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Local Government Group

The Local Government Group is made up of six organisations which support, promote and improve local government.

  

  



TweetyHall

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Local Government Leadership



Lessons from election 2010: local politics and social media

Foreword

Emma Maier

Editor, Local Government Chronicle

Ahead of 6 May 2010, there was great anticipation in media circles about the prospect of the first digital election, or even the first social media election.

Most post election analyses focused on the extent to which digital media affected the final general election result – and concluded with disappointment that 2010 was not the digital triumph they had hoped for.

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But this focus misses the point. In fact, 2010 was, without doubt, a media election. Presentation was key, underpinned by the televised debates, and the campaign was fought more than ever before through the media. Alongside the printed press, TV and radio, digital played its part.

Digital methods were widely used. Targeted emails, text messages, facebook, twitter, youtube, flickr, audioboo, microsites, iphone apps, viral campaigns, crowd-sourced adverts, and bloggers all featured. And they had an impact, even if they did not swing the result.

Digital media was used not only by candidates but by the formal media and the general public in scrutinising and responding to the campaign, including initiatives such as The Straight Choice, which enabled citizens to share, compare and comment on campaign leaflets dropped through their letterboxes.

Through MyConservatives.com, the Labour Party's membersnet and other streams, digital media also became part of the campaign process. It altered not only how campaign messages were communicated but also underpinned how the campaigns were organised.

But the most exciting thing was not the use of digital media in isolation. It was how digital media became intertwined with more traditional streams to create an integrated media, more powerful in its entirety than the individual parts.

Comments and trends from digital media fed newspaper and TV coverage, creating story leads and follow-ups. TV interviews were repeated and watched many times over online. The televised leaders' debates spawned online digital debates. Media streams interacted and blended.

This was not only a media election; it was a multi-media election.

The campaign saw many prospective parliamentary candidates, would-be councillors and members of the mainstream media exploring digital media for the first time. They discovered the power and the limitations it brings.

The well-aired concerns about using digital media are not unfounded, but alongside limitations are opportunities. The demographics on sites such as twitter are heavily weighted to those in the media and communications sectors and in politics – but this in itself makes them a useful tool for influencing and accessing the mainstream media. Digital communication offers the chance to reach out to younger people who are far less responsive to traditional door drops – but increasingly to a wider group too.

Alone, digital and social media cannot reach every group, overcome every hurdle, tackle apathy and restore faith in politics. Neither can any other media stream. It will not always be the right medium for a specific message or audience.

But it does offer enormous opportunity. It is another weapon in the communication arsenal. It can be used alongside other media to introduce and reinforce messages, to engage citizens and reach out to more groups.

As such, it will continue to be a powerful force and one that local government will need to understand and use. Ignoring it is not an option: just as it would seem absurd to rule out using other streams, such as the printed word or video, it would be a mistake to exclude digital and social media.

Introduction: using social media to improve local politics

One of the most exciting things for councils and councillors about the recent developments in technology (often summed up as 'web 2.0') is social media's potential at a most local level. It gives both communities a voice and individuals an opportunity to connect with one another, share news and make things happen offline. And it gives politicians an opportunity to stay relevant and engaged with the issues that matter to their residents.



“We will thread localism through the DNA of government.”

The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
Launch of the NALC Manifesto for the future of local councils, June 2010

This publication reviews some of the most notable tools and websites that are used by sections of the public and political parties – and what impact those tools had on the May 2010 elections. It will also look at the experiences and opinions of local councillors who actively use social media tools in their everyday campaigns. Above all, it highlights areas where social media can be used to best advantage in an era when politicians are looking to engage, improve transparency and do more for less.

This report is a follow up to *Connected Councillors: a guide to using social media to support local leadership*. As part of the 21st Century Councillor programme *Connected councillors* was jointly produced in March 2010 by Local Government Improvement and Development (formerly IDeA) and Local Government Leadership (formerly Leadership Centre for Local Government).

Both publications are available at:
<http://socialmedia.21st.cc>
<http://tweetyhall.co.uk/blog>

Examples of new media during #ukelection

Just looking at the UK national political picture through the numbers of fans, followers, viewers and tweets, it is undoubted that social media played its part in the election. It demonstrates that hundreds of thousands of people were actively engaged, at one stage or another, with a party's election campaign using social media tools.

What did the National Parties do?

1 Dedicated members/supporters email and social network sites to organise local campaigns, raise money and recruit volunteers.

MyConservatives.com
Labour's membersnet
Lib Dems' ACT

5 Maintained active Facebook groups and fansites

Conservatives	114,658 supporters
Labour	65,564 supporters
Lib Dems	94,759 supporters

2 Launch their policy and manifestos on multi-platforms – downloadable, browsable, interactive sections, with accompanying online films and animations

6 Uploaded regular films to YouTube

Conservative channel	views 590,396
Labour party channel	views 297,923
Lib Dems channel	views 142,851

3 Launch dedicated programmes for iPhones, with some (Labour's particularly) using geolocation software to connect activists with local campaigns, also to facilitate canvassing voters by phone.

7 Used online advertising to target messages based on search terms and filters from web-users including the Conservatives 'buying' the frontpage of YouTube on polling day to advertise to potential voters.

4 Kept up Twitter feeds for all their election campaigning, leaders tours and individual spokespeople.

@conservative	39,321 followers, 3,000 tweets
@ukLabour	21,152 followers, 2,374 tweets
@libdems	23,379 followers, 1,500 tweets



“I'm always amazed by which tweets get picked up too, one tweet about my blog article on the (then new) Conservative iPhone App, was even retweeted by @conservatives which was great for traffic and reaching new voters.”

Councillor Dean Russell, St Albans

And this of course only reveals the headline aggregate numbers of the parties' profile and activity on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Almost every politician and local campaign group maintained some form of online presence – anything from a simple website or email address to a full web 2.0 enabled campaign.

Some early research is showing that in communication terms at least – the parties did engage with more than half of voters via the web. A YouGov poll commissioned by Orange found that 57% had found out information about the election through online means. A particular finding was how many young people interacted with that material – stating at least 24% of the 18-24 year old group had left comments on social media sites about the election.¹

Despite all this enthusiastic activity, it is still very early days in terms of assessing how much of this swung people's votes. Also, it is important to remember that use of technology is different from the social web, and so could still have made a difference in a more complex way. James Crabtree, (Editor of Prospect Magazine and MySociety.org) has talked about “visible and invisible technologies”. In a debate at the RSA just after the election, he pointed out we will not know what the parties were doing with their “use of databases, email, postal marketing and search engine optimisation, unless the parties tell us”².

Nevertheless – there were innovations at a national level which helped drive, but were also influenced by, politics at the local level.

“This will be the word of mouth election.”

Ellie Gellard, 20 year-old prolific tweeter and blogger who introduced Gordon Brown at the Labour manifesto launch, May 2010

¹ <http://www.nma.co.uk/news/quarter-of-18-24-year-olds-discuss-election-via-social-networks/3013083.article>

² Royal Society of the Arts Debate: Action Replay, May 13th 2010
<http://www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2010/general-election-2010-action-replay>

#LE2010: social media and local activism

TweetyHall

www.tweethall.co.uk

“Lets go talk to them, that’s where people are, that’s where we should go, that’s where we should interact – it’s the future.”

Councillor Alex Perkins, Liberal Democrat
Councillor for Canterbury, Herne Bay,
Whitstable



TweetyHall is a constantly updated barometer of local issues. Using Twitter, it allows users to track local politics in real time and contact elected representatives. Its homepage highlights the hottest topics being discussed by councillors, pulling through live tweets as well as listing the most active councillors on Twitter and providing links to their profiles online.

To date, the 333 councillors who are being tracked by TweetyHall, between them have 83,527 followers. Even allowing for a few duplicates due to the local government social media family ‘talking to itself’, that is still a large and impressive number of people taking an interest in their local politicians (an average of 250 followers each).

TweetyHall was one of the main sources of information online for news on the local elections. It helped people track their own local politician and issues, but it also

provided a platform to follow other local elections around the country.

By tracking these conversations, TweetyHall highlighted the issues that were dominating local political debate leading up to election day. When the polls opened, TweetyHall live-blogged results and reported from local counts.

When it comes to which party is most represented on TweetyHall, the numbers are close, and continue to change as memberships grows.

Party breakdown

1. Conservative	35%
2. Liberal Democrat	33%
3. Labour	29%
4. Other	3%
5. Green Party	3%

Hope Not Hate

www.hopenothate.org.uk

“If you reject the politics of hate please get involved.”

Hope not Hate tagline

Hope not Hate is a campaign that focuses on specific areas of the country in which the BNP has attracted support. Its aim is to build relationships with those areas, allowing communities to provide a more positive political alternative and facilitate a practical way for like-minded people to work together on a cause.



It is a powerful example of activists using the web to create real, positive and progressive change on the ground during the 2010 election. The campaign saw almost 1,000 volunteers coming through the doors of the Hope Not Hate HQ and commentators believe it played a pivotal role on election day, attracting support back to mainstream political parties.

Openly Local and the Open Elections project

www.openlylocal.com



Openly Local is working to make local government more transparent by developing an “open and unified way of accessing Local Government information”. To date they have made available data from 158 councils and nearly 10,000 councillors. The site provides users with information on who represents them locally, how to contact them and any nearby hyperlocal websites.

The Open Elections Project, led by Openly Local, extended this model for the election, enabling councils to publish election results in an open and reusable format available for the public to access and share.

#GE2010: social media on the national stage

These are just a few of the social media developments that helped keep the public and politicians in touch and involved at the local and national level. Clearly the political landscape has irrevocably changed with the onset of these new tools and, by the next election, will change again. However, at this stage we can see a number of key issues and trends raised by the 2010 election.

Facebook's Democracy UK fan page

www.facebook.com/democracyuk

Facebook launched their Democracy UK page during this year's elections, creating a social media space where people could vote on election issues and debate with other 'fans'. The site encouraged those already active on social media sites, notably young people, to start talking about politics, and it was widely praised for engaging a significant number of first time voters and encouraging a rise in registered voters in that demographic. Facebook added an "I've voted in the election" option at the top of its home page, encouraging a sense of pride and connecting offline political actions with young people's wider digital identity.



The fan page remains active and continues to encourage debate amongst nearly a quarter of a million users that became fans in the run up to the election. Facebook continue to poll and signpost important political events, such as "Will the emergency Budget put the UK back on track?" and "Who do you want as Labour leader?"

Tweetminster

www.tweetminster.co.uk

Tweetminster was an influential force during the 2010 election. Just as TweetyHall operates at a local level, Tweetminster aims to make national politics more open and social. It allows users to connect with politicians and to follow the big political stories and issues of the day.

Tweetminster boasts nearly 20,000 followers on Twitter and co-founder Alberto Nardelli was a frequent commentator on national television news programmes during the election campaign. The site conducted an experiment during the election campaign to



see if the frequency of Twitter mentions could predict success at the polls. While results for individuals were mixed, Tweetminster is clear that the number of Tweets seems to have a bearing on how successful a party will be, particularly at national and regional level.³

The Straight Choice

www.thestraightchoice.org

The Straight Choice is an innovation that blends traditional media with its newer, online counterparts. It is a tool that looked at the more traditional campaigning method of leafleting, asking people to upload what had come through their letterbox during the election campaign, and examining them for accuracy and bias.

More than 5,000 leaflets were uploaded on the site. The result was to lift the lid on some of the local tactics of each of the parties – allowing people to compare what was being



sent to them, how they as voters were being targeted, and what the parties were saying about each other. It was also a great way to see the interplay between local and national messages.

³ <http://tweetminster.co.uk/posts/view/591743758>

Five key points to takeaway from #LE2010

01 **More and more people are using social media than ever before**

Nearly two-thirds of all UK residents are participating in 'social computing', creating an instant platform for observation and debate that is unrivalled, particularly on a local level. And it's not just for young people. The average age of Facebook users is 38. For Twitter it's 39.

The number of politicians getting involved in social media is increasing, but at a much slower rate. Those who are involved have the ability to harness the power of social media in a way that can help foster relationships with constituents, raise and debate issues, and increase transparency.

02 **Social media's potential is greatest at the local level**

Social media tools make it easier than ever before to see what local representatives do. Voters can track their local councillors' attempts to tackle the issues that affect them, and councillors can quickly and inexpensively keep residents informed about what they are doing. Reading Councillor Daisy Benson is a notable example. She created the Flickr group 'its not art, its a crime' to tackle her area's graffiti problem. She invited residents to upload their own photos of graffiti, as well as tweeting about how she is tackling the related issues that can lead to the problem.

No matter what the issues involved, local government will almost always have to fight for airspace on traditional, national media channels. Social media provides a real opportunity for regional branches of political parties to get the word out and report on local initiatives on their terms.

03 **The myth of apathy, disconnection and mistrust is just that – a myth**

There is a commonly held belief that people are increasingly disinterested and apathetic towards politics, above all local politics. Turnout in the UK is markedly lower in comparison to other European countries, and in a 2008 survey only 38% of people felt they could influence decisions in their local area.

But by giving voters the opportunity to talk more to their councillors both on and offline, it is possible to bridge the democratic deficit that apathy, or the assumption of it, is in danger of creating. Social media allows interested citizens to stop being simply consumers and become influencers and contributors.

04 **Social media has created real benefits for councillors**

Not only does social media create a new channel of conversation between residents and their elected officials, it allows councillors to link up with each other and find out developments and best practice at local and national levels.

Social media can help local councillors and local news connect. Not only can it help councillors keep their ear close to the ground in terms of what's going on in the local area, it also gives news reporters a quick and easy way to get in touch with local politicians.

05 **Councils could do better**

The 2010 local elections showed that when it comes to new media, councils have a way to go in supporting the democratic process. A survey, commissioned by the Society for Information, Innovation and Improvement (SOCITM) survey took a sample of 42 councils over the election and judged that, overall, there was some excellent practice by individual councils, but also examples where "information was patchy, hard to find, out of date or just missing."⁴ In some cases, even basic information such as the date of the election, candidate information or which ward voters were residents of were hidden or absent.

More positively, there were indications that some local councils were getting it right. Islington and Camden Councils even tweeted their results live on election night.

While councils still have some catching up to do, local councillors appear to be ahead in developing links to social media. There are a number of support sites for councillors who are looking for ways to get online and, often, it is this enthusiasm and adoption by local politicians that is encouraging councils to do more with social media.

⁴ <http://www.socitm.net/>

Case studies: connected councillors

“I can communicate my messages to the electorate and they can respond and let me know what they think. Traditionally we have done this face to face, but more and more people communicate through social media and we need to keep up. I would urge all councillors to look at it and I’m sure they will be pleasantly surprised by how easy it is.”

Councillor David Woodhead (Liberal Democrat) Kirklees Council. David’s blog attracts between 2000 and 3000 readers a month.

If councillors are leading the way to embracing social media, the 2010 election campaign propelled the process to a new level. The UK has more than 20,000 councillors and the last election saw more social media use in UK politics than ever before, with councillors using non traditional communications to increase their outreach and impact. A few of them have shared their experiences of the 2010 Election:

Dean Russell

Conservative councillor for Harpenden East,
St Albans District Council.



Dean Russell is an active user of social media. He used twitter throughout his campaign for feedback and insights into what was happening in his local community.

@dean_r
1,043 followers

“I wrote a series of ‘canvassing questions’, responding to the unusual or interesting questions I got on the doorstep. I used twitter to let people know when I’d written an article and to find out what other people were talking about during the campaign.”

But even as a fan of social media, Dean found it works most effectively alongside other channels of communication.

“I do think it’s important to remember the context of social media. However much I extol the virtues of social media during the election, it was clear to me during my campaign that elections are won by knocking on doors and meeting people face to face. I’m not sure how many voters were swayed by my tweets.”

There are still a huge number of people who are not online. So while it’s an important channel, we mustn’t lose sight of holding surgeries and other ways of meeting with people offline. At the end of the day, twitter and tools like it need to benefit the people we represent, and not be used for self-promotion.”

Antonia Bance

Labour councillor for Rose Hill and Iffley ward, Oxford City Council.



Antonia Bance views social media not as a useful way to maintain conversations with those she represents, but rather as a useful place to keep up with real time news.

@antoniabance
921 followers

“I find social media helps me in this way most, particularly as I find traditional communications targeted at councillors, such as magazines, are often not targeted to my interests and a little bland. It’s worth remembering that although most people don’t use twitter – the media and political elite do, so it’s useful for staying up to date with breaking and political news.”

Facebook is widely used in Antonia’s ward, however she admits that it can be a lot of work to keep up with the many conversations taking place across her constituents’ Facebook pages. Just before the election period last year, a rumour started that the council was going to close a valued local facility.

“Suddenly a Facebook group was gathering 1000s of members per day, and the city council had no means by which to respond to those people, as we had no Facebook presence at the time. That was a painful lesson in how misinformation spreads, and how important it is to understand social media.

But it’s not a substitute for the usual hard work of being a councillor. Get involved in social media only after you have done two hours on the doorstep and ten hours of meetings per week.”

Mark Gracey

Liberal Democrat councillor for Lytchett Matravers and Morden, Purbeck District Council.



Mark Gracey has been a keen blogger for many years, and during the election realised how effective twitter can be. He believes councillors need to make themselves a valuable resource to those they represent in order to be effective.

@markgracey
100 followers

“For voters the accessibility has to appeal, even if it is just the fact that you can send a message to your prospective candidate and get a reply quickly without having to write a letter or find their email address.”

Mark is also clear that social media should be used only as a tool to strengthen representation and transparency, rather than replace traditional ways of connecting with his community.

“For politicians it’s a great way to get your voice heard and to build a following. But it’s not everyone’s cup of tea so it’s important that they remember they need to reach out to constituents using traditional media as well as the new.”



Thoughts and insights



Andy Sawford

Chief Executive,
Local Government Information Unit
(LGIU)

I've not met a councillor who has said "the web won it", but there were a lot more candidates using social media at this election and I think that it is now seen as a very important part of the way that candidates can communicate with the electorate.

The impression I had was that social media was an insider's game at this election, rather than a form of mass communication between voters and politicians. I observed mainly people involved in politics – candidates, activists, and journalists – communicating across social media. This was then being fed into the old media who were covering lots of social media generated stories.

One exception is the huge increase in interest in Nick Clegg after the first Leaders' debate. I think social media did play an important part in connecting the Liberal Democrats with the electorate at that time, even though these

online signals of support failed to translate into a significant uplift in votes. I'm still optimistic about the potential of social media to have a real impact, perhaps initially in local relationships and trust building, rather than a quick boost to the national vote count.

I think it helps humanise local politicians. One thing that really comes across on social media outlets is how busy councillors' are and what a wide range of issues they deal with. I think that can only be helpful in terms of people understanding and hopefully engaging with their councillors.

One of the characteristics of social media that I like is that the offline boundaries, structures, hierarchies and notions of identity don't apply in the same way, and it is very noticeable that local and national politicians interact very freely on social media platforms and become part of the same online community.

There are some great users of social media that we have seen in this election amongst national politicians but I would say that in general the national politicians should learn from local politicians about being interactive on social media. There are lots of national politicians who set up profiles, seek to attract thousands of people to follow them, but largely use social media to just project and have a one-way dialogue. John Prescott is a good and perhaps surprising example of someone who understands that social media is about having a conversation.

I think it can be an important part of our 'new politics' by connecting politicians with the electorate in new ways. At a local level there are going to be very big choices to make about priorities and it will be very important for politicians to engage the public in this. Another opportunity is for social media to be a source of innovation, both through sharing and generating ideas, and also as a platform itself. An example is the new government's decision to scrap the current inspection regime for councils. The public still want to know about the quality and value for money of local services and social media can help make this happen and be a more dynamic form of accountability.



Councillor Richard Kemp, Leader, LGA Liberal Democrats Liverpool City Councillor, Church Ward

As politicians, being aware of and using social media is undoubtedly important. Crucially though, it should never be seen as a replacement for what I'd call traditional 'pavement politics'. In the recent elections we were all pounding the streets – knocking on doors, delivering leaflets and talking to people – young and old alike. Social media played a part – but it was only a part.

The temptation is to say "social media is cheap, accessible and the young people don't use anything else". Some of this is maybe true – but you need to add that knowledge to a range of tactics about how to reach out, understand and listen to the people you represent.

I should also say upfront that, although this election was certainly run through social media channels as well as the traditional media, I don't think we could say with any accuracy that "it was social media wot won it".

The Liberal Democrats clocked up nearly 3 times as many 'fans' on a pro-Lib Dem facebook page than they have party members, and Nick Clegg scored highly on twitter after the first debate – with **#IagreewithNick** becoming one of the catch-phrases of the election. But despite that, we still had to face an electorate who had other opinions. The buzz was simply that – buzz.

Having said all that, I am still a fan of some of the tools.

In our own local campaigning we use technology as much as we can. The most important of those (which is now starting to sound quite old fashioned!) is of course email. Although we have only 10% of our ward resident's email addresses – that is still over 600 contacts. We use email to survey residents for a quick online snapshot on local issues – and we of course use it for our day-to-day casework and campaigning.

One fact to consider is the background of our residents – in Church ward in Liverpool we have a huge number of highly literate, affluent people living there. They use the internet on a regular basis, and expect our emails to be short, timely and useful. In other areas where access to broadband and computers is limited, using email in a 'casual' or assumed way just wouldn't work.



Councillor Richard Stay
Deputy Leader, Central Bedfordshire Council

Keeping it real!

People do get excited about the web.

In the run up to the election the media and political commentators alike got worked up at the prospect of the 2010 poll being the first to be fundamentally influenced by social media, which they predicted would transform campaigns.

In my role as a national spokesperson for Lib Dems in Local Government, I find Twitter the easiest and most useful tool to use. I regularly put out messages and questions to the people following me, and get a really good range of responses back. I like it because it is chronological – and straightforward to use. I know this is a limited group of people – and journalists and others are all reading and watching – so it is a very public interaction. But I wouldn't do it if I didn't like it, and thought there was a value in it.

One final thought – social media is now a way we have of bypassing editorial controls over information. That may have its downsides sometimes in terms of quality, but on the upside (and particularly as politicians) it does give us an opportunity to share and spread information outside of traditional media controls. This I think is a good thing, and hopefully will lead us to a more open and accessible dialogue with residents. But don't put your shoe polish away just yet!

At the other end of the spectrum, various protocols have been produced by functionaries – urging politicians to exercise caution in use of 'new' communication channels, as if they are highly risky and deeply scary.

I'm a fan of the web, but like to think I have a more balanced view than either of these perspectives.

Whilst there have been a few spectacularly crass examples of political naivety in some politicians' use of twitter and blogs – I suspect the same individuals may have been equally exposed by more conventional communications. Many bright young journalists would have spotted and reported the idiosyncrasies of these individuals in any case. I'm not convinced that any protocol published by an earnest ethics official would really have protected them from themselves.

But neither has my personal online experience changed my political life. Alas, the fact that I'm on Facebook has not meant that I suddenly find young people in my patch actively engaged in politics and whilst my blog certainly helps me to communicate better with local people, I'm realistic about its reach and purpose.

What I like about blogging is that the medium somehow compels me to be conversational, and because of that, more human and approachable to my audience. A stuffy and remote individual will not be perceived as being any more engaging if they simply put stuffy and remote messaging on line.

I also like to think that I know my place. I'm not seeking to compete with Guido Fawkes or ConservativeHome when I share my topical views on local and national political issues in the blog. I'm just being myself. Ultimately I think that is really important for all politicians, regardless of their parties. A bit of humanity, humour and colour is perhaps what politics needs.

Whilst my blogging may give the monitoring officers sleepless nights, I haven't found it a struggle to balance my role as a Deputy Leader and a community representative who gets his message across online.

My blog contains my personal views, it's edgy, but generally it sits comfortably with the policies and aspirations of the Council. And if they are at odds, I apply the same restraint in expressing them, as I would do in an Executive debate or public meeting.

Of course there are risks, and I wouldn't dream of suggesting that the tone of my blog is to everyone's tastes. If you are honest and open in your communications and you achieve things for your communities, you will have complaints made to (the soon to be abolished) Standards for England – I wear mine as badges of honour.

As Churchill said "He who has never done or said anything has no enemies".

The greatest risk facing politicians – particularly at a local level – is being anonymous.

Conclusion: where next?

The 2010 elections taught us that although the web may not have won it for any one party in its own right, it is now a real, growing and, most importantly, trusted channel. To ignore its influence would be to miss important conversations and opportunities to engage the electorate in political debate.

There are now many politicians using online social media to do just this, evidenced in the good practice that exists locally, nationally and internationally.

Election time is always a good moment to pause and listen to the national conversation. As we've covered in this report – not only were the 'big tools' like twitter, facebook and youtube being used by the parties to promote their big messages, but hundreds of councillors are now using social media as a day-to-day straightforward communication tool. The elections have also seen the rise of citizen activism – websites that have sprung up to run campaigns on their own terms such as Hope not Hate and The Straight Choice.

Every councillor we've spoken to has warned of the potential 'twitfalls' (excuse the pun) but guidance is readily available⁵ and not an excuse not to engage with social media's ever increasing legitimacy and importance.

⁵ <http://socialmedia.21st.cc>

Where next for councils?

One thing which should be seen as very important, particularly for a 'politics-averse' town hall culture, is how the political parties themselves are embracing social media. Without doubt they can see the opportunity and advantage to ramping up their presence and reach online. They are using the web and technology to organise their local activists, to get supporters contributing time, money and resources through online networking. They are also holding debates and policy discussions on the web.

In these elections there has been much innovation and a technological coming of age – from the campaign iPhone apps, the way google maps is now a standard way to visualise and organise events on the ground, through to face to face campaigning backed up by sophisticated targeting through databases.

It will only be a matter of time before the politicians who are leading these campaign initiatives start to demand and expect similar efforts from their local authorities.

In technology circles at least, it was a coup indeed to have one of the champions of open-democracy/technology, Tom Steinberg, join the Conservative (and now government) ranks as a political advisor. Since the election the new government has announced various initiatives which have used technology to 'open up' Whitehall, such as the spending figures of each department, and asking for ideas from the public about what laws to scrap, what costs could be saved, and where could innovation happen. The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP has also recently called for councils to publish all spending over £500, saying "Getting council business out in the open will revolutionise local government"⁶.

The point of all this is that national government is being influenced by many people now who are arguing for open, transparent and, crucially, more local approaches. Social media is one part of a much larger agenda including how to create public spaces for people to come together, debate, contribute and decide about issues collaboratively. This has to be in a way that makes sense to people who are already using the web for their shopping and socialising. This larger agenda of course goes also beyond ensuring online connectivity. For politicians and councils to engage with their communities – especially hard to reach groups where strongly rooted but inaccurate perceptions can have damaging effects – they need to be considering an underlying shift from *communicating* to residents to *conversing with* them, both on and offline.

For public policy-makers to follow through with reform in spending and services provision, they need to be realistic now about the new channels of communication being laid down through social media tools. And it is not just in elite circles of public policy, anyone with an eye to Saturday night television will see the scheduled littered with programmes constantly asking for online votes, polls, texts and contributions – where outcomes are determined by the audience, not the organisers of the show.

The message for councils is they need to be innovators when it comes to citizen involvement – crowd sourcing, participatory budgeting, interactive and iterative consultation. *Local by Social*⁷ published recently by NESTA and what was then the IDeA (now Local Government Improvement and Development) has many examples of how councils can better understand and use technology and the web, not just to enhance conversations, but actually to make decisions differently.

The risk in not doing this will be for councils at best to be left behind, at worst to be bypassed all together – by a citizen body (led by politicians and community activists) who have come to expect empowerment through technology.

⁶ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1606882>

⁷ <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=17770779>