



Is this local e-democracy? How the online sphere of influence shaped local politics.

Empirical evidence from the Manchester Congestion Charge referendum

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Abstract: *The debate on the potential of the internet to transform democratic practice appears to have settled around a balanced, empirically driven consensus that sees the internet as a political sphere of influence. This article acknowledges this and drawing upon a network ethnography approach provides empirical evidence demonstrating how this online sphere was used to influence the recent Manchester Congestion Charge referendum in the UK. It illustrates the online sphere as a locally contested political space where “politics as usual” appears to prevail. Nonetheless, it also provides evidence of civic activists ably using the online network to get their voices heard and argues that prospects for this online sphere enhancing local democracy are in fact contingent upon the agency of these activists and local policy makers.*

Keywords: network ethnography, social network analysis, local online sphere of influence, trust

1. Introduction

Dutton (2009) has argued that the internet now functions as a new sphere of influence. He conceptualises it as a “Fifth Estate” with a potential to re-invigorate liberal democracies. It is the distinct networking properties of the internet that enhances the communicative power, over and above that provided by the traditional media, of both citizens and political representatives or institutions. Moreover, it is in the overlapping of these different networks to share information that the potential for influencing public policy lies. The question posed by this paper is: how might this networked sphere influence local democracy and local policy making?

Past evaluations of local e-democracy projects in the UK have not been heartening. Research for the government sponsored National Project on Local e-Democracy (Practhett, 2005) concluded that there was little demand for e-democracy and indeed perceived citizens to be hostile to such innovations. Wright (2006, p 244) while noting that “e-democracy initiatives have proliferated at a local level” concluded that the radical

potential of the internet to enhance representative democracy has "...largely been normalised to support existing processes" (2006, p 248).

There are at least two important caveats to these evaluations that suggest that local e-democracy might be in better health. One is that they pre-date the Web 2.0 phenomenon that has potentially created "...an 'architecture of participation,' and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences" (O'Reilly, 2005). For Chadwick (2012) the significance of Web 2.0 for political engagement lies in its facility to provide a granular information environment that enables citizens to choose not only when to participate but also how and to what extent. Indeed, the relative success of the UK Prime Minister's e-petition website (UK Prime Ministers Website, 2012) which recently forced debates in the House of Commons (BBC, 2011) might be testament to this. Secondly, leaving aside consistently low levels of electoral turnout for local government, there is a compelling congruency between the predictors of online activism and the attachment citizens in the UK have to local participation.

The significance that people attach to local participation has been consistently recognised in audits of civic participation (Pattie et al, 2004, Hansard Society, 2011). In its 2011 Audit of Political Engagement the Hansard Society showed that almost seven in 10 people (69%) claim they are interested in how things work in their local area, a higher level of interest than for politics more generally (58%). There is a strong correlation between those who are interested in politics and those who are interested in how things work locally: 86% of those interested in politics are also interested in the workings of their local area. However, half (48%) of those who are not interested in 'politics' are interested in the way things work locally. Significantly, around half of the public (51%) are positive about the efficacy of local engagement. This is consistent with Pattie et al (2004) findings that of those who vote in local elections two thirds think that their votes could have some or a great deal of influence

This is important given Norris's (2004) findings that it is this belief that a person can influence the political process that is a predictor of online activism. She maintains

"...use of the internet to be significantly related to political activism, suggesting that this relationship is not simply explained away as a result of the prior social or attitudinal characteristics of those most prone to go online. The most important factors predicting activism concern internal political efficacy (a feeling that the person could influence the political process) age, education, region and civic duty. After these factors, use of the internet proved the next strongest predictor of activism, more important than other indicators such as social or political trust or use of any of the news media" (Norris, 2004, p 15).

Moreover, this predictor of online activism can be combined with the decidedly local enactment of a global technology. As Polat and Pratchett (2009, p 193) have observed:

“the technology is often enacted in ways that are explicitly local in their focus, with the potential to enhance rather than undermine localities”.

This article will explore this potential by presenting qualitative evidence from actors connected to the online network associated with the UK Manchester Congestion Charge referendum conducted in December 2008. Firstly, we will make the case for the potential of an online networked sphere to influence local policies. This will be followed by an explanation of the research approach and how data associated with this particular online network was captured and analysed. The section after this will present evidence on how this online network was used by those actors identified as prominent in the network. This will be followed by a discussion on the implications of this evidence for the prospects for local e-democracy.

2. An online realm of local political influence?

In conceptualising the Internet as a ‘Fifth Estate’ or ‘a new sphere of influence’ Dutton (2009, p 5) points to the scale and nature of online participation that “... has begun to approach, if not pass, a tipping point at which the social shaping and implications of the internet are becoming more apparent” (Dutton et al, 2009, p 5). If this is allied, he argues, to the distinct networking properties of the internet, or the “space of flows” as Castells (1996) describes this new socio-technical environment, then the communicative power of individuals and organisations may be enhanced.

Levels of internet use in the UK are certainly impressive. According to the Office of National Statistics (2010) 81% of men use the internet every day or almost every day, and so do 76% of women. When it comes to blogs and social networks, 44% of men and 42% of women had posted messages on chat sites, social networks or blogs. Facebook, currently the most popular of social media sites, has according to Hitwise (2010) 26 million UK users. In terms of political usage of the medium a recent survey by the Hansard Society (Williamson, 2010) revealed that the majority of people (70%) surveyed felt that the internet makes it easy for those already online to participate in civic and political activities and half (49%) preferred to use the internet to do this. Indeed, as Dutton et al (2009) have shown, drawing upon the 2009 Oxford Internet Survey, a majority of the population (59%) had used the internet to access a range of government services including getting information about policy.

Moreover, the same study showed that the Internet was the first place users would go to for information across a range of subjects. Significantly, they tend to trust the information that they find there as much or more than the information they receive through the mass-media. Whilst acknowledging that the digital divide or access to the internet remains a

problem Dutton argues that the evidence points to the Internet achieving "...a critical mass that enables networked individuals to be a significant force" (2009, p 5).

Recent empirical research is supportive of Dutton's thesis. Jensen (2011) in an analysis of how citizenship in Denmark can be enacted online identified an online population who prefer to interact in online political activities than offline ones and, moreover, were likely to have been mobilised by the new media themselves. For Jensen this constitutes "... a new civil segment that ought to be taken into consideration by policy initiatives" (2011, p 17). Similarly (Bartlett et al, 2011) in an investigation into the online supporters of the new-right parties and movements in Europe found that numerically online support of such parties and movements was often triple that of the formal membership. They concluded that

"...online supporters of populist movements represent a whole new generation of predominantly young activists, who far outnumber the formal members of these parties. And their involvement extends offline: they tend to vote for the parties they like, and are far more likely to get involved in political activism compared with the general public ' (p 22).

Henman (2011) in examining policy making in the Australian public sector argues that the omnipresence and usage of digital media means that electronic networks stimulate policy thinking in terms of networks. Esher (2011) in an evaluation of the Mysociety website 'Theyworkforyou', recorded between 200,000 and 300,000 site visits per month. He found that while participation on the site was heavily biased towards politically active, university educated males from a high income group just over a fifth of users (21%) was not politically active and was using the site to look up information on their MPs for the first time. Also chiming with Dutton's thesis is empirical research undertaken by Coleman et al (2012) who provide contemporary robust evidence of a strong public demand for online consultation at both local and national levels of government and call for a "... more sophisticated approach to thinking about the ecology of public participation..." (p 187). The particular ecology they are invoking here is one characterised by an online networked communication that engages both citizens and public decision-makers.

Can this online sphere exert influence at the local level? A recent cross-sectional study by Hampton et al (2011) underlines the localised impact of new technology. They found, contradicting the dystopian view of the prevalence of echo chambers on the internet (see Sunstein, 2007, or Hindman, 2009, for example) that, on average, internet users have more diverse social networks than non-internet users. This was particularly true for users of social media such as Facebook which they show to have a direct relationship to network diversity. More importantly for our purpose here they also found that use of the internet mediated relationship to diversity through influencing participation in traditional local settings. So, for example, frequent internet users were more likely to attend church, participate in voluntary groups and make visits to public spaces than less frequent or non-internet users. Interestingly they also found, chiming with Chadwick's (2012) thesis on the

granular information environment provided by Web 2.0, that it was use of specific social media that mediated relationships to specific physical settings. Thus bloggers were more likely to attend church and those who shared photos online were more likely to visit public spaces and belong to more voluntary groups. Hampton et al conclude that people "...are using ICTs to reinforce participation in existing foci of activity; established institutions, public spaces and other settings that are public, place-based and primarily local'" (p 1045).

Of course it is still open to question if these affordances of new technology can enhance democracy and, broadly speaking, two opposing themes have emerged from empirical research. The internet facilitates the continued dominance of traditional elites on the political discourse and outcomes (Margolis and Resnick 2001, Schweitzer 2008, Hindman 2009) or it can widen participation and re-vitalise democratic ideals by facilitating a more bottom-up engagement (Norris, 2002, Bimber, 2003, Gibson and Rommele, 2008). More recent empirical contributions to this debate have tended to emphasise more nuanced positions (Price, 2009, Astron and Gronland, 2012) that are contingent upon policy implementation.

This paper contributes to this debate by presenting new empirical evidence on how a range of civic actors used the online network associated with UK Manchester Congestion Charge referendum.

3. Research approach

A single case study approach was adopted here as the Manchester Congestion Charge referendum offered a rare opportunity to analyse and study how the internet might be used in the context of a contentious local civic issue.

The Manchester Congestion Charge scheme was put to a referendum of 1.9 million registered voters in December 2008. This followed a year of intense, often acrimonious political lobbying, both for and against the proposal, by elected politicians, the business community and activists from across the political spectrum ranging from environmental groups to car drivers' associations. It was, as one interviewee, a local media commentator put it, "... the most important issue or story that has effected this area in a long while ... almost everybody had an opinion".

The scheme contentiously aimed to implement the largest traffic congestion charging scheme in the world. It would cover 80 square miles and consist of two cordons; the outer ring roughly cordoning the conurbation comprising the Greater Manchester Urban area; and an inner ring around the Manchester City centre area.

The charges for cars using the congestion charge scheme were perceived as both threat and opportunity to the economic interests of different sections of the business community.

Crudely speaking those businesses who came out against the proposal had economic interests in freight haulage and retail parks located on the edge of the urban area and included substantial multi-national businesses, including Kellogg's and Unilever alongside major national real estate companies such as Peel Holdings, owners of the Trafford Centre one of the largest shopping centres in the UK. The business interests of those supporting the proposal were generally located within the city centre area and whilst numerous were generally not in the same financial league as those businesses opposing the proposal. Both sets of businesses interests formed lobby groups: the Greater Manchester Momentum Group (GMMG) opposed the proposal; and United City supported it. They also hired local Public Relations (PR) consultancy firms to campaign for their interests.

There was also a lot at stake for local political interests and the governance of the sub-region. If successful the scheme as well as ushering in a congestion charging scheme, also provided considerable inward financial investment (£3bn) to improve the transport infrastructure of all 10 local government areas and generating, so it was claimed, 10,000 new jobs. Balanced against this were concerns over the impact of a congestion charge scheme on commuters' pockets. This was used to some effect by those campaigning against the charge who claimed that motorists commuting daily could be faced with charges of £1200 per annum.

A representative sample survey of residents run by Ipsos Mori found just before the referendum that just over half (53%) of residents were in favour of the Congestion Charge scheme (Ottewell, 2008). It was in this context that the results of the referendum - 8 out of 10 of those voting, voted against the proposal - confounded most commentators.

One of the actors interviewed as part of this case study, a PR consultant with responsibilities for monitoring online traffic associated with the referendum, considered that the rejection of the scheme was 'a real endorsement of the way in which the 'No' campaigners used Web 2.0'.

4. Methods

This case study employed a distinctive mixed method approach for collecting evidence on the online political activity associated with this referendum. A thorough explanation of this approach can be found in Hepburn (2012). It is the qualitative network ethnography approach that is most useful here and in order to weigh the significance of the evidence provided by this approach some explanation is necessary.

The web crawling software VOSON (Ackland, 2008) was used to find and capture data from the online political activity associated with the referendum campaign. Websites captured by this software were categorised according to a particular attribute, or function, of the site (see Table 1). So the sites were categorised as: a "Governance" site (Gov), that is,

they were a local government site or were an official site overseeing the consultation and referendum; a “Non-government” organisation site (NGO), these included sites that were established by civic activist to protest or support the TIF proposal; “Political Party” sites; “Media” sites, these included traditional mass media sites; and, “Web 2.0” sites, that is, those sites employing Web 2.0 applications. The latter were categorised according to the definition provided by O’Reilly (2005).

To be clear, all the websites captured by VOSON and selected as the core of the network¹ were manually examined and if they enabled Web 2.0 applications as defined by O’Reilly then they were categorised as “Web 2.0”. For the purpose of this analysis those sites not categorised as Web 2.0, but categorised as, for example, “Gov” or “Media” are to be understood as Web 1.0 broadcast, sites; in other words they do not facilitate any interactive engagement or exchange of information with the public but simply provide information for public consumption. The sites were also classified according to their campaign stance during the referendum, thus they were either campaigning for a “No” or “Yes” vote or they were impartial. Here all sites run or established by government or media institutions are categorised as “impartial”. It should be noted that the impartiality of these sites was questioned by campaigners during the referendum. Nonetheless it is the case that local government is legally obliged, as is the norm during any formal UK political contest, to be impartial in any of their published material, digital or otherwise.

VOSON then enables a number of basic SNA measures to be applied on this data. It was these measures that enabled Howard’s (2002) network ethnography approach to be drawn upon. The purpose of this is to select for interview those actors prominent in the captured online congestion charge network. It is, as Howard describes, the “...*process of using ethnographic field methods on cases and field sites selected using social network analysis*” (2002, 561). Biddix and Park (2008) also used this method and argued that the key strength of the network ethnography approach is its potential to minimise sample bias by incorporating network analysis to identify sub-groups or clusters worth further study.

All the SNA measures used are measures of node centrality thereby indicating the extent to which any given node is prominent in the network. As such the “betweenness” measurement provides an indication of how often a website may lie on the shortest path between two other sites and can be used to gauge the potential for that site to act as a “gatekeeper” in linking activity or flow of information in the network. The Hyperlinked-

¹ A decision was, taken following Kelly and Etling (2008), to analyse the core structure of the network. This was identified by selecting the most densely linked part of the network. Hence a subset of the wider network 3322 sites were selected that had a degree score of 4 or more, that is, only those sites were selected that were linked to by 4 or more ‘seedsites’, or they had reciprocated links with two ‘seedsites’. Sites within these subsets were then manually examined for relevance which resulted in an online congestion charge network containing 58 sites by the end of it.

Induced Topic Search (HITS) algorithm, on the other hand, was developed specifically to analyse the network structure of a hyperlinked environment (Kleinberg, 1999). This measurement of centrality indicates the extent to which “authority” is conferred upon particular websites by being linked to by other “hub” websites in the network. Thus a high “hits-auth” ranking denotes a website that is rendered authoritative on the subject in question, in this case the Manchester congestion charge. By the same token a high “hits hub” ranked website is one that is very active in making links to render other sites authoritative. These then are all different measures of prominence that can inform how a website may be politically influential in any given online network.

A cross-section of site categories that had a ranking in the top 20 on at least one of these SNA measures was then selected (see Table 1). The exception is the cleanairnow.co.uk site. This site was included as it was considered necessary to look at the environmentalist “voice” within the online network and this gained the highest SNA scores of such sites. This necessity was driven by a desire to understand why or how, given that one motivation for the proposed congestion charge scheme was protecting the environment through reducing car usage, the campaign on the referendum had been overwhelmingly dominated, both online and off, by an economic discourse.

Table 1: Sites selected as prominent in the online network

url_pagegroup	Site cat	Campaign stance	'Hits_hub' ranking (n = 58)	'Hits-auth' ranking (n = 58)	'Betweeness' ranking (n = 58)
http://www.gmfuturetransport.co.uk/	GOV	impartial	30	1	5
http://www.manchestertolltax.com/	NGO	No vote	7	3	2
http://www.gmmgroup.co.uk/	NGO	No vote	39	5	8
http://www.wevoteyes.co.uk/	NGO	Yes vote	40	7	11
http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=44393024872	WEB 2	impartial	19	19	9
http://www.bbc.co.uk/	MEDIA	impartial	31	10	13
http://blogs.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/	WEB 2	impartial	10	29	32

http://www.rochdale.gov.uk/	GOV	impartial	14	34	22
http://www.cleanairnow.co.uk/	NGO	Yes vote	37	31	53
http://www.libdemvoice.org/	POL	impartial	52	30	16
http://www.tamesidetories.com/	POL	No vote	47	14	38
http://www.stockport.gov.uk/	GOV	impartial	16	33	16
http://www.trafford.gov.uk/	GOV	impartial	13	32	15

Table 1 also serves to introduce the local actors contesting the referendum that will be discussed in this article. The Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive (GMPTE) (<http://www.gmfuturetransport.co.uk>) was charged with implementing the congestion charging scheme. This body is collectively managed by the ten local government institutions in the Greater Manchester conurbation. The two traditional media organisations with a significant online presence here are: the local regional newspaper the Manchester Evening News; and, the BBC. There are four campaign sites: manchestertolltax.com; gmmgroup.co.uk; cleanairnow.co.uk; and, wevotyes.co.uk. These campaigns, which will be discussed in more detail below, were formed specifically to contest the referendum and were non-party political.

As Table 1 illustrates a total of 13 sites were chosen for further investigation. Further research was necessary to locate the right person associated with the chosen site to interview. This involved contacting, either through telephone or email, the organisation responsible for the website and requesting an interview with the person who determined the site's content. This process provided a subject for interview from all of the sites identified as prominent in Table 1 apart from either of the two political party websites: the [Libdemvoice.org](http://libdemvoice.org) and the tamesidetories.com. However, it did serve to uncover a further 3 contacts, who were recommended as useful informants, two of whom worked for Public Relations Agencies, contracted by different elements of the pro-congestion charge lobby, and influenced the communication strategy of these campaigns.

Interestingly, whilst the mapped hyperlink network was useful in helping to identify prominent actors, it also usefully served to highlight notable absentees from the network. For example, significant by their absence from the online network was the dominant political party, both locally and nationally, the Labour Party. Given that this was also the party that had developed and promoted the congestion charge scheme their lack of prominence online was a curiosity that merited further investigation. This lack of Labour Party representation online was a question that was posed to the first round of interviewees. Whilst they were forthcoming on this issue they also suggested potential subjects for interview in the local Labour Party who had, in their opinion, campaigned either online or offline, for and against the scheme. This resulted in a further 4 subjects

being identified for interview, one of whom was a prominent local councillor (elected representative for local government) active in the “wevoteyes” campaign. In total 17 subjects were selected for further investigation. Once located the preferred method of enquiry was a semi structured interview.

The following draws upon a selection of these interviews to illustrate how the online network was used to influence this local referendum.

5. How the local online sphere was used to influence local policy

This paper does not maintain that internet usage alone was responsible for the defeat of the referendum but it is interesting that one of the interviewees – the PR consultant charged with monitoring online traffic for the GMPTE - considered that the rejection of the referendum was “a real endorsement of the way in which the “No” campaigners used Web 2.0”.

If it is indeed the case that the vote “No” campaigners used the online network to greater effect then the following narratives point to at least three factors that may explain this success: lack of trust in government institutions; powerful offline economic support; and, an awareness of the political potential of the online networked environment.

The most authoritative web site in the online network (see table 1) was a governance site hosted by the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive, <http://www.gmfuturetransport.co.uk>. This body was an arm of local government and would be responsible for implementing the congestion charging scheme but nonetheless as a public body had to position the site as neutral during the referendum campaign. As we shall see this position was contested. All the information related to the scheme and the results of an impressive public consultation process were placed on this dedicated website. It was designed as a static broadcast website allowing little interaction other than email. Nevertheless, it received 65,592 visits comprising 50,383 unique visitors. However, evidence from the actors’ narratives collected here suggested that information on this site was not trusted.

The political reporter of the local newspaper (see below) considered there were “*trust*” issues with this site as people had difficulty differentiating it from the vote “Yes” campaign. This had the effect of “*tainting*” the information on the benefits of the proposed congestion charge scheme in the eyes of many people. He thought that the unfavourable ruling by the independent regulator for the UK’s communication industries (Ofcom²) in

² “Ofcom received seven complaints about an advertisement broadcast on the television channel ITV1 (Granada) publicising a local poll being held in the Greater Manchester area. The poll seeks to gauge opinion on a proposed transport plan for the area, to be financed by funding from a central

response to complaints about a television advert publicising the referendum cemented this impression in people's minds. This was confirmed by the activist from the vote "No" campaign (website: manchestertolltax.com)

"The bottom line was that people felt that they couldn't trust what was being said and then when the Ofcom verdict came in that was it ...bang, they gave up.....nobody believed it was neutral site anyway ...there was an awful lot of gerrymandered statistics".

One consequence of this information not being trusted was the proliferation, particularly online of factually incorrect or mis-information about the Congestion Charge scheme. This proved frustrating for those campaigning for a "Yes" vote as the campaign manager for the www.wevoteyes.com site claimed:

"I'm big advocate of Web 2.0 and social media and use it a lot but on this campaign it makes me very, very nervous as it creates a parallel reality dominated by highly polarised views where there is no tracking of what is fact and fiction..'" To counter this he stated that it was necessary for '... a group of us would attempt to be online as much as possible to rebut stuff that was just wrong...".

The other factor tilting the online playing field in favour of the 'No' campaign was their level of economic support. Cyber sceptics suggest that new technologies will not as a matter of course transform existing patterns of civic and political participation. Margolis and Resnick (2001) found that it was "politics as usual" whereby it is established interests, including traditional parties, commercial and media interests, that have asserted their dominance in the virtual world of digital politics.

The narratives from those actors associated with the 'No' campaign against the Congestion Charge illuminate the ways in which economically powerful offline commercial interests may have exercised influence online during the course of the referendum. The Greater Manchester Momentum Group (GMMG), website www.gmmgroup.co.uk, was established by business concerns such as Peel Holdings; Kellogg's; and, Unilever to oppose the Congestion Charge proposal.

government Transport Innovation Fund ("TIF"). This transport plan includes the introduction of a congestion charging scheme. The advertisement featured a presenter in a studio referring to the poll and summarising the consequences of "yes" and "no" outcomes. During the advertisement a call to action to vote, the name and logo: Greater Manchester Future Transport ("GMFT"), and GMFT's website address were all prominently displayed. Ofcom found this website to be 'partial in respect of the transport funding bid and the prospective congestion charge'. In our view this advertisement therefore directed viewers to a website which contained information about a matter of political controversy which was partial in support of a 'yes' vote" (Ofcom, 2008b)

These are, by any measure, economically powerful businesses. Peel according to its website³ is one of the leading infrastructure, transport and real estate companies in Britain with assets of £6bn. Kellogg's is, of course, a well-known multi-national company employing more than 26,000 people worldwide with a turnover of \$13 billion⁴. Both of which are dwarfed by Unilever which claims⁵ a worldwide workforce of 179,000 and a global turnover in excess of \$39 billion. How might their undoubted economic offline presence be felt online?

The GMMG, in contrast to any of the "Yes" campaign web sites were able to pay for their website www.gmmgroup.co.uk to be optimised for search engines. This was also true for another "No" campaign; also, so they claimed, in receipt of support from local "big" business - who organised around the website www.manchestertolltax.com. A good search engine optimisation will help to ensure the site appears in the top rankings of any search engine thereby increasing the online presence of the site. It is worth noting that the site www.manchestertolltax.com was the only site to be ranked in the top ten in all the "centrality" measures in Table 1. This means it had a highly visible online presence: other sites were hyper-linking to it and, in turn, it was linking to other site. It was, in effect, both a hub for online traffic and a source of authoritative information on the referendum campaign.

It is revealing to note that the cost of site optimisation was considered beyond the "Yes" campaign who were themselves supported by a different set of businesses. It was, according to the campaign manager behind www.wevoteyes.co.uk, an economic decision so they opted for ".....no site optimisation it had a price tag attached to it equivalent of a full month of ads...we took a strategic decision not to do that but spend it on billboards."

The "No" campaign was not confronted with this choice, they had both. This impression of well-funded "No" campaign was voiced by the local councillor

"there were very clear vested interests which is fine by me as long as people were aware of these interests. Peel Holdings funded the 'No' campaignand in terms of campaigningthey ran a very expensive campaign..."

Site optimisation is one example of well-funded organisations increasing their web presence, prominence and therefore influence in the online network. The environmental campaigner who established the www.cleanairnow.co.uk site provided another example where, in his view, the offline economic weight of those behind the "No" campaign was

³ <http://www.peel.co.uk/aboutus/default.aspx>

⁴ <http://www.kelloggcompany.com/company.aspx?id=32>

⁵ http://www.unilever.co.uk/Images/Unilever%20fact%20sheet_tcm28-70889.pdf

instrumental in diminishing the political impact of his web site which was campaigning around the environmental benefits of the Congestion Charge scheme.

“There is a whole other agenda.... you look at the number of affiliated organisations on the ‘CleanAirNow’ site you will find that there are less than there were for most of the campaign I’m not sure if you are aware of this but Graham Brady who is the Conservative MP for Altrincham the only Conservative MP in Manchester put down an early day motion in parliament criticising CleanAirNow for misusing public money and listing a number of publicly funded organisations who had leant their support to the manifesto which we put forward for public transport... we never had any public money much less misused it neither did any of the organisations have any commercial relationship with us at all but unfortunatelygiven that they were publicly funded, they felt they had to remove their affiliation from us I actually met with Graham Brady ...and I get on very well with himand I can say this because it is on the record, I feel he was strongly misled in terms of the briefing he was given to put down that early day motion”.

It is a matter of fact⁶ that Graham Brady proposed an Early Day Motion on CleanAirNow’s alleged misuse of public funds. It is of interest that the company, Kellogg, whom Graham Brady appears to be proposing the motion on behalf of, was one of the businesses behind the establishment of the GMM Group, the group that led the “No” campaign.

This withdrawal of support of previously affiliated organisations from their website is likely to explain the website’s lack of prominence, as illustrated in table 1, in the local online network. This is because online affiliation normally means reciprocal hyperlinks between the affiliating organisations’ websites; the withdrawal of these links would result in a lowering of the site’s prominence in the online network. In this way the potential influence of the website was limited along with its arguments for the environmental advantages of implementing a traffic congestion charging scheme.

⁶ Early day Motion , EDM2457 proposed by G Brady on 10/11/2008 “That this House is concerned that the organisation Clean Air Now paid for an advertisement in the Independent newspaper on 20th October 2008 which criticised one of Greater Manchester's oldest and largest employers, Kellogg, for its opposition to the proposed Manchester congestion charge; understands that Clean Air Now receives funding from a number of public bodies, including Manchester is my Planet, Manchester Arts Festival and Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisations; notes that these bodies are funded directly by a number of public sources, including the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities the Greater Manchester Public Transport Executive and Authority and Manchester City Council; is further concerned that acting in this way constitutes an inappropriate use of public funds; and urges public bodies to take greater care with public funds particularly in the run-up to the forthcoming referendum on the proposed Manchester congestion charge.”

(<http://www.edms.org.uk/edms/2007-2008/2457.htm>)

The traditional media are also implicated in the “politics as usual” scenario and the narratives of the actors here revealed that their online presence was indeed influential.

In an attempt to engage their audience in the Congestion Charge debate the BBC site, noted as prominent in table 1, deployed an interactive map. This map asked visitors to the site to choose, in response to the question “how would the congestion charge affect their behaviour”, one of five options: drive and pay the charge; drive at different times; use public transport/motorbike/bicycle; work or shop elsewhere; and, not affected. Visitors were asked to enter their postcode and choose a response. Their postcode area would then be coloured according to the option they choose. Blue was associated with the most negative response “work or shop elsewhere”. For most of the referendum the map was coloured entirely in blue. This map was commented on in interviews by campaigners from both sides. It delighted the “No” campaigners and frustrated those campaigning for a “Yes” vote.

Moreover, it proved to be a very popular site generating more views than the London Underground’s map, 28066 to 27843 respectively (MapTube, viewed 2010). The journalist interviewed here had been responsible for developing the map and managing the news online content coverage of the referendum He commented that:

“it was extremely well used if you look at the map tube website it was the most popular MapTube website they had done ...more than the one on the London underground.....I’m not sure what effect it had, it allowed other commentators to refer to it, it also opened up the debate to those outside Greater Manchester as the referendum only asked voters in Greater Manchesterbut what about those commuting from outside the area you were excluded from the process but this opened it to the whole region and beyondbizarrely we had people registering views from Scotland and the Scilly Isles”

The journalist was well aware that the site could have been subject to political gerrymandering by both sides during the course of the referendum and because of this the BBC had placed health warnings on the site disclaiming it as a scientific exercise. Indeed the “No” activist associated with the manchestertolltax.com site acknowledged that they had organised their supporters from across the country to interact with the map.

Regardless of the best intentions of the BBC this map undoubtedly had some political influence. The campaign manager for the GMMGroup considered it “*reflected public opinion and justified her campaign orientation*”. By contrast the campaign manager of www.wevoteyes was very critical:

"...that interactive map the BBC ran.....nothing useful came out of that ...it represented no sensible interrogation of people's behaviour, that was really annoying – the whole point of the congestion charge was to change people's behaviour....."

The other influential online presence promoted by the traditional media was the site <http://blogs.manchestereveningnews.co.uk>. This blog was run by the chief political reporter of the most prominent local newspaper the Manchester Evening News. His blog was characterised by a number of features, namely: participants had to identify themselves; in the main they were leading figures in their respective campaigns or politically significant local – and sometimes national – figures; and it was read by figures of similar standing. To illustrate this the journalist provided an example where he had "... posted a comment about Hazel Blears, a local Labour MP and Government minister, and shortly afterwards she posted a comment in reply". He also considered his blog provided "a better more informed discussion" than that on the paper's other, more open, unmediated, online discussion forum. In other words his blog represented something of an "elite" online discussion forum used almost exclusively by key political figures in the referendum campaign.

Along with the local paper's other more open unmediated online discussion forum, there were other more populist online forums and sites. Whilst these sites did feature in the hyperlinked network captured here they were not identified as prominent as other sites for two reasons: either because users were not, as a matter of course hyperlinking in and out of these sites they were simply posting comments; or, the applications being used were "walled gardens" restricting hyperlink access. Nonetheless, they were online sites of interest for those campaigning in the referendum. These included: Youtube which had 29 videos on the Manchester congestion charge; Facebook had 66 groups contesting the charge; and, www.skyscrapercity.com an online forum had a discussion thread on the congestion charge of 7201 contributions.

The two main sites for online discussion were partisan. The online comments sections of the Manchester Evening News was generally colonised by those opposed to the congestion charge scheme and those participating in the www.skyscrapercity.com were, as a rule, supporters of the vote "Yes" campaign. It was an ill-advised participant who transgressed these boundaries. The PR consultant for the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive observed the "No" campaigners "supporting each other online" through endorsing each others comments and "harassing" any "Yes" campaigners who came online. He described this activity as akin to being "hunted down by a pack". The print journalist considered that the online comments to articles in his paper "were of a low level and often offensive". While even the 'No' campaigner associated with the manchestertolltax.com site, who utilised the partisan nature of these sites for his own purpose, thought that "...to be honest it was like a football scrum in there".

The local Labour councillor, a significant player in the vote “Yes” campaign, was also dismissive of these contributors:

“...I don't know if there is a certain type of person who spends their night in their bedroom banging out the most wacky barking mad venomous emails ...the level of debate you want which is an exchange of ideas and the majority of people engage in this as you don't want to leave the room hating each other.....you don't get that on the webthey are nasty”.

The issue here is that however low-level and offensive this type of participation might have been it was politically influential. The PR consultant for the GMPTE, who was hired to monitor online activity and discussion on the referendum for the GMPTE, was confident that whatever was said on these sites would appear on other websites, he described this process as “a ripple effect”. These sites worked, in his view, to shape opinion elsewhere on the internet.

This was understood perfectly well by the vote “No” campaigner associated with www.manchestertolltax.com:

“I learnt fairly quickly ...that I could wait and put a comment in that I thought would be most effective ...not to leap in straightaway because to be honest it was like a football scrum in there but at least it was our football scrum.....perhaps the biggest coup we had was the press release we posted about traffic levels dropping in the city centre ...all of a sudden through the Manchester Evening News comments section, which was vital, ...it became common knowledge and spread like wildfire and it became the story of traffic levels dropping that the other side never really dealt with”.

In other words he understood the networked nature of this particular online environment and how to use it for the purposes of his campaign. This understanding was further underlined by the way he consistently monitored online information “First place I went every morning there was two or three key sites to keep up with to tell you what was going on and you would do that throughout the day...”. What is also of interest here is that this activist was new to political campaigning but was, nevertheless, motivated by a sense that the congestion charge scheme was unjust. He described how he started:

“ I got together with a couple of friends we kinda met up in pub that day and said that's wrong and we've got to do something about this. It took us a month or so as we knew nothing about how to run a campaign but slowly people started joining in dribs and drabs”

In this sense then it might be argued that this activist is an ordinary citizen ably using the online network to get his voice heard.

The above narratives then have served to highlight three features of this local online network that helped to explain the success of the “No” vote campaign in this referendum: lack of trust in websites hosted by governance institutions; support from dominant offline economic interests; and an awareness of the networked nature of this environment and how to politically manipulate it. How then does this particular usage of this online network speak to the current discussion on the potential for this online sphere enhancing local democracy?

6. Discussion

For those interested in democratic renewal the excitement associated with the continuous development of ICTs lies in their potential to level the political playing field to enable the voice of ordinary citizens to be heard above, or at least interact with, those that traditionally dominate the political discourse and public policy making. As such this article is not concerned with adjudicating on the merits of the opposing campaigns contesting this referendum but rather with the implications for local democracy arising from how this particular online environment was used.

The narratives revealed a lack of trust in the leading governance and most authoritative site in the network. There is nothing startling about the presence of lack of trust amongst the public in the political class and its associated institutions. Declining levels of public trust in Government have been apparent for more than three decades according to Tolbert and Mossberger (2006). Pattie, Seyd and Whitelely (2004) demonstrated that lack of trust was particularly, and peculiarly associated, with representational government. What is interesting here is that during this civic issue this lack of trust in the local governance institutions was reflected online. The problem with this, for the local democratic process, is that there was a lot of relevant information on the governance website in question which might have usefully informed the civic debate on the congestion charge scheme.

Whilst Dutton et al (2009) have argued that internet users tend to trust information they find there as much or more than that provided by the traditional media there is clearly a need, evidenced here, and previously identified by a number of commentators, for trusted third party spaces (Coleman and Blumler, 2010, Wright and Coleman, 2012) that might be used in the future to host relevant information or discussions on such civic issues. The other point to make about the issue of trust is that there was also a degree of mistrust in the role the websites of the traditional media played in this campaign.

It is tempting to argue that the evidence presented in these narratives solely underlines the “politics as usual” scenario argued by, amongst others (Margolis and Resnick, 2001). It is pertinent to note, in this context, how the narratives demonstrate ways in which the traditional media have used the affordances of the new technology to bring their offline influence to bear online. However, if the test of democracy here is if the local online

network enabled ordinary citizens' voices to be heard by those in power, then the narratives also highlight two very different online experiences of local civic activists.

The voice of the environmental campaigner associated with www.cleanairnow.co.uk site was clearly muted by the exercise of political power being wielded by dominant economic interests. This undoubtedly helped deprive the civic debate of an important environmental dimension. However, the activist associated with the www.manchestertolltax site had an altogether different experience.

Whilst it is true this campaigner had support from the same economically powerful business interests that supported other elements of the vote "No" campaign he was distinct from them. He was not motivated by a threat to his business interests but more by an understanding that the congestion charge scheme was unjust. In this sense he was very much an ordinary citizen whose civic interests were congruent, on this particular civic issue, with those of a powerful section of the business community.

The point to emphasise here is that this citizen used the online network very effectively to get his voice heard and arguably would have done so regardless of business support. He showed an implicit understanding of Chadwick's (2012) "granular information environment" and Dutton's (2010) networked sphere of influence. He was less concerned about the quality of the debate in some of these forums, indeed he characterised it as a 'football scrum' but nonetheless he recognised it for what it was: politically valuable engagement. The fact that these people were contributing at all online was an acknowledgement of their political interest in the issue. As such he was able to use this admittedly low level of participation for the purposes of his campaign. He also knew that in developing a relationship with particular online discussion sites he would be able to feed these sites campaign information that would re-surface elsewhere through the internet's network of networks until it "*...it became the story of traffic levels dropping that the other side never really dealt with*". In this way the online network levelled the political playing field for him and his comrades.

This usage of the online network should be instructive for local civic leaders and their policy makers as it is testimony to the local political influence of the online network. In this regard it is noteworthy to contrast the attitude of this campaigner to the nature of online participation with that of the local councillor. For him online contributors were, in general, "barking mad". In other words they did not conform to more normative ideals of democratic debate and as such it was hard for him to assign any democratic value to this kind of engagement.

Conclusion

This article has presented empirical evidence on the dynamic and politically influential local online sphere of interest. Much of this evidence presented by the narratives does speak to the debate between cyber sceptics and cyber optimists. It clearly provides empirical ammunition for those that consider the internet as simply another medium for the economically wealthy and traditional media institutions to continue to exercise their political power. However, it also points to the potential influence of local activists and if the internet is, as Castells (2007) maintains, a politically contested space, then dominance of the traditional elites can be expected given their greater resources but this is not necessarily immutable.

Moreover, as Dahlgren (2005) points out, the real point of departure in these discussions is between those who consider that society is in a transformative flux – primarily as a consequence of the impact of new technology allied with other modernising processes (Castells 1996, Beck 2001, Lash 2003) - rendering uncertain existing political relationships, processes and institutions and those who think it is just business as usual. This is not to claim that such technologically enabled transformative processes will necessarily lead to greater democracy but what should be factored into this change process, from both a normative viewpoint and policy perspective is the agency of local political and civic activists.

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