

## Online Social Networks and Community Development

Our recent evaluation of Project Dirt, the green social network, offered a tantalising glimpse of the significant potential that online spaces have for supporting local community development.<sup>1</sup>

Project Dirt is one of a growing number of websites that specifically place the facilitation of local communities at their heart. In the evaluation members of Project Dirt were not only using it to advertise events but

also to inspire, enthuse, engage and encourage action at a local level. But the facilitation of local groups is also an increasingly common use of some of the most popular generic online networking tools, such as Facebook and Twitter.

In this edition of Emergent Thinking we consider ‘place-based’ online communities, the ways they can facilitate local action, and how those interested in community development may be able to work with online networks more effectively.

### Virtual communities and the ‘real’ world

Not so long ago the Internet was thought to represent a potential retreat into a virtual world. The digital revolution offered real opportunities for building new communities; communities of interest linking people with common experiences, hobbies and passions. However sociologists and educationalists were worried about the effect of ‘cyberspace’ on young people and feared that they would retreat into their bedrooms and avoid ‘real’ social interaction.<sup>2</sup> There were also worries that the global reach of the internet would undermine existing social ties of family, friends and local, place-based communities.

The reality is that new technologies are introduced into existing social and cultural dynamics; they may influence the way society develops but they are also shaped by it. William Dutton’s recent paper on globalisation and local communities for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlights that the internet has increased the frequency of communication at all levels, between friends, families



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.projectdirt.com/project/10487/>

<sup>2</sup> Hogan B and Wellman B, 2012 *The Immanent Internet Redux*, Chapter in ‘Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture’. Edited by P Hope Cheong et al. Peter Lang, New York. [http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/neighboring/neighboring\\_netville.pdf](http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/neighboring/neighboring_netville.pdf)

and members of local communities as well as with those further afield.<sup>3</sup> Caroline Haythornthwaite, Professor in the Graduate School of Information Science at the University of Illinois, suggests that “What has been growing over the years is a stronger, internet-enabled connection to the geographically based community”.<sup>4</sup> Building strong social ties and, critically, working together towards a common aim remains easier in the places where we live, work and relax. Nevertheless, the development of social networks that combine both communities of interest *and* communities of place has been a key feature of the recent development of online social networks and is central to sites like Project Dirt, freecycle.org and streetbank.

### Facilitating local action

Can these online social networks really encourage action or are they simply another line of communication for existing social groups supporting activities that would have taken place anyway? The Canadian sociologist Barry Wellman certainly believes that online communities have the potential to encourage action that would not have otherwise taken place. He studied ‘Netville’, an early ‘connected communities’ housing experiment in Toronto during the 1990s, where new houses were built with permanent internet connections and platforms to allow them to communicate with each other as well as the outside world. He found that one of the first things residents used their new connections for was to self-organize and hold the developer to account for the snags builders had left unresolved in their new homes.<sup>5</sup> This feedback was so overwhelming that the housing developers reportedly said they would never build a wired neighbourhood again!

In ‘Pathways through Participation’<sup>6</sup>, the NCVO, the Institute for Volunteering Research, Involve and the Big Lottery Fund undertook a comprehensive two and a half year research project to explore the factors that led to ‘active citizenship’. They concluded that there are four key elements that need to be in place, namely; the **motivation** for action; the **triggers** to prompt action; the **resources** to support participation and the **opportunities** to contribute. It is perhaps not too difficult to see how the design of the Netville experiment itself might have provided residents with a suitable motivation, trigger, resource and opportunity to take the kind of action they did.

Our research with Project Dirt users also suggested that online social networks can help to put all four of these elements in place in order to stimulate a wider range of, perhaps more positive, activities aimed at reducing carbon footprints and protecting the environment (see table overleaf). Project Dirt is an online social networking platform that offers members the potential to build personal journals and project pages. It enables them to promote and manage events and activities within a geographical cluster whilst also sharing learning more widely across different communities. The site is designed to raise awareness of things going on in your locality. The Project Dirt team help facilitate communications through newsletters and journal posts that set the tone for the site as a place that is positive and fun but also focused on promoting local activities in the real world rather than becoming a talking shop.

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<sup>3</sup> Dutton, W, November 2010 *The local impact of the global internet: The effect of new technology and global communication on individuals and communities in Britain* JRF programme paper on Globalisation. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/internet-communities-communication-full.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Ciciacora P, May 2010, *Online interactions have positive effects for real-life communities* <http://news.illinois.edu/10/0405online.html>

<sup>5</sup> Hampton K and Wellman B, 2003, *Neighbouring in Netville: How the Internet Supports Community and Social Capital in a Wired Suburb*. City and Community Vol 2.4. [http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/neighboring/neighboring\\_netville.pdf](http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/neighboring/neighboring_netville.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Brodie et al. September 2011 ‘Pathways through participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship?’ Research funded by NCVO, Institute for Volunteering Research, Involve and Big Lottery Fund. <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/>

## Pathways through participation – the Project Dirt example

	Factor Description	Project Dirt User Survey Results
	<b>Motivations</b> – people get involved in activities that have meaning to them, in particular because they help others, develop relationships, exercise values and beliefs, enable people to have influence, give personal benefits or give a feeling of being part of something.	Whilst most current users are already committed greens, the site provides further inspiration for many: 93% of all users said they had been inspired by what they had seen on PD. 51% of project leads said they had got specific ideas for their projects and activities from the site.
	<b>Triggers</b> – people tend to participate when a general motivation has been triggered by an emotional reaction, a personal life event or some external influence.	Key triggers to action include being specifically asked to help and the sense of obligation that comes from receiving support: 35% of project leads and 20% of general users said they had responded to a request for help on PD 34% of project leads and 27% of general users also said they had received help through the site.
	<b>Resources</b> – motivations can be tempered by limits to practical resources (time, money etc), learned resources (skills, knowledge and experience) and felt resources (including self-confidence and efficacy).	Project Dirt helps with 'felt' resources like confidence and self-efficacy as well as sharing practical resources: 75% of general users agreed that 'Doing green stuff seems easier than they first thought' after using PD 57% of general users agreed that using the site had helped them realise they had something to offer.
	<b>Opportunities</b> – where institutions, organisations, groups, venues and events create an environment in which participation can flourish and individuals have the opportunities to translate motivation to action.	One of the strongest dimensions of Project Dirt is its ability to raise awareness of opportunities to participate: 93% of all users said that they were more aware of opportunities to get involved after using PD 75% of general users agreed there was a lot more going on near them than they'd previously thought.

Source: Project Dirt Evaluation 2013, Emergent Research & Consulting Ltd.

Pathways Model adapted from: Brodie et al, September 2011 'Pathways through participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship?'

Our evaluation concluded that whilst many groups using the site may have existed before they joined Project Dirt, their online experience has helped to motivate and engage people and to stimulate new activities. Users also reported that the site helps to make activities enjoyable and provides an additional mechanism for feedback and encouragement, both of which are highlighted in the Pathways through Participation work as being key to *sustaining* active citizenship.

### Potential limitations

Whilst these findings are impressive it is important not to overstate the case; there are limitations to the potential of online social networks to support community development. The difference in the levels of access to and use of the internet between different parts of society, with the most socially excluded groups also the least likely to use online media (known commonly as the digital divide), is clearly an important one. There are also limitations in terms of scale. Place-based social networks need to have a critical mass of members within a locality for the network to 'take-off', i.e. for groups to be able to engage new members and for activities to inspire others. This can make it difficult for social networks that combine communities of interest *and* place to work in small communities where there are relatively few committed individuals to get the network off the ground. The most active Project Dirt geographical clusters to date have been in London and Liverpool (although this is

also where the resources to facilitate groups have been concentrated). Streetbank, a network that aims to facilitate local sharing of goods, skills and time in order to build social capital and reduce the consumption of natural resources, suggests that a critical mass for them is a minimum of 100 members within a mile of one another.

### Online opportunities

Nevertheless online social networks offer real opportunities for those with a professional interest in community development. Many projects and programmes we have seen have attempted to build their own bespoke websites and online tools to encourage communication and sharing between projects and between project staff and project beneficiaries. Almost invariably they are expensive failures, little more than brochure sites that are quickly out of date with forums and discussions that show little contribution from anyone other than paid staff. Using an existing platform, even generic sites like Facebook, allows much greater interaction between people inside and outside of the project both within and beyond a local community. It is also much more likely that such an approach will generate a critical mass of interest and enable projects to benefit from the 'positive externalities' of learning from and sharing with others and creating a positive 'buzz' of activity.

However, using existing platforms and groups is not necessarily a cost saving measure. Online social networks with a community development purpose work best when they are actively facilitated, with facilitators helping to ensure the right tone is set, to encourage learning and sharing through things like local newsletters, making personal introductions and, critically, helping people to get to grips with the technology. Effective facilitation also works best with a multimedia approach, using emails and the general feeds of some of the most popular networks (like Twitter and Facebook) to draw new and existing members to project or theme specific pages where there is less noise and more opportunity for meaningful communication.

Not developing bespoke websites and communication tools does mean some loss of control for programme and project managers. A key dimension of successful online social networks is that they are networks, not top down structures. But this is perhaps a small price to pay for preventing project websites becoming online ghost towns. With the increasing emphasis on co-production in community development, online social networks can be an enabler rather than a barrier to working with self-organising communities.

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