

THE NETWORK-EMPOWERED CITIZEN
How people share civic knowledge online

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E-democracy has tended to be associated with uses of the Internet to modernise top-down political institutions and processes, such as government consultations, MP and party web sites, online electioneering and Internet voting.¹ By thus institutionalising the interactive potential of the Internet, politicians, parties and governments have been accused of merely adapting 'new communication technologies to their existing missions and agendas.'² In this paper we explore the potential of e-democracy to empower grass-root civic networks, augment social capital and cultivate incipient institutions of co-governance.

From communities of place to network-empowered individuals

The traditional idea of community was characterised by parochial belongings and shared ethical and emotional commitments. Community was conceived as a bounded enclave, with narrow filters of entry and badly-marked exit signs. It was a place for life and for burial at the end of life. As citizens become more mobile in their movements, volatile in their attachments and reflexive in their choices of lifestyle, communities of place increasingly seem to be a burden rather than a haven. The lament for old, localised solidarities fails to resonate with twenty-first century citizens whose interpersonal networks are increasingly a matter of choice rather than a consequence of geography.

As citizenship ceases to be defined or shaped by place-based community, individuals turn to geographically diffuse networks as sources of information and knowledge. Unlike communities, which are strong, fixed and enduring, networks are light, loose, ephemeral structures. One does not join a network to cultivate a sense of emotional belonging; networks exist as arrangements of convenience in a world where dispersed groups of people have a common need to access and share specific types of knowledge. The virtue of online networks is that they can be accessed on demand and entail few ties of social commitment. (One can be on an email list with a group of fellow professionals or

pet owners or beekeepers over a period of years without knowing how old they are, what colour their skin is or whether they are also have a passion for heavy metal music.) While such networks are not suited to the kind of deep, emotionally-committed relationships often found in families, friendships and close-knit communities, their strength lies in their unburdensome nature and their facilitation of 'weak ties'³ which do not demand onerous or binding obligations. Civic networks emerge in the space beyond government or the market, serving citizens' need for knowledge that can enable them to be more active, resourceful, creative and influential.

The research reported in this paper examined six quite different civic networks. The objectives of these networks are not related to one another, but they have four common characteristics:

- each network operates online and would probably not have existed without the Internet
- each network involves everyday knowledge-sharing between people whose principal connections with one another are virtual
- each network exists to meet civic, rather than commercial or governmental, needs
- each network links online knowledge to offline practice

The six civic networks discussed in this research are

Netmums (<http://www.netmums.com>) which exists to support the quality of life for mothers with young children by helping them to find their local parent and toddler group, childcare facilities, playgroup; suggesting somewhere new to take the kids; recommending a good local GP; or helping them to make new friends in their local area.

BBC iCan (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/ican>) is intended to enable people to share impartial information about issues that concern them; provide them with tools to set up

campaigns; and give them a free public space where they can exchange experiences with one another.⁴

Kikass (<http://www.kikass.com/>) which describes itself as ‘a staging point for anyone under the age of 30 in search of a 21st-Century survival guide or who wants to take responsibility for their life and to play a role in shaping the future.’ It provides an opportunity for young people to discuss and get involved in issues that concern their lives.

UK Villages (<http://www.ukvillages.co.uk/ukvillages/ukvillageshome.htm>) which allows people living in villages to contribute information directly to their community and links over 7000 existing websites. The UK Government has said that ‘The UK Villages initiative is a great example of how the Internet can be used to make connections within and between communities. It is an invaluable online information resource for UK citizens which will enrich offline lives.’

Gypsy Expressions (<http://www.gypsyexpressions.org.uk>) which aims to encourage gypsies and travellers to express themselves in the written word in order to share their stories and experiences.

Pain Talk (<http://www.pain-talk.co.uk>) is a national discussion forum for UK nurses, doctors, and other professionals with an interest in acute, chronic, or palliative Pain Management.

The methodology employed in this research is qualitative, comprising extensive, semi-structured interviews with network-empowered citizens who are key actors within each of the six networks.⁵ The analysis presented here is grounded in the rich qualitative data that has been generated from the interpretations and experiences of those for whom online networks have served as a source of civic empowerment. Rather than seeking to measure the effects of these online civic networks upon social capital (a project about which I have strong reservations, not least because factors such as trust, efficacy, reciprocity, solidarity and loyalty are not reducible to quantifiable indices), the purpose of this research is to allow network participants to speak for themselves in response to three key questions:

- Why did these networks come about – and why online?
- What are these networks achieving?
- What are the implications of all this for democratic citizenship?

In the concluding section of the paper we shall consider the implications of online civic networks for democratic citizenship and governance.

Why an online network?

The enthusiasm for the Internet of the network-empowered citizens we interviewed was high. The Internet was generally regarded as indispensable to the sustainability of civic networks. But what exactly did the interviewees mean when they spoke of ‘the Internet?’ Did they see it as a ready-made tool to be utilised or a cultural realm to be entered and shaped?

The Internet has always been a contested space, with the corporate conception of a single Internet comprising standardised, proprietary applications in conflict with the open-source perspective of the Internet as an unregulated sphere of loosely associated programmers, hackers and netizens. Civic networks inhabit an informal, shared space populated by blogs, wikis, recommender systems and peer-to-peer exchanges, in contrast to the commodified space of banner ads and password-protected zones of transaction and the official space of well-funded government web sites. Network-empowered citizens see themselves as in some sense taking the Internet back to its original purpose. They are using the Internet as ‘it should have been used all the way along’ (Stoneley), recognising ‘what it is for.’ (Russell)

Network-empowered citizens espouse the model of the Internet as a channel for interactive information-sharing and conversation, as opposed to the broadcast model in which the web site is conceived as a centre of transmission to a receiving audience. They speak of the network enabling ‘two-way conversation’ (Russell) and ‘share[d] information’ (O’Neill) and clearly regard the Internet as being more like a many-to-many version of telephone than a narrowcast version of television.

The flexibility and speed of online communication serves to level the playing field, giving network-empowered citizens faster and more effective access to one another, as well as to sources of policy and power. They see online networks as 'quicker' (Almond), 'more accessible' (O'Neill) and 'dynamic.' (Russell) While such opportunities unseat policy-makers, who are used to maintaining a distance from the public and remaining invulnerable to the hour-by-hour solicitations of active citizens, it enables network-empowered citizens to keep a surveillant eye on political representatives and public information.

Network-empowered citizens have a non-traditional idea of organisation and tend to adopt the decentralised ethos characteristic of new social movements. They believe that networks empower 'the individual rather than the organisation' (Almond), although critics might argue that these networks are still dependent upon managerial hubs which have their own conceptions of what the network exists for. Nonetheless, attitudes to conventionally controversial questions such as anonymity (O'Neill) and self-defined agenda-setting (Vogel) is strikingly different to those found in political parties or most large NGOs.

The Internet is so dynamic: it allows a two-way conversation between members. It can be instantly updated by people who are providing classes and courses for parents or children, for example, and the members themselves can come and add on new information. So, it enables you to work as a cooperative rather than just providing information to parents one-way. That is where the Internet has just been brilliant. This is what it is for, if you like. (Sally Russell, Netmums)

We reviewed our role following the last general election when turn out fell simply to enquire whether the BBC could be doing more to help people engage in politics and we did find that there was a significant proportion of people who found that the way we reported politics alienating with too much of a focus on Westminster and not enough of a focus on the issues which affect peoples lives. iCAN took those challenges and tried to come up with a way for people to engage in politics through their own definitions of the issues that concern them, so instead of looking at the Westminster village, looking at the issues that affect me and helping people to have an influence on them through connecting with

others and finding sources of information which get you started. (Martin Vogel, iCan)

Most young people these days have some sort of access to the Internet, mobile phone technology as well, to back that up. It's primarily a networking vehicle because it enables us ... to have communication. We can have online 'brainstormings.' We can do things a lot quicker as well. So it means that whereas traditionally it might have taken two weeks to do something, we could have perhaps consulted with the forty young people we needed to in twenty-four hours or get two hundred responses within twenty minutes.

One of the advantages of working online is that it gives the power to the individual rather than the organisation, and ... having that power creates a sense of responsibility and a better buy into the organisation, it's more of a choice.

It's the way in which you use the Internet, the possibilities for overlapping into the real world, the skill with which you use the Internet, because if you're just going to put a magazine online it's not going to work. (Neil Almond, Kikass)

We're using the Internet how we feel it should have been used all the way along, which is to share information...The Internet is of crucial importance in the promotion and support of sustainable and thriving communities. Villages show immense resourcefulness, creativity and strategic vision in the way in which they have researched and implemented some truly wonderful websites and IT initiatives. Far from supporting social isolation, IT really has brought communities closer together and encouraged new economic growth, individuality and humour. (Ellie Stoneley, UK Villages)

The Internet makes it more accessible, because even people who don't have a PC themselves or access to the Internet will know a gypsy or traveller or other organisation that does... They can access the website in private.... If you had a book lying around at home, people may wonder what you're looking at, whereas if you go and access the Internet you can do it quite anonymously. You can access that information without interaction with anybody else... And vice versa, when you want to put information onto Gypsy Expressions... quite a few people have asked whether they can use a different name, because they want to see

what the reaction is to it first, from other people, from family etc, without putting their own name on it. I think that the anonymity both ways is a key factor.

I think the Internet is a great leveller when you think about how there are people of all different ages, and people's work is just seen as people's work. When it comes on the Internet, without actually knowing anybody or without seeing them in person, you just judge their work for what it is not for how attractive they are or how wealthy they are or what their standing is in the community. I think it does promote democracy, definitely. (Richard O'Neill, Gypsy Expressions)

We started the website because there was not enough information and communication for people working in pain management. I think this project as it stands couldn't really take place without the Internet. We had a network of meetings two or three times a year, for like-minded individuals. But it meant that between times there was no communication... being Internet-based allowed us to do this. (Glenn Bruce, Pain Talk)

What has been achieved?

Interviewees felt that civic networks are filling an information vacuum between what governments have a responsibility to tell people and markets has a vested interest in making people hear. Civic networks can be regarded as a third current in the flow of public knowledge; they are self-help groups for the information society, adding to their participants' capacity to cope with aspects of life that nobody else has an interest in addressing.

Several interviewees emphasised the extent to which social isolation is a barrier to collective action. Online civic networks offer their participants respite from the frustration of separation from people in the same position as themselves. Whether it is Netmums making 'all the difference between ... isolation becoming depression' (Jane), grass-roots campaigners realising that there are others who share their aims (Burke) or doctors and nurses working on pain management being able to share experiences and anxieties (Bruce), one is seeing here a lowering of barriers to collective action which results in the emergence of new campaigns and broader agendas.

We are fulfilling a need. A survey we carried out this year (of 2,000 mums) suggested that 60% of respondents did not have enough friends and 61% did not see enough of their family. This indicates that there is a lack of support for parents with young children. A huge number of mums and parents find that they are isolated. In fact, 53% of the people surveyed thought that they may have suffered from postnatal illness. NetMums has made a difference here, helping people to network and make friends. Nationally, there are also certain issues that we campaign on and are hopefully contributing to change on (e.g., the food and healthy eating debate). (Sally Russell, Netmums)

Before I had the Internet I found it extremely difficult to find out information in my local area for toddler groups or anything. It seems like people mainly ignore the needs of mums with very young children to a large extent. When I, myself, asked my health Visitors, they did not have any actual information about toddler groups or even know where any were - although there has been one right across the road from the surgery for the last 18 years! My local newspapers do not bother to put toddler group sessions in their paper unless they really have to and unless you know where to look, it can be so hard to find out any relevant information! Mums need somewhere to turn especially when they feel alone and isolated. A website like Netmums could be all the difference between that isolation becoming depression. It is important someone is out there to help mums cope with their everyday life. Where I live, it doesn't seem like many other people want to! (Jane, Netmums)

When I first moved from Leeds to Liverpool I had a 8 week old baby no friends and no job. I was very lonely. It was really hard to build up friendships with other mothers I did not know how to find the information about my local area, where were the local toddler groups, what do people do on a rainy day. I had friends come to visit from Leeds I did not know where to take them with their children. It was a nightmare. I searched the Internet for help but did not really find much at all, but this was back in 1999/2000 before the netmums concept had been born. It was then in 2004 when netmums was featured on Steve Wright's show that I logged on and found out about it. I was disappointed that there was not much information in my area - now a mother of 2 who had lived in Liverpool for 5 years

I have built up a lot of information about where to go and what to do keen to help I sent in my information and before you know it I was editing the site myself. A lot of the emails I get are from mothers who like me back in 1999 feel isolated and want to find other mothers in their situation to talk to and give support. True there are Government bodies (sure start) that you can get some of the information from but this information comes in the form of a sterile list without any of the useful tips that we include from parents who have been there and done that. Most people like to do things that are recommended by others - Which have been trading on that concept for years. (Alia, Netmums)

An issue like wind farms has been an important one around the country. People from all sides of the debate have been having their own local little battles. Some people were in favour, some were against, some were indifferent, but opposed to the way the electricity from the wind farms would mean 50 metre pylons crossing the landscape.

Some stories were parochial, but exercised thousands of people, and no less important than the 'big' stories. In Liverpool the bus company changed the times of the buses, but didn't put up new bus timetables at the bus stops. It meant hundreds of people were missing their connections and were hugely infuriated. Without iCan that story may not have featured as prominently as it did on local radio.

There was the case of the amateur astronomer in Leicester who was upset about light pollution. After his campaign was featured ... hundreds of people supported his aims <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/ican/G630>; very few opposed it. Less than a week later the Institute of Physics said it would not support the light relay because of a "public perception" that physicists are clashing with astronomers. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/leicestershire/3552228.stm> And now it seems America may pull out too. (Time Burke, iCan)

One of the projects that we're working on at the moment is that we run the youth advisory board for the Russell commission, which is looking at designing a new framework for youth volunteering in the UK. And, basically what's happened on that is that, because of the facilitation that Kikass gives, the youth advisory board

has totally transformed the consultation process, so there's a completely separate youth consultation process, with a website that's very, very focused, that gets through most of the normal need to give out information and which is very much about, 'here is a survey'. They were very forceful that they were not just going to ask questions, that they wanted to genuinely consult...

Then there's something like Supershagland as I say: 1.4 million users, 31% saying they are less likely to have unsafe sex, 1.9 minutes playing the game, 3.5 minutes reading the safe sex messages on average; 55% saying they have learnt more information. So once again, that is something tangible. (Neil Almond, Kikass)

We were invited to talk at a conference a few years ago and the topic of debate was... 'The Internet is the salvation of the rural community.' And I was in the pro corner arguing against someone who was in the disagreement corner. And I sort of sat there and thought well, I know what I think but I wonder what everybody who uses the website thinks... So I emailed out to eight hundred people and just said, 'Help! What do you think? Have you got any examples of how the Internet really can help your community or UKVillages has helped?' I got five hundred responses in two days and some of them were, literally, huge great swathes of paper, five sides of A4, from individual stories of how somebody had relocated, an old lady had relocated out from London out to Southwold, and used UK Villages specifically as a relocation tool, having heard about it from Channel 4 and she had researched the nearest doctor's surgery, the council tax, she'd found a property available, she had researched the route to get there to encourage her family to come and visit her and she had even found sort of local shops and things. So, we have some wonderful local examples. Certainly during the foot and mouth crisis, there was a number of communities in Wales who used the site very avidly to promote the fact that their businesses provided products which you could buy over the Internet. We didn't actually sell them through UK Villages, but we promoted the fact that it was possible. And we had tremendous feedback as a result of that, and that has really helped economies in a couple of villages....

In Devon, we worked with the County Council to help on their 'report a faulty light initiative.' A lot of people won't go to the council's own website, but they will come

to UKVillages and then think, 'Oh gosh, you can report your street lights', because it is very overt on the Devon pages. Giving voice to small communities is also important. We survey opinions from people - we have just done a survey of 38,000 people's opinion on parish councils and how they work. So it really gives a voice to the smaller person on a fairly equal platform. What we do is a survey online that basically people can offer open and closed answers to... But they can also print it out and pass it to their friends to do offline, and we put a freepost address; again we always try and work on and offline in parallel. (Ellie Stoneley, UK Villages)

One particular incident: there was a young girl up in the north-east at school, a young gypsy girl, a fourteen year-old, really having a hard time. The school said there were no resources around so they could not really cater for her educational needs and she found out about the website and she was able to go back to the school and her parents were able to go back to the school and say, 'Look, there are resources out there, it is possible.' And as it has turned out there has been a very happy ending to that. She, for quite a lot of her coursework last year, was able to write a book about gypsies and travellers, took a lot of photographs and very, very kindly, about two and a half months ago, asked me to write the foreword to her book. (Richard O'Neill, Gypsy Expressions)

One of the big problems of working in pain management is that it is slightly in isolation. I mean, I work for one of the biggest trusts in the South-West and it is only myself and a part-timer doing the job we do, specifically. And so Pain-Talk has meant that people from elsewhere can share information, ask questions...they can get help from individuals elsewhere... tips and advice. (Glenn Bruce, Pain Talk)

Where is it all leading?

Without seeking to devise or advocate new forms of governance, the network-empowered citizens in our interviews regarded their activities online as having broader political implications. These were not traditionally 'political' people, but, in a range of separate interviews, most of them spoke about how they believed that democracy should learn from the power of their networks. Interestingly, several of the interviewees

were apologetic about their informal relationship to e-democracy, as if non-politicians or party-groups were somehow impostors in the world of e-democracy. Russell states that she was told that e-democracy 'was really just about elected representatives.'

Most of the interviewees were sanguine about the capacity of civic networks to connect with, inform and enrich institutions of political power. Central to this belief was the idea of a direct, informal and ongoing, rather than ritualised and intermittent, relationship between citizens and the state, enabling citizens to influence policy 'more than once every five years' (Kevill) and 'people who currently have to make decisions based in a vacuum [to] actually consult on those issues.' (Almond)

I used to say that netmums was an example of e-democracy occasionally and I was corrected and told that that was really just about elected representatives and so I have tended to stop using the phrase. But what we do does allow parents to engage with politics, on issues that affect them, both locally and nationally. We get complaints in about local council services and then we forward them to the council, then they reply, and they do take notice of them, increasingly... they write long replies and take an interest in what we're doing. So I think that we do have a role to play, however you define e-democracy itself. (Sally Russell, Netmums)

... people who now play an active part in securing their rights in consumer life are chafing at their lack of power over their civic life. They want information which is not defined by party politics but by the issues which interest them. They want to be able to judge what a politician promises and, if they disagree, they want to register this more than once every five years. (Sian Kevill, iCan)

I see that the technology that is around at the moment makes the model of government that we've got in some degree obsolete, inasmuch as it was built in a time when it was very difficult for everyday people to understand what was going on in the world and therefore you had one representative who spoke on behalf of their constituency and reported back, whereas now ... with the Internet, with mobile phones and all of these sorts of things ... there's the potential for people to take a far more active interest in issues and the way in which they are

governed. The Internet, and modern technology, has this amazing potential to tap into by get people involved in decision-making. Now, I think there's responsibility that needs to go with that. And also I think that that shouldn't be a scary thing for politicians, because I think it actually makes their job easier. You know, it's possible for us to get the views of one thousand young people in a matter of half an hour or an hour, which is really important for our decision-making process... I think that that's the opportunity of e-democracy: people who currently have to make decisions based in a vacuum can actually consult on those issues, but, more than that, can actually work-up, probably, better solutions that would work for people and perhaps also get beyond the political activists, for instance, a politician consulting with a group of young people.

I don't believe that young people are, you know, they may not be voting but that's not because they are not interested in these subjects. It's because they don't believe they can make a difference and we see that over and over again. And I think that e-democracy has to go beyond, 'you can now vote by email or a text message' and go into the realms of really engaging those people, giving them ways to get involved, in a way that actually engages their minds.(Neil Almond, Kikass)

Trust is hugely important with the Internet. There are so many people out there that will spam information to people, that will sell email addresses, that will do all sorts of bad things and will also promote irrelevant advertising to people. And so trust is hugely important, people will not come back to a website unless they trust the content, unless they trust that if they give you their details you wont sell them, and they trust that the content that comes from you will be of relevance to them. (Ellie Stoneley, UK Villages)

What I have learned is that obviously you can do it and it can be successful and I think the policy-makers need to support this, to support projects like this one and many, many others. There are websites for all sorts of things, all sorts of community good. I think there are a lot of websites for things that, a) there is no money in, b) not many people are interested in, but they do really do a heck of a lot for the community that they cater for. (Richard O'Neill, Gypsy Expressions)

The consequences for democracy

This research has been conducted in the context of a widespread sense that old democratic structures and processes are not working well and that new ways are needed to bring the demos into democracy.⁶ Faced with such a task, policy-makers have tended to reach for institutional solutions: devolved assemblies, new consultative juries and panels, state funding of parties and even compulsory voting. Such approaches are united by a desire to bring people closer to government. A more radical proposal for the reinvigoration of democracy would be for government to move closer to the citizens. Rather than telling disengaged citizens that they really ought to get involved in the alien structures, procedures and languages of political authority, there is a strong case for governments to cultivate new engagements with the countless informal networks that currently stand outside the purview of their official gaze.

Consequences for citizenship

Governments need to think more seriously about a meaningful role for citizens in democratic society. To be a citizen, rather than a subject, consumer or free-floating ego, is to enter a communicative relationship with the social world. What Kateb called 'democratic connectedness' is not about recognising that everyone else is like you, but coming to terms with the fact that they are not.⁷ It is because people's experiences and interests are always disconnected from one another that the binding ties of citizenship perform such a vital social function, for there can be no community without communication, no citizenship without the prospect of connecting with strangers.

The experience of being a citizen is mediated through language, books, newspapers, radio, television – and now the Internet. This mediation of knowledge is central to the project of making citizens. Citizenship entails common knowledge – what you need to know because everyone else knows it – as well as specific domains of knowledge relating to socio-demographic segments of the population and groups bound together by common interests, needs or passions. The division of power in any society is reflected in the ways in which citizens produce knowledge out of the range of experiences, representations and interpretations available to them. Where elites monopolise power, citizens face a constant struggle to produce and disseminate their own knowledge and sense of the world. The more democratic a society is, the more citizens make and debate their own meanings, intentions and actions.

In the more hierarchical past, when the dissemination of common knowledge was the responsibility of trusted institutions such as the church, press and national broadcasters, informing the public tended to depend upon a linear and asymmetrical relationship between the unquestionable voices of authorised informers and the cultural deference of message recipients. While people still rely upon a narrow range of highly trusted sources for political and civic news and interpretation, it is increasingly the case that they place trust in personal social networks – family, friends, workmates – for authentically credible accounts of what is going on around them.⁸ There has been a democratisation of knowledge-making, with people increasingly questioning the authority and authenticity of information and asking how they can make changes on the basis of their own knowledge reserves.

The coincidence between the demise of deferential culture and the rise of the Internet led some commentators to assume that in the new digital world citizens would be freer than ever to encode, circulate and debate their own accounts of civic knowledge without needing to seek the permission of elite gatekeepers. According to this perspective, the Internet has the potential to serve as an arena for the critical, reflexive and democratic negotiation of civic knowledge.

The late 1990s' image of the emergent e-citizen (or netizen), as articulated by theorists, policy-makers and e-enthusiasts, bore a remarkable likeness to that of the liberal citizen who had inhabited the pre-digital world. If liberal citizens were conceived as autonomous moral agents, driven by an instrumental pursuit of fixed interests, e-citizens were expected to behave in much the same way, surfing the net in search of tangible benefits, such as lower information costs and more convenient modes of transacting with government. E-citizens could retreat to their computers and navigate the world through a succession of attenuated mouse clicks, liberated from the burden of promiscuous sociality. In its most starkly utilitarian form, this notion of e-citizenship embraced the consumerist fantasy of having everything at one's fingertips, from White Papers to ballot papers, without having to go anywhere, see anyone or interact with any discomforting strangers.

In contrast to this vision of the atomised netizen-cum-consumer, surfing alone in a sea of virtual harbours, stood another late 90s' image: that of the virtual community as a digitised reincarnation of the spirit of *Gemeinschaft*.⁹ For example, Michael Benedikt's description of cyberspace as 'a parallel universe ... in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainment, and alter-human agency takes on form'¹⁰ and Manuel Castells' claim that 'the major transformation of sociability in complex societies took place with the substitution of networks for spatial communities as major forms of sociability'¹¹ suggest that virtual and disembodied social connections could replicate the communication flows of real communities. Other writers about online networks have been less sanguine:

If people are just going to stay cloistered in their houses and communicate with each other electronically in the dark of the night, without seeing each other or knowing what's going on in local politics, or giving a hoot for the environment, it's disquieting to me.¹²

As the population of Internet users has grown and social behaviour (including civic interactions and transactions) increasingly takes place online, the credibility of these liberal and communitarian idealisations of the e-citizen have diminished. The autonomous e-citizen of the liberal imagination has become more sociable as a result of being online. As Hampton and Wellman have shown in their seminal Netville study, Internet use is 'associated with larger neighborhood networks, neighbor recognition, greater frequency of communication (on and offline), and participation in the public and private realms. The Internet intensified the volume and range of neighborly relations, rather than reducing neighboring or transforming neighboring into an online-only experience.'¹³ At the same time, only a small minority of Internet users have been persuaded to commit to the neo-romantic allure of virtual communitarianism. As the Internet integrates with routines of everyday life, people's online selves become remarkably similar to their offline selves – but at the same time their offline experiences are increasingly shaped by what they do online.

All of this has led some commentators to conclude that the Internet is being normalised; that online socialising, learning, discussing and mobilising merely mirror offline social practice. This is far too glib an analysis, especially when applied to citizenship. There are

at least three reasons why civic behaviour can be expected to change as wider sections of the population spend more time online. Firstly, information that was once scarce is now abundant, thereby lowering the cost of acquiring knowledge and taking collective action. Secondly, groups with common interests who were previously geographically dispersed (diasporas, the disabled, the housebound, the socially unconfident, the impoverished) now find it easier to 'gather together' online in a variety of synchronous and asynchronous ways. Thirdly, there is scope for citizens to 'shop' online for personalised communities which offer them access to like-minded others. In combination, these opportunities offer potential for a new kind of civic knowledge-sharing which, in turn, could serve to augment the social capital of network-empowered citizens.

The term 'social capital', first used by Hanafin in 1916, and popularised in contemporary discourse by Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam, is centrally important in thinking about the value of online civic networks.¹⁴ The OECD has defined social capital as 'networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups.'¹⁵ For Putnam, social capital inheres in norms and networks 'that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions.'¹⁶ There now exists strong empirical evidence to suggest that people and groups derive increased social capital from the experience of interacting online. The Internet does not simply support people in their existing social activities, but 'contributes to the development of new communication formats which modify existing activities as well as help[ing] [to] shape new activities.'¹⁷ Quan-Haase and Wellman have examined extensively the relationship between online networks and social capital and conclude that

the Internet occupies an important place in everyday life, connecting friends and kin both near and far. In the short run, it is adding on to – rather than transforming or diminishing – social capital. ¹⁸

In a separate study, Wellman et al argue that online networks empower individuals rather than groups or communities (they refer to this phenomenon as 'networked individualism') by enabling them to personalise their associations:

Each person is a switchboard, between ties and networks. People remain

connected, but as individuals, rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Each person operates a separate personal community network, and switches rapidly among multiple sub-networks.¹⁹

Kavanaugh and Patterson, on the basis of a three-year study of the Blacksburg Electronic Village²⁰ and Muller, based on his study of chatroom and newsgroup participants²¹, endorse Wellman et al's finding that being part of an online network enhances citizens' reciprocity, solidarity and loyalty. All of these studies stress the fact that online networks are not self-contained communities in which people retreat from face-to-face physicality, but an extension of and supplement to the world of offline interactions. Although social capital is generated online, its consequences are manifested both on and offline, within and beyond networks.

The cultivation of network-empowered citizenship is seriously undermined by unequal social access to the Internet. This is why policies that promote inclusive social access to the Internet are fundamentally important to the health of democracy. Across the UK there are approximately 6,000 UK Online Centres intended to 'bridge the gap between those in society who have access to and are able to use information and communication technologies (ICT) competently, and those who do not.'²² Such public access policies, as well as the spread of Internet-enabled mobile phones, could play an important part in empowering poorer and less educated citizens, whose social networks have traditionally been localised and limited. Network-empowered citizens mainly produce and receive *bridging* social capital, which enables them to transcend their immediate social circles in the search for information. For people who are low on resources, confidence and personal contacts, bridging social capital is a way out of a social rut, as it is also for traditionally marginalised groups, such as the housebound, the disabled, the elderly, residents of remote areas, children and speakers of minority languages. Ensuring access to the bridging social capital of online civic networks should be a policy priority.

Consequences for governance

Network-empowered citizens are less likely to join rule-based, mass-membership organisations than to form contingent associations in which they can interact with one another directly for a common purpose. This presents political parties, as the traditional channels between citizens and governments in liberal democracies, with a problem. As

vertical bodies organised on the basis of hierarchical discipline, parties represent the antithesis of the horizontal, decentralised, acephalous movements that flourish in the online environment. How are political parties, and the governing institutions they run once they are elected to power, to relate to civic networks?

If representative governments are to have legitimacy in a society characterised by widespread online communication and network-empowered citizenship they must find ways of connecting with these incipient circuits of online civic interconnection. Traditionally, parties could campaign and governments could govern by cultivating 'safe' constituencies of territorial support. The politics of locality remains important for many people, but increasingly alongside other voluntary and mobile associations and attachments which are not easily represented by aggregate party positions. Broad-brush party programmes addressed to mass-market electorates must adapt to the hyper-pluralism of multiple networks.

Governments must learn to engage constructively with online civic networks. Engaging *with* entails more than nodding recognition and occasional funding. Rather than inviting citizens to visit badly-designed government web sites to find civic information or interact with elected representatives, politicians and officials should be going to the civic networks in which people articulate and represent their own interests and values – and they should be pointing other citizens in the same direction. Just as in the past politicians spent many evenings in drafty civic halls or behind tables in public libraries, they should now be seeking out and entering into dialogue with the online networks that represent the new *loci* of active citizenship.

Engaging with horizontal networks will be a testing challenge for vertical and centralised governments used to dealing with 'lobby groups' that speak with one voice in the language of advocacy. Civic networks are less likely to advocate a position (although they sometimes do) than reflect a set of values, experiences and reflexive disclosures of identity. As Norman Fairclough has suggested, 'in effective public sphere dialogue there is a process of becoming in which people's individual identities, their collective identities as members of particular and diverse groups, and their universal identities-in-common as citizens and human beings are collectively constituted simultaneously through a complex weaving together of different facets of the self.'²³ Governments prefer to deal

with settled public interests expressed as aggregate demands than informal collectivities working towards a common identity through mutual disclosure. Network-empowered citizens do not necessarily know what they demand: they are searching for articulations of their interest through a process of ongoing production of and exposure to new knowledge. Preferring intersubjective dialogue to strategic advocacy, network-empowered citizens want to talk with rather than to government; they see government as one of many contributors to conversations about who they are and what they need. Government must learn how to enter such conversations without seeking to patronise, buy off or take control of participants.

One policy proposal that could support such interactions between governments and online civic networks would be the creation of an online civic commons which is owned by nobody and trusted by everybody. (Jay Blumler and I have set out the case for such a new public space in an earlier IPPR paper entitled *Realising Democracy Online: a civic commons in cyberspace*.²⁴) A civic commons would be publicly funded, but would be independent from government. It would be responsible for eliciting, gathering, and coordinating citizens' deliberations upon and reactions to problems faced and proposals issued by public bodies (ranging from local councils to parliaments and government departments), which would then be expected to react formally to whatever emerges from the public discussion. An online civic commons might be conceived as a network of civic networks: an online meeting point between civil society and the state.

The creation of such credible and effective intersections is especially necessary in the context of the transition taking place in many contemporary liberal democracies (including Britain) from government to co-governance, especially at the local level. Whereas government has traditionally entailed authorisation via periodic elections of elected representatives who make decisions on behalf of citizens, co-governance entails interdependence in policy formation and decision-making between the state and a multiplicity of affected stakeholders. The role of elected representatives within co-governance is to speak for entire communities, including the unaffected and uninvolved, and to steer and balance the inputs from diverse stakeholder networks. The role of civic networks in co-governance is to bring the experiential knowledge and direct voices of stakeholders closer to the centre of accountable governance. The accessibility, speed

and informality of the Internet offers a promising arena in which multi-actor governance can be played out without endless logistical and bureaucratic disruptions.

The main conclusion of this research is that new sources of networked knowledge-sharing have emerged and are producing a new kind of empowered citizen. Network-empowered citizens are not like liberal-individualists, insofar as they recognise the value of pooling knowledge, but neither are they like members of virtual communities, because their principal commitment is to pursuing offline interests and values. Network-empowered citizens go online to augment their store of bridging social capital, enabling them to make heterogeneous connections and acquire knowledge conveniently. Civic networks should be respected and promoted as sources of empowered citizenship.

Network-empowered citizenship weakens the sustainability of vertical structures of government and calls for new forms of co-governance in which the shared common knowledge of citizens feeds directly into the making of more relevant policies and more accountable, legitimate and effective decisions. Interesting examples of successful co-governance are emerging across the world. (Bang²⁵; Koonings²⁶, Garcia- Guadilla²⁷) The six case studies of network-empowered citizenship examined in this paper present practical examples of grass-roots e-democracy at its best and, perhaps also, a model of incipient structures of democratic co-governance.

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