



## Japan Local Government Centre, London

### Monthly Report for November 2010 (England) – London's Digital Neighbourhoods

#### **Background**

“Community sites with no costs can serve very small, human news geographies of a single ward or a few streets.”

*Digital Britain, DCMS 2009*

The recent trends towards the decline of traditional local media in London (with several local papers folding in recent years) and the increasingly atomised nature of community life in the capital (on account of transient populations and commuting patterns) has seen increased interest by policymakers in the rise of what is being termed ‘hyperlocal’ websites and the contribution they can make towards both engendering a better spirit of community and greater engagement of service users by local authorities. Since Robert Putnam’s landmark *Bowling Alone* (2000), policymakers have sought an elusive formula for engendering new forms of community participation to replace those which has been lost on account of the pressures of modern life and loosening of social bonds. There is also the tendency of councils wanting to engage with the founders of hyperlocal sites on account of the sometimes hostile nature of their coverage of local public service failures or tensions. The Local Government Association is undertaking work through its ‘Local by Social’ programme to help councils better understand how residents engage with them through social media.

Hyperlocal sites are appealing, and sometimes unappealing, to councils for a number of reasons. Firstly, there are the claims towards the low cost but value-added activity achieved by hyperlocal sites in discovering untapped social capital. Equally, the transient nature of life in the capital, with new communities arriving and the retrenchment of retail activity away from long established local businesses in favour of chain retailers on high streets has rendered community life difficult to maintain. However, some observers also point to the notion that hyperlocal sites merely extend engagement of already engaged sections of the community by local authorities, while harder to reach ‘voiceless’ groups not involved are left behind. In some instances, local councillors have engaged in party political behaviour on the sites, seeking to discredit opponents.

Hyperlocal sites can be identified by their coverage and discussion of community news centred on one particular neighbourhood. While many hyperlocal websites are run by amateurs, there is also evidence of professional journalists becoming involved. In the London Borough of Greenwich, two hyperlocal sites covering two neighbourhoods are run by freelance journalists working for large scale media *Any opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of JLGC or CLAIR.*

outlets, while the borough site greenwich.co.uk employs national journalist and local resident Andrew Gilligan as a columnist. To some extent this would question the notion of these websites being organic, amateur and community-grown, although the site founders receive no payment for their role here.

The concentration of residents in the capital lends itself to easier construction of hyperlocal sites than in other areas of the country, as people exist in closer proximity and have more access to the internet and more innate curiosity about their neighbourhood which is not being met by traditional word of mouth information or bonds between neighbours. Equally, the spread of hyperlocal sites has occurred on account of the increased availability of functional free software such as Wordpress with which editors can construct professional looking websites.

The hyperlocal movement in London has even led to a London Neighbourhoods Online conference being held in September organised by the London Civic Forum and hosted at the offices of Ofcom, which attracted around 100 participants.

### **London's Digital Neighbourhoods**

The London Digital Neighbourhoods study explored the ways in which people communicate online using locally-based websites, whether that communication has an impact and the implications for local service providers. In this project, the Networked Neighbourhoods organisation is working with London Councils' 'Capital Ambition' (the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership) to investigate London's online neighbourhood spaces and understand the true extent of their impact and the implications for local service providers.

The study aimed to provide insights on how local citizen websites:

- contribute to citizen empowerment and engagement
- help strengthen sense of belonging
- build citizens' capacity to work alongside services
- hold public services to account

The study also identified other relevant issues such as:

- implications for local enterprise and local economic development
- implications for local media
- extent of the untapped potential of the networks

The findings of the study were discussed at a special London Digital Neighbourhoods conference in November. The study found that the 'ecosystem' of hyperlocal sites in the capital consisted of 160 citizen-led sites identified by the researchers, with one, the East Dulwich Forum, securing an active readership of 15,000 people across two council wards. The forum was notable for the generation of offline activity such as the foundation of a Women's Institute and a Curry Club in the neighbourhood, while the Harringay Online site had led to similar offline activities such as the formation of a knitting club and residents' action groups.

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Respondents to the survey pointed to an increased sense of neighbourliness following the creation and operation of hyperlocal sites, including increased social contact between residents where none had existed before. The researchers claimed that hyperlocal sites ultimately led to social action in neighbourhoods over common problems, enabling communities to pull together and co-produce their own quality of life. It was also noted that hyperlocal sites had led to an increased sense of community pride and belonging among those users surveyed. As the coalition government pushes both its 'Big Society' plans and also the new emphasis on greater community involvement in the planning process, hyperlocal sites may come to play an increasingly valuable part in the future policy landscape.

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