic representativeness’ (Eulau and Karps 1997) as well as new capacities. The emergence of new rules or norms for councillors’ behaviour is also delineated and considered in an attempt to move beyond description of technological use into a deeper appreciation of the ways in which councillors are ‘doing politics’ online. The work of Lowndes (2008:55) provides a framework, which is exemplified when she states:

New institutionalist’ analysis is grounded in these ‘common sense’ understandings of the nature and importance of institutions, but seeks to establish more specifically the characteristics of institutions and the dynamics of institutional change. New institutionalism moves beyond the descriptive traditions of pervious institutional approaches. It is interested less in describing formal structures and constitutions, and more in unearthing the ‘rules of the game’ that influence behaviour.

Those rules will be examined in more detail later in the paper after a brief summary which outlines the methodology used in the research.

Research methodology

The background for this piece of work came from a quantitative study of eighty five English councils and a detailed qualitative study of practice in four local authorities and is part of a wider PhD study on the impact of social media on accountability in local government.

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2 Web 2.0 allows users to create their own content online, to interact and to collaborate with others; examples of applications using Web 2 include blogs, mash-ups and wikis (editable encyclopedias).
The quantitative study sample was drawn from the population of three hundred and fifty three English councils. The councils with poor broadband connectivity (Ofcom index 2011) were excluded in order to separate citizen concerns around communication from the issues caused by the technical difficulties of broadband access. A random sample of 85 councils was then drawn from the remaining two hundred and sixty-two councils. Online sources, such as the councils' web-sites, were then used build an overall picture of the changing nature of the use of two particular social media platforms used in local government, Facebook and Twitter.

This data was then evaluated for different types of content, for example photographs, number of posts over twenty-four hours, type of retweets and interactivity and the content was also subjectively scored against a five point scale for levels of formality. Information such as population, population density, political control and percentage turnout at the last election was also used to populate the spread sheet. The number of Twitter followers and Facebook ‘likes’ was also collected for each council. The data collection took the form of a time series with three successive samples collected at regular time intervals over three years.

The purpose of this was not to develop a new form of web metrics, but was intended, given the speed of technological change, to help to provide a background within which to locate the next, qualitative, phase of the research project. This narrowed the focus of the study and comprised the development of rich, descriptive case studies of four councils (strategically selected from the sample population) in England. NVivo10 was used to develop the coding frames to enable categorisation of the data.

Work within the case study councils, a London borough, a large rural council, a mayoral council and a metropolitan borough, has taken the form of approximately fifty-six semi-structured interviews with councillors and officers and observation of meetings as well as analysis of documents such as constitutions and standing orders both online and offline.

**The impact of social media on local government**

Citizens have been using the new social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter extensively for debate, comment and engagement with a number of institutions and commercial companies (Shirky 2008, Rheingold 2012). In the first quarter of 2013, 43.5 million adults, 86 per cent of the population in the UK, were reported to have used the Internet (Office of National Statistics). The British population were also embracing many forms of social media, with Twitter claiming over 10 million users in the UK in 2012 and Facebook 30 million. The 2009 OXIS survey showed a specific rise in social networking with nearly half (49 per cent) of all Internet users surveyed having updated or created a social networking profile in the last year, up from 17 per cent in 2007. And in the first quarter of 2012 figures from the Office of National Statistics showed that 60 per cent of Internet users had used social media in the last year.

More significantly, in terms of social media, there was also a marked increase in the creation and production of content by users. Blogs and personal websites reported in the OXIS (2011) survey represented 25 per cent of the total user population. The survey also highlighted the emergence of a ‘next generation’ of Internet users, primarily young people, with always-on broadband connections and an increased use of handheld devices to access the Internet.
The picture revealed by the wider statistics demonstrated that citizens were using social media extensively for news, information and entertainment purposes. Much of that activity was purely social; the teen idol Justin Bieber had 56 million followers on Facebook in August 2013. Citizens were also interacting with the new technologies, developing what Rheingold (2012:147) termed the skills of ‘social-digital know-how’, including the realisation of ‘participation power’ (ibid: 111). Shirky (2008) illustrated the many and different ways in which citizens are beginning to use the new applications creatively to hold private sector companies to account, citing examples of individuals harnessing the participative power of social media to change the practice of large corporations which fear reputational damage.

Twitter was also beginning to shape news as mainstream newspapers and television looked to Twitter contributors more frequently as news sources. Bruns et al (2012:8) in their analysis of social media use in the 2011 Queensland floods argued that ‘Twitter both drew on and became a source for mainstream media’. Closer to home, a survey of British Members of Parliament (Democratic Audit 2013) revealed that over 408 MPs had Twitter accounts with 242 not yet tweeting.

This picture of the usage of social media and interaction with the public contrasted sharply with that in local government. Councils came late to the understanding that they would have to engage with social media. Indeed it was only in the last decade that local authorities began to invest wholesale in the provision of static websites, on line information and simple transactional functionality. That provision was only speeded up with the advent of some ring-fenced funding streams and the establishment of government targets (ODPM 2002, ODPM 2005). Councils became relatively comfortable with the provision of information online but were initially more wary about engaging with the public in the more fluid and unstructured arena of social media (Local Engagement On Line research website, June 2011). Margolis, M. & Moreno-Riaño, G., writing in 2009, commented that many of the anticipated changes in democratic processes have not yet materialised:

‘…we argued that the preliminary evidence indicates that the Internet has produced changes in the ways that citizens inform themselves about political and civic affairs, but that it has not produced the surge of participatory politics nor the redistribution of political power that classical democrats anticipated.’

The early stories of councils’ attempt to control or to set boundaries for online interactions were fraught with problems. The results were often inept as the limitations of a traditional institutional bureaucracy clashed with the agility and immediacy of the medium. Stockport council made the national newspapers in 2009 with the embarrassing story that six months after setting up a Facebook page the council had only garnered six ‘Facebook friends’. Adur and Worthing councils suffered a similar fate in 2010. Councils also struggled to respond to the growing use of mobile phones to film meetings with some councils such as Cambridge and Carmarthen banning the practice altogether in 2012. More recently, in 2013, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government issued new guidance which instructed councils to open up their meetings to citizens for the purpose of filming, blogging or tweeting (DCLG 2013).

Control of social media or the setting of inappropriate boundaries has also had unintended consequences for councils. In of the case study councils the elected Mayor had embraced social media wholeheartedly, tweeting and posting most days, but access to social media was blocked for all staff outside the communications unit. Employees were unable to access the external
communications of the elected Mayor and of the council itself. In a further attempt at control, the
council’s HR department had provided guidance to staff which tried to restrict any mention, in their
personal use of social media, of working for the council.

Experimenting with the web-casting of council meetings, in conjunction with a comment forum for
viewers, was also problematic, yielding mixed results. Most council meetings, it is accepted, are
attended by very few members of the public. Among the most viewed webcasts for Cornwall
Council were the full Council meeting of 16 October 2012, with a total of 13,575 live and archive
views, and the full Council meeting of 23 October 2012 with a total of 11,710 views. That can be
compared with Stoke on Trent City council where the viewing figures reached a high of 476 for a
budget-setting meeting in February 2011, but a low of 2 viewers for the June council meeting.

The impact of social media on local government has yet to be explored in depth in the literature, but
it might be expected, as Coleman and Blumler (2009:8) have argued, that the new technology has
real potential to improve democracy and to transform relations between the public and holders of
political authority by inverting the ‘few to many architecture of the broadcast age…’

In theory at least, the Internet and particularly social media have great potential for enhancing
public engagement in politics at the local level because:

• Citizens can be better informed; they have access to more information online;

• Citizens can participate; commenting and tweeting is easier than attending meetings. They
don’t need to post letters or attend meetings. For those who don’t fit the majority societal norms,
for example ethnic minority citizens, the Internet can also provide a useful cloak of anonymity;
O’Reilly (2010), writing about the changes in media use created by Web 2.0 coined the term the
‘architecture of participation’ to describe this increase in participative technologies;

• Citizens can be in direct dialogue with politicians – unmediated by officers, Dialogue can be
self-structured by the participants rather than the authorities. Benkler (2000:180) describes the
‘freeing’ effect thus:

‘The Internet allows individuals to abandon the idea of the public sphere as primarily
constructed of finished statements, altered by a small set of actors socially understood to be
‘the media’ (whether state owned or commercial) and separated from society, and to move
towards a set of social practices that see individuals as participating in a debate.’;

• Citizens can pressurise politicians online; they can create protest and amplify positions;

• Citizens can be the experts on local issues in their neighbourhood;

The potential for local councils to utilise these new technologies is evidenced above and it might
therefore be expected that the research findings would show that councils, as institutions, were
adapting and had taken steps, for example, by changing constitutions, to embed new media
practices into the day to day working life of the authority. It might also be hypothesised that
councillors would be trained in and advised upon their social media use in order to bring their
practice into line with that of the councils where they were elected members.
Having set the scene, the next section focusses on the early findings from both the quantitative and the qualitative studies, highlighting in particular how the practice of ‘leading edge’ actors is unfolding. The findings are divided into three sections describing the diversity of practice which was uncovered, the apparent failure of the current institutional arrangements to adapt to social media use and the emergence of some new rules.

Findings

Diversity of practice

Across the 85 councils surveyed there was a surprising heterogeneity and divergence of practice in the usage of the two most popular social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook. The strong homogenising pressures on institutional behaviour (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Meyer and Rowan 1977) would suggest that the new social media platforms would be adopted uniformly across local government but that was not found to be the case.

Twitter was the most popular social media platform for councils with 89 per cent of the 85 councils in the study sample registered as having a main council Twitter account but there was a wide spectrum of range in the number of ‘tweets’. Of the councils surveyed 34 per cent had one or no posts or tweets in a 24 hour period (surveyed midweek, September 2012), whereas the council at the top of the range had 40 tweets in the same period. The number of Twitter followers as a percentage of population also varied with Newcastle and Oxford rating with 5 per cent of their population following them on Twitter. Wychavon and Exeter came next at 4 per cent, with Lichfield, Tanridge, Lambeth, Westminster and Northumberland coming in just behind. The fact that these councils are of different sizes in terms of the population they serve and that they cover both rural and urban settings would indicate that there are factors other than these at work in determining engagement with local citizens.

Facebook was less popular; only 53 per cent of the survey councils had whole council Facebook accounts with the remainder choosing to have no formal council presence on Facebook. The highest number of Facebook ‘likes’ was 3298 and the lowest 34. There was also diversity in the style and tone of postings which ranged from formal ‘broadcast mode’ to informal.

A small number of councils, representing 15 per cent of the total, stood out from the other councils in their adoption of a highly informal style in postings, retweets for non-council organisations, regular use of URLs and visible online dialogue with citizens. Those councils also made frequent use of first names and colloquial language such as ‘hi’ instead of the more formal ‘hello’.

The analysis of the initial results indicated that councils’ use of social media was currently falling into what can be described as three main categories; emerging (and avoiding), engaging and embracing. The categorisation can only be provisional at this stage as terminology in social media is not yet settled and widely agreed, but it provides a working basis for further development. The key features for the categorisation are described below:

Figure 1. Categorisation of councils’ use of social media 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging (and avoiding)</th>
<th>Engaging</th>
<th>Embracing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Councils which are avoiding</td>
<td>Councils which are engaging with at</td>
<td>Councils which are actively</td>
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</table>

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engaging with the new technologies and currently have either very little or no communication with the public using the new platforms. May have a main council account but demonstrates ‘place-keeping’ behaviour by securing site on social media platforms which is then not used, i.e. no post or tweets. Some social media presence may be allowed in specialist areas such as museums or sports departments. If social media is used then the style is ‘broadcast’ and formal. Social media use by staff often banned.

least some of the new technologies with at least one account on social media platforms. Often uses ‘broadcast’ mode, (see Benkler’s ‘finished statements’ 2000:180), using social media like press releases to conventional media. Content tends to be what Landsbergen describes as stuck in ‘providing a stream of information mode’ (2010:140). Posting not always frequent and usually event driven e.g. winter gritting schedules or forthcoming meetings. Retweets are often only from other public sector organisations.

using social media platforms to communicate with residents, with frequent posts. Main council account covering all aspects of services and residents’ concerns. High level of followers as a percentage of population. Actively seeking external contributions and opinions, e.g. retweeting, including photographs. Creates listening presence by asking questions. Use of informal tone and first names. Responsive and creates a sense of real dialogue. Staff access to social media.

While these categorisations provided an initial way of segmenting the use of social media by councils, there is further work to be done on understanding the constraining and enabling forces at work and how significant the ‘actorhood’ (Meyer and Jepperson 2000) of key or charismatic individuals might be in shaping choices. The early findings indicate that some councils may be more risk averse or have had an experience which has reduced their appetite for social media, but further research is required to demonstrate that this is the case. East Herts District Council, for example, originally chose the social media site MySpace over Facebook after the latter allowed comments to be posted on the site by individuals and organisations other than the council itself, citing the need to control inaccurate or abusive comments.

In terms of the presence of politicians on these platforms, once again the picture was diverse. 71 per cent of the councils surveyed had at least one councillor who had blogged or tweeted in the previous month. The Local Government Association’s ‘Tweety Hall’ (August 2013) site listed over 700 councillors tweeting with different levels of frequency, out of the 20,000 councillors in England. The research revealed a spectrum of councillors’ usage of social media and an initial characterisation of that is displayed in the table below:

Figure 2. Categorisation of councillors’ use of social media 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Denying councillors</th>
<th>Doubting councillors</th>
<th>Dabbling councillors</th>
<th>Digital councillors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usage</td>
<td>No use of social media at all.</td>
<td>No use of social media for political purposes (but may use Facebook in a family context). Never tweeted or posted in own right.</td>
<td>Aware of different platforms and has tried to use at least one.</td>
<td>Regular and frequent contributor to at least one social media platform. Retweets others regularly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Has some awareness of social media, but has entirely negative views. Categorises social media as trivial. Internet seen as riddled with risk.</td>
<td>Has some awareness of social media and accepts that it is now part of political life even if not personally using social media themselves. Fears negative and risky aspects of social media e.g. trolls, loss of privacy.</td>
<td>Late adopter. Identifies social media as now important in politics. Uses lurking to learn. Negativity can lead to either angry responses or withdrawal. Inadvertent tweets or posts can lead to unintended consequences.</td>
<td>Comfortable with social media. Usually early adopter. Proactive in usage of social media. Sees it as the norm - a way of living. Follows ‘people of influence’ locally. Not easily put off by negativity.</td>
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<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred communication style</td>
<td>Preference for face-to-face or written communication. Writes to local newspapers.</td>
<td>Preference for face-to-face or written communication. Writes to local newspapers. Few retweets/posts.</td>
<td>Default tone and style is ‘broadcast’ messages, sometimes focussed exclusively on comment on events or national issues.</td>
<td>Adoption of tone which accurately reflects offline values and persona in a way that is recognisable and authentic. Asks questions, is interested in dialogue as well as debate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of contributions</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>National and party political, some local.</td>
<td>Mostly consciously locally focussed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Lacks technical skills and knowledge to use social media, although may have tried briefly and given up.’ Not clear about boundaries.</td>
<td>Not comfortable enough with social media to use a great deal, often ‘lurks’. Concerned about boundaries and making political gaffes. Still more comfortable with more considered email and offline communication.</td>
<td>Technical skills sufficient to feel comfortable with social media, skills sometimes greater than that of officers. Clear about personal and political boundaries, but confidence can lead to errors. Is committed to being responsive if appropriate. Responsible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This spectrum of councillor behaviour provided the context and framework for the next area for consideration; the more detailed institutional arrangements which govern the actions of elected
representatives within councils, with particular focus on those councillors who were early adopters of the new technologies.

**The failure of current institutional arrangements**

How did the current institutional arrangements constrain and shape councillors’ behaviour and what changes happened as a result of social media use? The study utilised Lowndes and Roberts’s (2013:16) new institutionalist description of ‘rules, practices and narratives’ to assist in categorising the shaping and constraining features of political life within local government.

**Rules**

In terms of rules one of the key constraining features of local government life is the constitution, which sets out the rules for the British ‘Committee-Leader’ form of local government (Wilson and Game 2002:271, Mouritzen and Svara 2002: 61). The constitution covers the Forward Plan of forthcoming decisions, the decision-making processes, the lines of responsibilities and accountabilities, declarations of interests and the minuting of decisions. These rules, as a comparison of council constitutions in England quickly showed, are very homogenous being based on a model constitution published with the Local Government Act 2000. DiMaggio and Powell (1983:147) highlighted the very strong institutional forces at work in most organisations, noting that institutional processes and forms make organisations more homogeneous, not just structurally, but also in terms of their culture and output. They point to the ‘startling homogeneity of organizational forms and practices’ (ibid: 148) and this is well illustrated in local government constitutions.

A scan of the constitutions of the 85 sample councils found that social media was rarely referred to directly in the rules governing council committees and procedures. The almost total absence of specific references to social media might be attributed to the fact that constitutions have traditionally been revised only infrequently and usually only in response to changing legislation.

**Practices**

The constitution is often supported by guidance or standing orders which exist to guide day to day practice within the council or the party (Copus 2004:123). Standing orders might cover, for example, the order of debate in a meeting or the precise times when the public can speak at council meetings. In addition informal, written or unwritten, rules usually exist to guide councillors, for instance in responding to the public, dealing with complaints and speaking to the media.

Councillors are also expected to abide by a local code of conduct which guides their behaviour towards each other and the public. The previous ethical standards regime governing the conduct of local councillors was abolished in 2012 (Localism Act 2011) with the responsible Minister claiming an end to the centralised codification of councillor behaviour, but was replaced in most councils by a local standards code.

Practices in councils are also framed by the induction of new councillors after election, by on-going training, for example in the quasi-judicial procedures of the planning system and by the customs and practices of the particular political group to which the councillor belongs (Copus 2004:199). Practices are often homogenous across councils, with a great deal of often learning by mimesis (DiMaggio and Powell (1983:151) especially where models or good practice guides have been
offered by the Local Government Association (see for example the IDeA’s online ‘Connected Councillors’ 2010).

The research findings across the sample authorities indicated a sparsity of evidence that guidance or standing orders had changed to accommodate new practices. None of the councillors in the case study authorities could recollect having been given any specific guidance on use apart from the universal ‘Acceptable Use Policy’ governing use for illegal purposes such as child pornography or illegal streaming. There were sometimes specific rules for employees in the use of social media, but few specific rules for councillors.

Training was also scarce, with the councillors interviewed reporting either no training at all, or that the small amount of training they had been offered was not very useful. Most of the councillors interviewed were self-taught and had transferred that learning to their political and council practice which partially explains the diversity of practice.

Narratives

The waves of modernising initiatives and reforms in local government have, over the last two decades, provided a dominant narrative which has informed the behaviour of local councillors. These reforms (DETR 1998, 1999 DCLG 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b) were intended to address issues of low electoral turnout, tackle increasing voter cynicism and reverse the perceived failings of local democracy, particularly in relation to transparency of decision-making and lines of accountability (Lowndes and Wilson 2003). At the centre of the reforms was the endowment of executive decision-making powers to a small number of councillors with ‘back-benchers’ confined to scrutiny of those decisions. The reforms also provided a call to those backbench councillors to remake their role outside the core decision-making cadre into one of ‘community leadership’, (Copus 2003 Berg and Rao 2005). Councillors were seen an unresponsive and inaccessible to the public (Lowndes at al 2001:451).

The responses of the early adopter councillors did not refer to ‘modernising’ as such, but did echo much of the language of those reforms. Councillors described how social media increased their transparency and visibility to residents and voters and saw this as an important channel of accountability. The fact that their postings and responses to residents were immediately visible in the public domain (as well as to political opponents) was frequently cited as significant in shaping behaviour.

Responsiveness was also a current theme from the interviews. The conventional council guidance about response times (usually 24 hours for emails and 5 days for letters) or getting public comment ‘signed off’ by the council’s press department or the party was routinely ignored by the councillors who were digitally confident. The prevailing culture of social media, which calls for immediacy of response, appeared to be driving exchanges between councillor and resident or rather, to use Meyer and Rowan’s terminology, providing the ‘external legitimisation’ for that course of action (1977:348). Responses were often happening very quickly outside the formal case management systems that the council or their party provided and social media adept councillors consistently reported being the recipients of residents’ gratitude for responsiveness rather than bureaucratic delay. These findings, it might be concluded, reveal that councillors use of social media, if more widely adopted, may well have the potential to realise the previous Labour government’s narrative
of community leaders who are seen as ‘accountable, strong, local representatives for their area’ (DETR 1998:3.42).

In spite of this it appeared that the overall resilience of the ‘rules of the game’ in the light of the challenge of these new technologies was not yet sufficiently adaptable or robust. Councillors’ social media practice had been, in effect, ‘decoupled’ (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2011) from the formal rules of the council. From the interviews it became apparent that councillors were engaging with the ‘old rules’ very loosely, almost tangentially. Councillors’ responses gave the existing rules and practices little significance and most felt that they were irrelevant to social media use.

Although councillors felt that the councils’ constitutions and standing orders did not constrain or shape their behaviour, to say that councillors felt disconnected from the normative rules might give the impression that they had no rules and this would be misleading; new ‘rules’ appear to be emerging. As Meyer and Rowan (1977:357) indicated:

‘Despite the lack of coordination and control, decoupled organizations are not anarchies. Day-to-day activities proceed in an orderly fashion. What legitimates institutionalized organizations, enabling them to appear useful in spite of the lack of technical validation, is the confidence and good faith of their internal participants and their external constituents.’

Lowndes and Roberts (2013:90) drew attention to the possible ‘opening up spaces for rule breaking or shaping’ following the failure of old rules outside the control of the elites or the imposition of rules from above. If the old rules of the game are not providing laws and boundaries for social media use, what did the study reveal about how are councillors using the disconnection and slippages from the old models of constraint to create new rules?

**Emerging rules**

Meyer and Rowan (1977: 354) suggested that decoupling the actions of some actors from formal rules can be an efficient response to tensions caused within an organisation responding to multiple pressures. They asserted that even in very stable organisations the emergence of new ‘myths’ and practices is helpful in refining change and allowing new practices to be either rejected or incorporated into the existing rules and structures of an institution.

In this case some of those emerging rules might better be described as codes or principles rather than anything more formal and some are clearly borrowed from the growing vocabulary of the Internet where rules tend to be demotic, short and often in the form of an exhortation; Google’s ‘Don’t be evil’, being a good illustration. Some of the rules can be described as universal, pertaining to social media use more generally, but some are specific to local government.

**Figure 3. Emerging ‘rules’**

<p>| Be authentic, be yourself and as part of that find the tone which reflects your own values |
| Tweet the truth |
| Be visible, tweet or post little and often (but not so often followers get tired of you) and tell people what you are up to as a councillor |
| Don’t bring the council into disrepute |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Don’t tweet or post on confidential items (Section 58(1)(c) of the Local Government Act 2000)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Don’t bring the party into disrepute</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to residents – use social media to amplify community voices, broker introductions, follow local voluntary organisations and follow ‘people of influence’ locally and ask for retweets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seize issues early – quench negative stories, get political advantage or identify issues to take to group or officers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be responsive and timely – if you are going to respond do so within a day, ‘quick and dirty’ works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t feed trolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn from others - crowd sourcing ideas and solutions from other councillors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Remember this is real conversation – as real as writing to the paper</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These emerging rules are interesting, but, based as they are on the digitally confident councillors in the study, they must be treated with caution. Crouch (2005:77) offers one way of thinking about the significance of the early findings of change in institutional life. He observes that the initial institutional steps in a change process may well have a strong conditioning force on later action – in other words, what happens at these early stages may set the path for future development.

If the rules are beginning to change, what else did the study find that may be a predictor for further changes in local politics? How are technological changes influencing councillors? What is new?

**Conclusion**

The study found four areas from which it can be argued that social media use by councillors is changing practice. Those areas were: attention; framing; capacity; and representativeness.

**Attention**

From the perspective of the local citizen social media has improved the way in which they can get the attention of local politicians. As Kingdon (1995:116) identified, a key part of the process through which issues rise to the surface from the ‘policy primeval soup’ to be given consideration is access to the minds and thoughts of the politicians themselves. Kingdon (1995:139) illustrated how a consensus could develop if one policy idea was widely shared and then adopted by the elites. Social media allows ideas for policy change ideas to be put directly to the elected representatives, unmediated by the bureaucratic processes. It provides councillors with the advantage of immediacy, enabling them to pick up on issues bubbling up in the community and take them to officers or the group.

The new technologies allowed that sharing by citizens and elected officials to happen in a very short period of time as some councils found to their cost. Service failures can be widely publicised, putting politicians on the spot. One Scottish council which tried (and failed) to stop a schoolgirl from photographing her school meals (Never Seconds) and posting them on a social media site found itself introduced to the concepts of ‘trending’ and ‘going viral’ as the girl’s complaints were shared online around the world.

**Framing**

Social media was not being used solely as a new and quicker way of gauging public opinion; it was also being proactively by councillors in the study to influence the issues which are then selected for
decision-making. By actively posting selected messages councillors are framing the debate. Entman (1992:52) describes the process:

‘Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.’

Councillors described themselves as more enabled to ‘make the political weather’, using the new media platforms to start stories or ‘nudge the agenda’ in a particular direction. This was sometimes picked up by journalists; several blogging councillors described how journalists often cut and pasted stories from their blogs. This is consistent with the findings of Bruns et al (2012, p. 31) who describe Twitter as:

‘Deeply embedded in the broader media ecology, both drawing on and rapidly becoming a primary source of information for more mainstream news and media outlets’.

Capacity

The creation of Increased capacity through social media, Petricek et al (2006:669), is frequently referenced in the literature on the Internet and Web 2.0, (see, for example, Rheingold 2012: 112). The example which is often cited is that of the Galaxy Zoo project which harnesses the computing power and efforts of volunteers to help with scientific tasks such as the search for new stars, tasks which would be impossible without the connecting power of the Web. The biophysicist and open access campaigner Cameron Neylon (2012) has argued in a number of forums that networks created by the connections of the new media ‘qualitatively change our capacity’.

In the case of digitally confident councillors it can be demonstrated that, at least numerically, councillors can have contact with many more citizens than face to face interaction would traditionally allow. One councillor in a rural case study authority gained a seat with 706 votes but has 1,980 followers on Twitter and a substantial number of subscribers to his regular blog. In another electoral division in the same council 601 votes secured a seat for a councillor who blogs regularly and on his busiest day counted 2,000 visits to his online pages.

Digitally active councillors felt that being online enhanced their capacity compared to ward surgeries. Some compared the new media channels to leafleting, with one saying:

‘When you tweet it’s like going straight into a voter’s living room in the same way as you would put an election leaflet through the door’.

Representativeness

Councillors also identified a significant opportunity to use social media channels to create and enhance their identities as local representatives. The new online channels provided a different kind of ‘theatre of representation’ in which politics is enacted and the politicians represent themselves to the voters (Copus 2004: 192). Rao has identified how expectations about representativeness in local government have changed:
‘...where representativeness has become secondary to questions of responsiveness and accountability’. (1998:19)

Eulau and Karps’ (1977:241), in their work on U.S. politicians, developed the idea of responsiveness further, identifying four categories of responsiveness; policy responsiveness, service responsiveness (or case work) and allocation responsiveness and symbolic responsiveness. That final component, symbolic responsiveness, they described as involving:

‘...public gestures of a sort that create a sense of trust and support in the relationship between representative and represented.’

Fenno (1975:51) observed that mobilising voter trust and confidence in this symbolic manner recognises that, particularly at the local level, voters are often prepared to go outside their party political affiliations. Using the ideas advanced by Goffman in ‘The Presentation of Self’ (1959), he argued that creating a ‘home style’ for politicians is important in developing that symbolic responsiveness through a series of verbal and non-verbal impressions (Fenno 1977: 898). Blumler and Kavanagh (1999:224) claimed that in a world of media abundance politicians must aim to demonstrate their ‘regular guy’ qualities because the proliferation of media channels means the dilution of politics into human interest stories.

Digitally able councillors in the study had often created, both consciously and unconsciously, that symbolic representativeness, that authenticity, by blurring the boundaries between the personal and political. They blogged or tweeted about football, holidays or restaurants alongside details of council meetings or new campaigns on benefits or mental health. One councillor, asked about this blurring of the personal and political, described how important it was to be authentic on social media:

‘Be who I am. I don’t have a political persona. I don’t have a personal persona. I have one person, that’s me. I’m not two different people’.

These early findings provide some stimulating areas for further investigation into the way in which stately temporal rhythm of municipal life (Lowndes and Roberts 2013:158) is being challenged and subverted by immediacy of social media. Councillor roles are beginning to change even with the current cadre of elected representatives, as social media becomes more embedded into the everyday practice of local government life. Things are already changing; one councillor, a regular blogger with a high number of followers, described how his younger voters were no longer loyal to one local newspaper and liked to ‘cherry-pick’ across different papers and other news sources online. He, like other regular bloggers and tweeters, felt that this had become the new norm and councillors now had to be part of that online landscape to connect with residents. The next generation (Dutton 2011:1, Serres 2012:14), young people who have grown up with the new technologies and ways of communicating, will have different expectations of their local representatives, but equally they will have different ways of being councillors and different ‘rules of the game’ will undoubtedly be in play.
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