



Neighbourhood online networks

Been there? Done that?

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Online service providers have been *acting globally, thinking locally* for some years now, in the expectation that local manifestations of online activity would break out at commercially-rewarding levels. Social policy watchers and practitioners have been awaiting the same general phenomenon with an assumption that local online connections will strengthen local social capital and community cohesion.

Meanwhile, systems like MySpace that support or strengthen *personal* social networks, independent of locality, have had much-celebrated impact. But there seems to be little evidence that local neighbourhood systems are yet making a difference to connections between local residents, except perhaps some DIY versions.¹

Are we mistaken to believe that neighbourhood online networks can be promoted to become widespread and sustainable, and can make a difference to local quality of life?

The evidence from north America (the Netville and e-Neighbors studies) seems very clear that active participation in a neighbourhood email list increases a resident's number of local weak ties.² Most sociologists and policy theorists would think this was highly desirable. Some local elected members and community activists in the UK would give a great deal for such a measurable transformation of apparent community cohesion.

But we should note that the research, while persuasive, focuses on the most local understanding of *neighbourhood*, as opposed to local area or even city-wide systems: Hampton's thesis for the Netville and Boston studies has long been that small-scale, around 150-200 units, is significant, and that email is predominantly the application on which it all depends. Against this, the commercial imperative seems to require some level of directory-type information provision and advertising, necessarily covering a broader area and thus perhaps over-stretching the principle of very local identity or neighbourhood coherence. Can these two scales be reconciled sustainably?

Furthermore, for most systems apart from the DIY versions, users are required to register their location and discover whether or not any of their neighbours have done likewise. They may encourage their neighbours to

¹ Also, examples can be noted of failure and of negative social capital being provoked.

² 'Those who were enrolled and actively participated in e-Neighbors, by sending at least one message to their neighborhood list, experienced an average increase of 4.36 ties in each year of the study.' (Hampton, K. N. 'Neighborhoods in the network society: the e-Neighbors study.' *Information, communication & society* 10(5), 2007: 714-748).

sign up, but generally the connections formed have a very low likelihood of accumulating into a measurable increase in local ties.

It seems likely that where neighbours or near-neighbours have regular email contact, it will be on the basis of some other shared interest or ongoing responsibility, such as ferrying schoolchildren or going to football matches – in which case membership will be atomised and a neighbourhood list unnecessary. The development of online neighbourhood networks cannot be predicated either on the need for babysitters nor on the demand for local restaurant reviews. Nor, I suggest, can we interpret much from the success or failure of reporting and suggestion systems (using SMS or the web to correspond with the state): what's missing is communication, not information.

The political agenda of 'responsibilisation' of the citizen is unrelenting. This is a powerful driver of social change and the requirement for citizens to act together to promote cohesion, manage their environment, reduce waste and deter crime would be facilitated in many cases by better communication, and therefore more interaction, at the most local level. And although many people may find it hard to describe their locality in terms of 'neighbourhood', or their lifestyle as compatible with neighbourly interaction, public debate as reflected in our broadcast media seems often to uncover an appetite for both. There is surely political justification for investment in this field if it could be shown to be worthwhile.

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