Study report:

Typology of citizen-run neighbourhood websites

a study of the social impact of citizen-run online neighbourhood networks and the implications for local authorities

part of the

online neighbourhood networks *study*

2010

the Networked Neighbourhoods group

capital ambition

Networked Neighbourhoods

The Networked Neighbourhoods group works with communities and organisations using technology-based approaches to strengthen neighbourhoods and create opportunities for the more efficient delivery of public services. We develop innovative projects that make a difference on the ground as well as providing leading edge research.

For further information about our group or this series of study papers, please contact:

The Networked Neighbourhoods Group: info@networkedneighbourhoods.com

Online neighbourhood networks study
Typology

Hugh Flouch and Kevin Harris
The Networked Neighbourhoods Group

(See last page for complete listing of the *Online neighbourhood networks study* materials)

Typology contents

Typology

Introduction

The citizen-led local online ecosystem is becoming richer and more varied. Understanding the impacts and implications of the sites within this ecosystem requires some framework against which each one can be calibrated and understood.

This paper presents the first version of a typology to describe the variety of citizen-led local internet spaces. Whilst the primary focus of the London study is citizen-led webspaces, this typology would be incomplete if it did not include some that are owned by commercial organisations.

From our review of approximately 160 local sites in London we have identified eight types. Six of those can be described as citizen-led sites, typicallyset up with a civil purpose. The remaining two types are run on a commercial basis.

These are early days in the development of neighbourhood websites. As our research review indicates, there have been very few studies of specific local sites and the movement barely registers in the local government world. Many sites are growing and changing rapidly. It follows that any classification has to be subject to ongoing revision. Our intention here is to facilitate further study and development by providing a language against which each site can be assessed and described.

Overview: High level model

The eight types are presented below on a four block model. The vertical axis represents the perceived level of civic purpose underpinning each site; the horizontal one shows the breadth of contributors and the level of interactivity for each type.
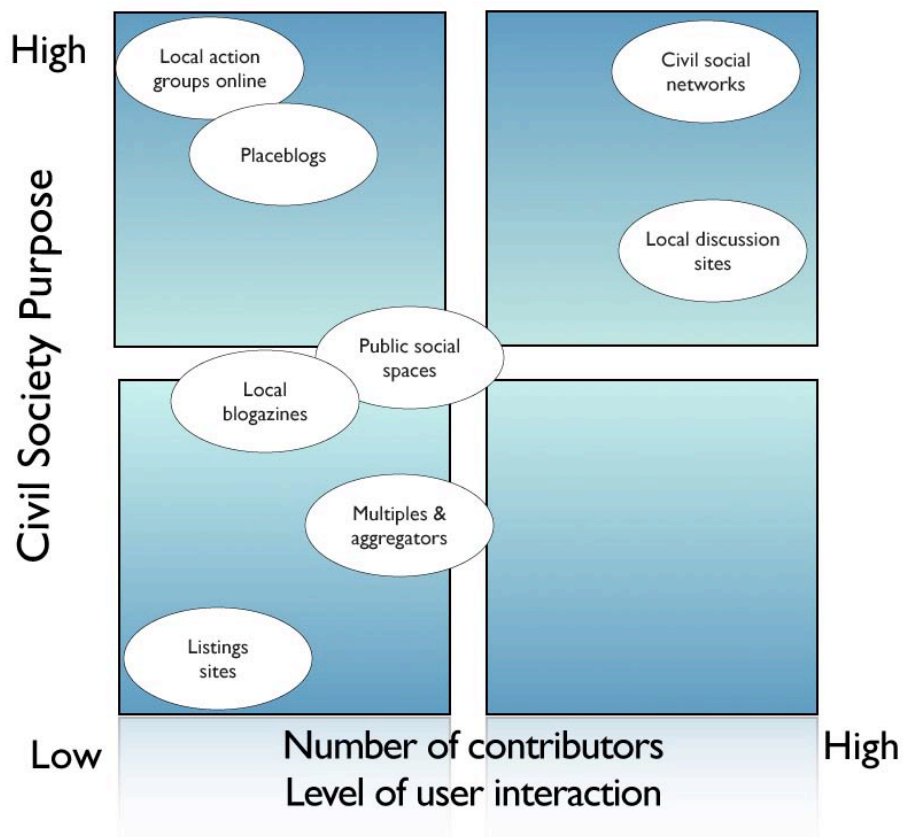
The diversity of neighbourhood networks often makes it difficult to slot each example neatly into a single category. However our intention is not to provide the means for forensic classification but to offer some categories which can be used to articulate the differences between various local websites.

Type 1: Civil social networks

Civil social networks are designed to encourage discussion and interaction between local people with both a civic and social purpose.

They can be built on a range platforms from traditional forum software to newer style social networking platforms. The range of content varies with the sophistication of the software.

Some are restricted to discussion forums only. Others include a broad range of content including events listings, photos, videos and static information pages.

Key features are:

- Often formed out of a specific local issue and tend to maintain a keen eye on place-shaping whilst also encouraging lighter social interaction.
- Wide range of content types.
- Members can contribute to most parts of the site (with the exception of static information pages).
- Members can interact with each other (both openly via comments walls on member pages and by private messaging).
- The highest profile feature on civic social sites tends be a discussion forum.
- Often a significant proportion of material added by the site "editors".

Example

[Harringay Online](#) (Social network based website)

Type 2: Local discussion sites

There is a significant overlap between local discussion sites and civic social networks, but discussion sites tend to be more focussed on connecting locals to make social connections and share knowledge about an area. There is less purpose around improving a neighbourhood.

Most local discussion sites are built on one of the forum software platforms.

Key features:

- Highly interactive, with a focus on sharing local knowledge about local services, property, events etc.
- Most highly social type of local network, often developing a strong sense of group.
- Usually have a seam of civic social purpose, with exchange of information around crime, planning etc., but less frequently used as platforms for local place shaping.
- Lower levels of editorial content pages than civic social networks.

Examples

[Stroud Green](#)
[East Dulwich Forum](#)

Type 3: Placeblogs

Placeblogs sites are set up by a single person or small group of people to report on local stories at a very local level. There is often a strong purpose of driving local change through shining the light on issues of local concern.

Placeblogs are not designed primarily for user contribution and interaction, but the busier sites do attract a significant number of comments.

Key features:

- Publish articles about local cultural activities and other local happenings to inform and build sense of place.
- Make use of citizen journalism to identify and investigate stories about local issues that affect the quality of residents' lives.
- Some user contribution through commenting, but user interaction restricted by platform design.
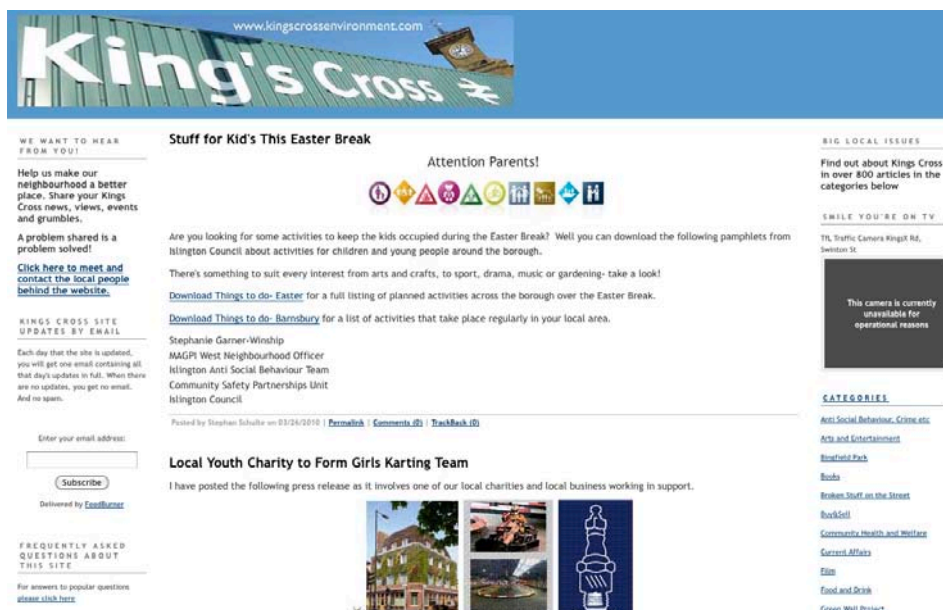
Example

Kings Cross Environment
Brockley Central

Type 4: Local blogazines

Local blogazines are similar to placeblogs, but the focus is less on local news and more on lighter neighbourhood profiling and local human interest approach. There is less direct support for community action and holding local politicians to account.

Local blogazines are very often run by just one person or by a very small group.

Key features:

- Carry a mix of local human interest stories, items about local businesses, history and some news.
- Use stories to improve perceptions of an area.

Example

[Transpontine](#)

Type 5: Public social spaces

Profiles set up on Facebook or Twitter for sharing information about areas and often light-hearted chit-chat about an area.

Key features:

- Strong focus on events, restaurants and other social resources.
- Some local campaign related content.

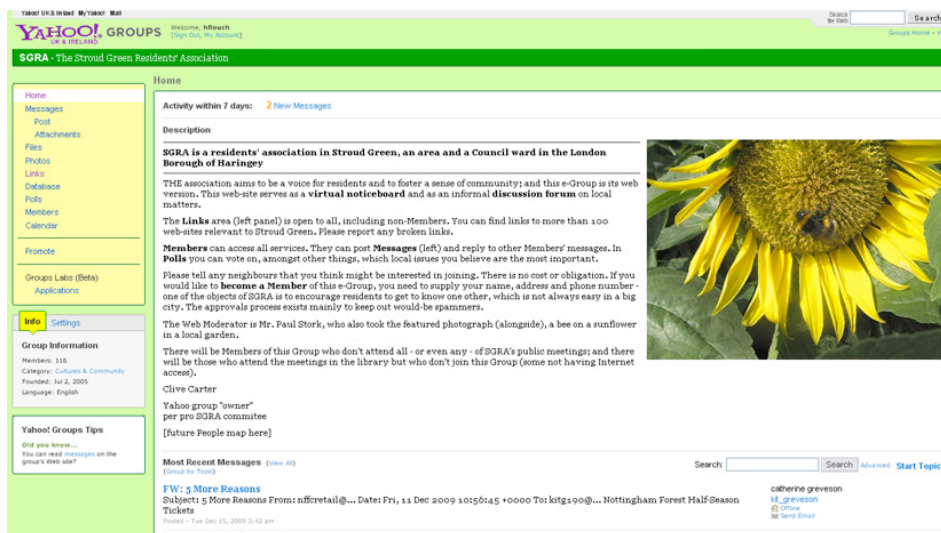**Examples**

[Mitcham (CR4) (Facebook)](#)
[Whampstead (Twitter)](#)

Type 6: Local action groups online

Local action groups are increasingly creating online spaces. Groups include residents' groups, friends of parks groups, tenants groups and environmental groups.

Since the web spaces created by these groups are extensions of work they do in the "real world", there tends to be less focus on design of content. In many respects the webspace replaces the old newsletter. Content tends to reflect the group's function, although since the time and cost investment in publishing is low these sites often publish bulletins from a range of groups within the community/resident circle.

Many are set up as a Yahoo group or as a static digital notice board.

Examples

[Stroud Green Residents' Association](#)
[Barnes Community Association](#)

Type 7: Local digital news (Commercial)

Local Digital News sites are hyperlocal news sites designed to report on local issues. Often established with a civic purpose, these sites are distinguished from citizen journalist sites by their commercial nature. Often they will go beyond merely reporting the local news and will include forums.

There are several local digital news groups now operating in London. Recently Associated Northcliffe Digital (part of the Daily Mail family) has started to set up its People sites.

Examples
Se1
Neighbournet sites
AND People

Type 8: Multiples & listings (Commercial)

Sites in this category are aimed primarily to generate revenue through listing local businesses, services and events. Some are old fashioned flat listings. Others include elements of user content in the way that review sites like Qype do. Some sites that are part of a network are developed within a template provided by the network owners.
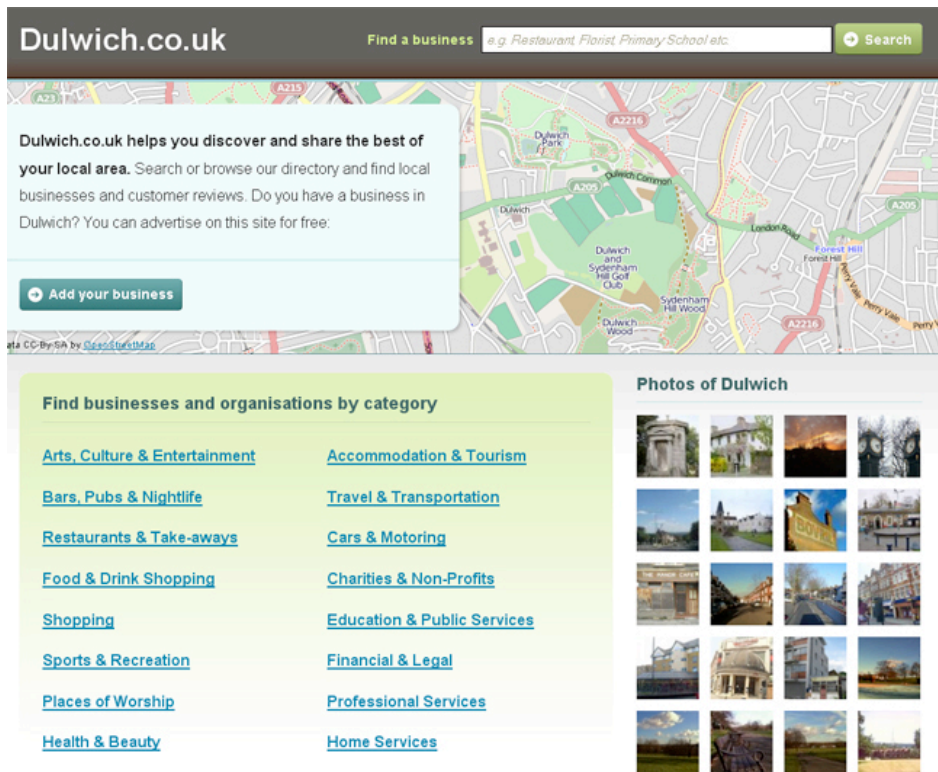
Examples

Wimbledon Visitor
Dulwich.co.uk
My Village
Your local London

Appendix: Content by site type

Content item	Civil Purpose						Commercial	
	Civil Social Networks	Local Discussion Sites	Place-blogs	Local Blogazines	Public Social Spaces	Local Action Groups online	Local Digital News	Multiples, Aggregators & Listings
News - Planning & other local developments - Crime - Local businesses (openings/ closings) - Local Events - Local people – achievements etc - Other community news	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
Discussion - Chit chat - Civic action	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓
"Magazine" content - Civic Society - Local History - Image/video content - General interest - Restaurant reviews	✓✓		✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓	
Local Information databank - key council contacts - how council services work / how to get things done with the council - Police, health & other services - Local travel - others	✓✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	

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Content item	Civil Purpose						Commercial	
	Civil Social Networks	Local Discussion Sites	Place-blogs	Local Blogazines	Public Social Spaces	Local Action Groups online	Local Digital News	Multiples, Aggregators & Listings
Self-selecting micro-groups	✓✓							
Events listings - Civic Action - Entertainment	✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓✓
Recommendations - local trades / professions - local restaurants - Dentists / doctors etc	✓✓	✓✓					✓	
Listings - Business Directory - Jobs - For sale / going free	✓	✓					✓✓	✓✓✓

KEY	
	None / little
✓	Low level
✓✓	Some
✓✓✓	Key feature

Guide to materials in the online neighbourhood networks study

1   *Online neighbourhood networks study* short summary (4 pages)

2   Introduction, background and extended summary

3   Online neighbourhood networks study (Main paper):

    Section 1: Social capital and cohesion
    Section 2: Supportive and negative online behaviour
    Section 3: Empowerment, civic involvement and co-production
    Section 4: Relations with councils
    Section 5: The future for citizen-run neighbourhood websites.

4   Council survey report

5   Guide for councils to online neighbourhood networks

6   Videos (Part of the Guide for councils)

7   Network timeslices

8   Research context

9   Online neighbourhood networks typology

10   Local broadcast media

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by

the Networked Neighbourhoods group

on behalf of

With thanks to our partners