



Building the Virtual Town Hall: Civic Architecture for Cyberspace

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Executive summary

- The social web presents both a challenge and an opportunity. It is opening up new avenues for communication and deliberation at the same time as creating new social norms and expectations. The question stands then as to how should Local Government respond and is there an opportunity to use this growing interest social networking tools to address our major problem of democratic deficit.
- Local Government should not be trying to recreate the new social spaces that are being used such as FaceBook or Twitter but instead be seeking to create a permanent civic destination online which will incorporate these sites and their successors.
- The challenge in doing this is not technical, as the development work is understood and can be implemented – it is social and political as we look for ways to create a civic space which is not only technically web native with the tools and features of the popular social websites but more importantly socially web native with the ideas of co-creation and networked content embedded throughout the space.
- The paper develops the idea of the Virtual Town Hall – which can serve as permanent presence for democracy online and where we can start to re-engage the public with the ongoing process of discussion and deliberation which is so essential to democracy.
- The paper examines ways in which we can use tools such as FaceBook or YouTube to address the problem of democratic deficit. We make the point that we need to move

past the enthusiasm to look at strategic and sustainable ways of using the potential which we see online.

- Public institutions need some way to respond to the participation that they can see online so that they are not overwhelmed. This needs to be balanced with a requirement to preserve accountability and transparency where you enable people to establish their 'civic persona' online and then to re-use this identity.
- There are risks associated with the social web but these can be managed and are balanced against wider opportunities. Using community moderators both manages resources and mitigates risks and there is an opportunity to connect to a very different type of audience to the one which government is traditionally able to connect to and to reinvent the 'rules of engagement' around the relationship with the citizen.
- Online contact is generally far cheaper than face to face content and this must be taken into account in such a difficult financial climate.
- There are a number of specific strands of work which can be undertaken now that will build towards a wider social web strategy.
- We need to create a flexible and modular technology infrastructure that is a fully web 2.0 architecture which can respond to the constant change and innovation online.

Note: The work underpinning this white paper is the result of an EU funded project:
<http://www.citizenscape.org>

1. Introduction

It is clear to anyone working within Local Government in the UK and beyond that real and expanding democratic deficit is characterised by citizens engaging less and less with the formal democratic process in all measurable ways. This is at a time when online participation in informal online social websites spaces such as FaceBook or YouTube is expanding at a remarkable rate (OFCOM 2008). The question is can we find a way to use this social networking phenomenon to address the problem of democratic deficit?

Initially signs seem to be good - online participation is not just limited to social content and increasingly participants will engage with political topics and campaigns and therefore the potential exists for this aspect of the social web to grow. Local Government has started to experiment with ways of engaging citizens online and there is a lot of enthusiasm about the opportunities. However at present there are few clues as to how this will work in linking formal democratic participation and we are not yet clear on how we would build systematically rather than opportunistically in this new environment. We need to move past the enthusiasm to look at strategic and sustainable ways of using the potential which we see online.

The online world can seem in many ways to be a foreign country. I use the term 'spaces' throughout this document deliberately as these social websites have many of the attributes of physical spaces. They have boundaries and a distinct footprint – you know when you are inside or outside of the space. Socially they are complex with acknowledged rules of behaviour and social norms. Each of these spaces also has a unique tone or atmosphere which means that the experienced user knows instantly where they are. Throughout this paper I will be arguing that this trend towards recognisable online spaces makes it both possible and desirable to deliberately build spaces which provide a location for civic discussions and democratic deliberation and to meaningfully evaluate whether the design of any particular space is contributing to or reducing the democratic deficit.

There is of course a contrary position – that of doing nothing - because social networking is just a fad. I would argue that the social nature of this participation, as well as the speed of change on the internet, means that it is of a different nature to other social phenomena or even the pressure that the media can be seen to have had on politics and participation in the past - it is something new and as a result a new response is required from government. In many ways the social web could be seen as a response as much as a cause of many of the problems that the media now face in terms of readership and income – but the fact remains that self-publishing and the viral distribution of that content has radically changed the location and nature of public debate.

Public institutions need some way to respond to the participation that they can see online so that they are not overwhelmed. One response would be to promote spaces which are not owned or designed by the media, where deliberative debate can take place online and where the formal democratic process can connect with the network society in order to benefit from the participation of citizens. Some kind of online space is needed which will make it possible for citizens to interact with institutions online beyond the merely transactional basis which is currently supported by institutional websites. There is currently no online civic space which meets the needs that were previously fulfilled by the village or town hall or the formal debating chamber – something like a 21st Century Agora.

The real question is whether the one is in some way an answer to the other – i.e. if people really are participating online can we deliberately translate this activity to a democratic context and connect it to the formal democratic process either by shifting their participation from one domain to another or by using the techniques of the social web to support a democratic activity. We need to look at ways that they can be drawn to a new online space where they can carry out formal democratic engagement along with techniques for increasing participation in the process. This aspiration is described eloquently by Howard Rheingold:

“I think there is time to prove the democratic potential of the medium by using it properly. Electronic communications do not offer a utopia, but they do offer a unique

channel for publishing and communicating, and the power to publish and communicate is fundamental to democracy. Communication media are necessary but not sufficient for self-governance and healthy societies. The important stuff still requires turning off the computer and braving the uncertainties of the offline world. When we are called to action through the virtual community, we need to keep in mind how much depends on whether we simply "feel involved" or whether we take the steps to actually participate in the lives of our neighbours, and the civic life of our communities."

2. What is the democratic deficit we are talking about?

The term 'democratic deficit' is being used specifically because although the instruments of the European democratic process such as Local and National elections, consultations, select committees and scrutiny processes are fully functional in European democracies the reduction in voter turnout and general participation in the deliberative process of democracy, and for example the diminishing numbers of citizens prepared to stand for civic positions such as local or parish councillors, calls into question the legitimacy of the position of representatives elected with a proportionally small mandate to govern. This legitimacy is further challenged by reduced levels of trust in the political process and the politicians within that process at all levels of government. It is the combination of these two things which causes concern.

Elected representatives need citizens to participate in the whole democratic process, and not just as voters, in order to be able to effectively represent their constituents. Without this participation, trust is diminished as decisions are not scrutinised and citizens do not gain a sophisticated view of the actions needed to govern. Without trust and without participation from citizens a representative system of democracy is in a weakened state. There are many reasons for this lack of participation, but it is a profound concern to anyone who believes in the importance of democratic decision making that there is more participation in a reality TV show than there is in the national process of voting for political representatives (Coleman 2006).

3. What do we mean by the social web?

There are many loose definitions of the current stage of internet development characterised by these sites; 'web 2.0' perhaps being the most prevalent. Within this paper the term used is 'the social web' as this best encapsulates the current developments on the internet in terms of being driven by user generated content and social sites where people talk to each other rather than the initial broadcast or transactional phases of web development. The social web is therefore a term which loosely groups together social networking technologies and websites. It represents a shift from websites which have a broadcast emphasis and moves towards far more collaborative online spaces and content. The idea of the social web fits within the framework of the network society which provides the back drop for any research into effects and behaviours online. Membership of these websites is growing exponentially as are the proportions of leisure (and work) time people are spending on these sites. This growth is more exaggerated within certain demographics, such as the 18-35 year old age group, but can also be seen to be true in a much wider section of the public.

Researchers such as Sherry Turkle (Turkle 1997) have established the fact that online environments can play a central role in people's lives with individuals considering online interactions to have at least the same significance as those that happen in their physical world. There are of course some essential differences between online and offline interactions; for example even with extensive use of multimedia online interactions will be primarily text based and removal of barriers of time and place means that many online conversations are 'time-shifted' with each participant joining the conversation at their convenience. Perhaps the greatest difference comes around the malleability of identity. For many people the potential for anonymity and role playing which the online world brings is its greatest attraction, with participants exploring aspects of themselves, trying out different opinions or working through problems. To some extent the participation of other people is irrelevant except as a mirror to see their own actions. Without wishing to get into a debate about the nature of reality, this potential for solipsism could call into question the validity of the online world which has people using false persona's and ideas to interact with each other and this is a major concern if you are considering the problems of online democratic debate. However I will argue that the opposite can also be seen to be true with online connections leading to authentic and valuable connections being made between people online.

This authenticity of content and relationship can be demonstrated in many different online arenas and online communities can demonstrate intimate ties between community members sharing personal information and offering each other support. Some of the clearest examples of this can be seen in communities like Mumsnet which is a community of parents or on sites like Breast Cancer Care which runs a forum for cancer sufferers, carers and survivors. These sites can be shown to be communities in the fullest sense with measurable social capital and a strong sense of community identity. They have become significant online destinations for their participants and have developed the attributes of physical spaces described above.

These communities can either be formed, as described above, in dedicated websites or within the wider terrain of social websites like FaceBook. A sense of community can also be found in the social web at large with perhaps weaker ties between participants but still the same strong sense of place which brings with it social norms of behaviour and the idea of what is authentic and inauthentic within that space. Since the inception of the Internet the technology has been used to support communities of interest around very specific topics and ideas, but the growth of the social web means that the spaces to have these conversations exist before the conversations do. Where previously it was necessary to first build your space and then populate it with like minded people these new pervasive online spaces provide the empty buildings which can then be populated by groups of people. There is a big difference between seeking out a community for a specific purpose, such as the Mumsnet example, and being part of a larger community which cuts across many different interests. The social web is about the increase of these wider communities, these more general spaces. Where it is relatively easy to categorise the interactions within a community of practice or of interest as these sites tend towards homogeneity of either participant or topic, participation within the wider social web, currently best represented by FaceBook, is less easy to categorise and define as participants are showing different elements of their interests within the same space.

The question of how authentic an individuals contribution is becomes central when considering the fact that within these wider social web spaces of the network society it can be shown that people are not only choosing to share intimate personal information, they are

also talking about the minutiae of their days as well as broader topics and ideas. This includes political opinions, political campaigns and social issues. Political blogs and online news services can offer sophisticated commentary and most political and social campaigns will now have an online aspect; be it a website dedicated to the thwarting of the Heathrow Airport runway expansion or one dedicated to 'Make Poverty History'. The networked nature of the social web, and the technology which supports it, makes it easy for participants to join these campaigns and in some sense join the debate. This contribution, if authentic, is extremely valuable as viral marketing techniques are applied to online campaigning in order to involve thousands of people. In this area the idea of the social web overlaps with the way in which the media is developing in response to the new online environment. Real-time rolling news services are starting to rely on contributions from amateur journalists and the political blogs discussed above are increasingly professionalized. Online sources have gained a credibility and influence which reach beyond the printed newspapers and television programmes that support them.

And its not just on computers.....

The discussion social web is often centred around the PC (or Mac) as this is the environment where tools and services are most mature. However for many people the phone is becoming a primary tool for online access and the growth in interest in smart phones with fully functional web access is accelerating this. While the iPhone, which still dominates this market, is too expensive to be a mainstream tool it is bringing with it a wave of more affordable devices which use 'apps' in order to interface and make accessible specific web services from the phone interface. This is a channel which is very much suited to the 'status update' features which encapsulate sites like Twitter or the more viral aspects of Facebook and as such needs to be considered when building a social web strategy.

Further to that DigiTV is still an important access channel for homes which do not have a computer and the work which is done on phone interfaces should also be able to complement and serve the needs of the simple DigiTV interfaces.

Social web means pervasive and real time use of web services which means that availability if the right access channel is essential.

4. The importance of authenticity – identity matters

This issue of authenticity is central to the problems surrounding the use of the social web for democratic debate. Put bluntly – you have no idea who anyone is. You could be talking to a sophisticated 16 year old rather than a voter or a bored Australian looking for conversation in another time zone. The facts of the matter are actually that few people have the need or imagination to create a completely false identity online (though there is some interesting research about people who do) and you can actually get a good sense of what a community is thinking from an informal social web space. However, this is not enough for democratic decision making and at some point you need to introduce the idea of accountability into the process. This is one of my central reasons for arguing for pervasive civic spaces. You use these to allow people to establish their 'civic persona' online and then to re-use this identity.

Accountability does not necessarily mean recognition for all participants. There are many circumstances under which a debate can work better where all participants have the reassurance that someone knows who all the people are, but where participants prefer to mask their identity with screen names. When discussing potentially contentious issues this approach can work well.

This development of a civic persona and the accompanying environment also addresses the issues raised by the current situation of multiple digital identities which many people deal with. For example, Local Authority Officers have always had to balance their identity as a citizen with their identity as a Council official and this is relatively simple (though not easy) in a physical context. The new online spaces have the potential to complicate this balance considerably as observers are able to 'network' the different elements of your life and the same is true for the always complex balance between a Councillor's role as a politician and as a community advocate. An acknowledged civic persona can help address these identity conflicts by providing a more sophisticated environment for interaction.

5. Command and control is over

The social web is driven by user generated content and the sharing of information and content is networked together via the viral nature of the online environment. Eye witness reports become our first point of contact for breaking news and these are often un-mediated by the press.. Political bloggers are gaining ground with the traditional media in terms of access and influence and mass collaboration online is being used by large corporations to support product research and development, by news organisations to create new content and by websites such as Wikipedia to create shared content outputs. Participatory design is being used to improve products and services in all commercial fields and the increasing use of co-creation online is endemic. This makes it more notable that these ideas have not yet been adopted or even attempted by Government in order to address the acknowledged issue of the democratic deficit. Notable but perhaps not surprising. It is almost impossible to imagine a public sphere which is rich in user generated content and yet managed with the ideas of command and control which are embedded in many government engagement and communication strategies. Organisations need to ask themselves if they really want to know the answer before they put a question to the social web as authenticity is paramount to building a relationship online.

Within the field of eParticipation the concept of co-creation or participatory design has a dual heritage. Methods of co-creation have been used within offline community engagement projects for some time. Co-creation is seen as an answer to the problem of how to engage citizens with the decision making process and is used with a wide range of citizen groups. Its main antecedent being the Arnstein ladder of engagement (Arnstein 1969) which describes different levels of citizen engagement in the deliberative process with a truly co-created discourse where citizens fully engage in deliberation and have power in the process being seen as the top of that ladder and the overall objective of citizen engagement. This ladder of engagement has been frequently discussed but has not yet been examined thoroughly in an online context.

These two senses of co-creation resonate with the idea that by creating a truly shared design method both the process of design and the final outcome will be the work of all participants and not something which has been imposed by one group on another.

Mass collaboration online however requires a third element; the tools and features of collaboration – the space in which co-creation takes place needs to support the process. In the physical world the place where a dialogue or debate takes place has a big effect on the tone and nature of that debate. This is also true for online spaces where clues about tone and purpose can be found embedded in the design of a website. Governmental institutions have for a long time responded to this fact by designing physical buildings which are imposing and grandiose. Civic architecture was often oriented around showcasing the power of decision makers and they have reinforced this online with websites which tend to reflect the organisations itself, in terms of language and structure, rather than the public which it is there to support. The question is whether a change in the nature of websites created by Local Government will affect levels of democratic participation. The metaphor of the village hall is central to this – a village hall is traditionally a facility provided by government but managed and used by the community.

However it is important to note that the deliberate creation of a new social space is by no means a given as many people try and fail to set up vibrant online conversations. Practitioners who have engineered commercial spaces like the early AOL or Geocities communities agree that there as much art as science in the process of community creation (Kim 2000) and though they are a different phenomena to earlier online communities there is also little indication as to exactly why sites like Facebook or MySpace have so rapidly acquired the levels of participation that can be seen today. The Virtual Town Hall is not an attempt to create an online community but rather an opportunity to leverage existing participation in the wider social web towards a specific objective. That being said there will, out of necessity, be elements of community creation within the project – though only in so far as it is necessary to support the mass collaboration approach to discussion.

There is no obligation on individuals to participate in civic society, to contribute to the public sphere. I personally would argue that the rights of citizenship bring this responsibility but in

terms of compelling people to participate our tools are limited and we need to rely on persuasion. For the purposes of this research I am looking at the people who are either already online and already participating in the social web or at people who are already democratically engaged offline – irrespective of their motivation. Specifically, in terms of addressing the democratic deficit, this is a question of how to encourage citizens online to move from the position of participating in online discourse of some kind but not participating in democratic debate into a formal democratic process.

6. Involving the Community

I want to talk specifically about the concept of community moderators as I believe it should be considered as a cornerstone of any online engagement strategy for a few reasons:

- Co-created or participatory processes require genuine engagement for all, in all parts of the conversation and a sharing of the management of the process as well as the outcomes of the dialogue.
- Moderation of these sites will not be sustainable for Local Government – if we accept the need for moderation then we must find a way to make it practical. Community moderation achieves this at the same time as supporting the key objective of co-creation
- Online communities require a social element – its a very dull party where you only talk about politics and community moderators are better able to provide the social glue which will hold the community together

This mix of the proactive and the pragmatic is very central to all of the work that will be undertaken as part of a web 2.0 engagement strategy and is also an effect of the social nature of these new technologies.

7. What are the risks of using the social web?

As I write I am very aware that my argument can come across as internet evangelism and I want to try and redress the balance somewhat. Firstly, it must be understood that these

online tools will, in my view, never replace physical meetings or face to face debate which is central to our current political discourse. However pressures from changes in people's lifestyles and increased pressure on finances means that online presence will continue to make up a growing part of the democratic process and needs to be addressed. In this section I want to talk about the risks and possible risk management associated with the social web.

7.1 There are no controls – but that's not all bad

Once your content is on the social web then it is in the wild. You have very little control over what happens to it practically speaking and it will have a deep digital footprint which means that retracting content is very difficult. This freedom brings with it a need to ensure that content is authentic and consistent because the traceability of ideas online means that inconsistencies of ideas or messages will be far more obvious in an environment where the public can join up the dots between departments, or even between individuals at different points in time. This highlights a big tension between the social web and contemporary media which is driven by short sound bites and often negative reporting as well as a big opportunity. The balance for the risk of inconsistency is the reward of a much richer and more direct relationship with the public. If you are able to create an authentic voice online and connect to citizens then you can, to some extent, avoid the sound bite trap of having your communication 'managed' through the media.

7.2 Are the public ready? Are you ready?

As I said earlier, I am not advocating an entirely online engagement strategy. Any wider strategy needs to be blended and use a mix of online and offline tools in order to reach as full a range of citizens as possible. However if online is, as I believe it should be, a substantial and growing part of your engagement mix then there are some skills which need auditing and may need addressing:

- **The public will need to get used to the idea that you may change your mind about something** – they will need to get more sophisticated about the way in which they perceive the work of the council and you will need to be thoughtful about how you present it. Arguably this is an effect of the empowerment agenda generally but it is a change that needs to be managed internally and externally to ensure that you are opening up the whole of the decision making process for any conversation you take

online

- **Not everyone you meet online will know what they are doing.** This is true both internally and externally and you will need to decide where the balance should sit between training people and making it clear to them what they need to know in order to participate.

7.3 Speed matters

Conversations online move very quickly and this can be a challenge to Local Government infrastructure which can have a number of decision making layers. This can work very positively with crisis management information being distributed rapidly but can also be a problem if incorrect or 'difficult' information is in the public realm. You will need to examine your internal processes and either re-engineer them to meet the faster pace of online information exchange or provide alternative channels for digital communications, at least in the short term.

7.4 Technology is defined by change

It is stating the obvious that technological change is one of the things that define the social web and it needs to be taken both as a risk and as an opportunity. New technologies need to be evaluated and exploited where ever possible but it is also important not to hang an entire agenda, such as empowerment, around one technology set. Your strategy should assume that the next big fad is around the corner and that FaceBook will be superseded by something new – we just don't know what.

7.5 Not everyone has access

It would be naïve to discuss the social web and not to discuss the digital divide. Not everyone has a pc or online access and not everyone who has basic access has reasonable broadband speeds. There is much written on this subject¹ and I do not intend to rehash the debate here apart from to state the view that internet connectivity should be viewed as a utility and that I would like to see decent broadband connectivity available in every home. Manifesto aside the lack of access for all is another reason why every engagement strategy

¹ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/digitalinclusion/> will get you started!

needs to have a blend of online and offline methods because the absence of connectivity for some does not mean that we should not take advantage of new technologies for the growing numbers who are using them.

8. What are the opportunities?

Balanced with these risks are opportunities to make significant, positive changes to the way in which Local Government is interacting with the public:

- **There is an opportunity to connect to a very different type of audience** to the one which government is traditionally able to connect to. Recent OFCOM research (OFCEM 2008) shows the younger demographic which is using social media and indications are that this is increasing. Informal workshops that we have run with younger people shows clearly the fact that the communication focus of anyone who is under 25 will tend to be online or on their mobile. This clearly makes social media an exciting opportunity to engage with a group that has always been in the 'hard to reach' category.
- **A new environment gives you the opportunity to make new rules around behaviour** – it's the chance for a fresh start for the relationship and though you will need to connect it back to your offline world you can use these new spaces to refresh the discussion around behaviour and expectations with all participants
- **Online contact is generally far cheaper than face to face content.** This is true even with the need for content moderation which can be mitigated by the community moderators. By using more cost effective routes it frees up resources to work on the more intensive offline contacts.

9. What does this new space look like?

The Virtual Town Hall should be a place where you are connecting to all of the online conversations which are going on around the local deliberative process and, where possible, to connect these conversations to the formal democratic instruments and processes which enable the Local Authority or other parts of government to respond. Social websites, tools and widgets are an essential part of this process but because of the issues of identity of authenticity discussed above those sites are not the place to engage in formal deliberation

and the overall strategy must be to use social websites to encourage participants to a civic space.

However, this needs to be balanced with another design assumption that the Civic space will not be a necessary destination for all citizens and that content needs to be 'set free' to be produced on other websites and to be available in other spaces. This means that all civic content needs to be packaged in widgets which can easily be embedded in other websites but have a clear point of reference back to the civic space.

Widgets need to be considered in two directions – push and pull – with points of presence both in the Virtual Town Hall and out in the native social web environment. This means that, for example, a petitions widget within the virtual Town Hall needs to have a companion widget which can exist out on the social web driving traffic and signatories.

A really important principle here is the idea that the democracy goes to the people and not the other way round. Where citizens are already using online tools and have existing online community sites the proposition is that we deploy a widget there rather than expecting them to move to our environment. We want to connect to the existing conversations and tap into that community 'energy' rather than trying to restart those conversations in a new location.

Finally, this approach needs to be modular in order to accommodate the constant shifting of attention and interest online. Twitter is today's big thing where Facebook was last years – and we no longer speak much about MySpace. Any online engagement strategy needs to adapt to the shifting focus of the social web and to build spaces which can include and accommodate new sites and services rather than trying to build a point of presence in each new arena.

Box: The suggestion is a hosted container which draws in different Web 2.0 widgets. What this means is that instead of a static website there is a webspace (the container) which is able to control different pieces on functionality (widgets) which

are hosted within its space. These widgets can then interact with the wider internet in order to selectively draw in content and write content back to those sites it draws from. The BBC home page is a good example of a page based in widgets

10. What next? Some suggestions for getting started

This is a huge agenda and one where we are all still feeling our way. However enough early work has been done for it to make sense for us to stop playing around the edges of the new technologies and start to build a sustainable strategy that will continue to experiment at the same time as starting to build online destinations that can have longevity beyond their specific technologies. To do this we need to create a balance between risk and experimentation and to build into our processes ongoing evaluation and learning. The Virtual Town Hall can be built in stages, and can be begun with a specific consultation, community or democratic process.

10.1 What will the building blocks look like?

Here are some specific standalone projects which can help define the elements of a social web strategy:

- **Create a social web policy for officers and members.** This should be done through consultation and discussion internally and should help to define how the Council is talking and acting online. It needs to address issues around identity – for example officers also being citizens – and also needs to make it clear what is and isn't supported by the Council. By doing this you can set free all your existing social web power as you enable your own staff to join the conversations.
- **Start to recruit and train community moderators.** This is a key feature of a sustainable social web strategy and the sooner you start making these relationships work the better.
- **Create a flexible and modular technology infrastructure** where you can base all

of your social web work. This doesn't mean a big enterprise technology solution – just create a single front door for all your online engagement and start to connect that space to the tools and technologies of the social web – **create the building site for your virtual town hall.**

- **Start to identify pilot projects.** There will be small areas of engagement within your organisation that are ready to start using these new tools and probably already are. Create a steering group and some common evaluation criteria and start to ensure that they are all working in the same direction.
- **Use Place.** One of the levers you need in order to start on online engagement is a sense of common interest from the public. It is difficult to know what people are interested in but you can be fairly sure they are interested in what is happening near their home. Use this to connect to communities and to create online the conversations that people are having locally. There is an increasing emphasis on 'hyperlocalism' with eParticipation (www.talkaboutlocal.com) and this needs to be heeded.

11. Conclusion

The social web presents both a challenge and an opportunity. It is opening up new avenues for communication and deliberation whilst at the same time creating new social norms and expectations. It is currently being used by a limited number of people but the overall trends indicate that at some point in the not too distant future it will be an unavoidable arena for public engagement as more and more people choose to connect to the wider world via digital means. The question stands then as to how Local Government should respond and is there an opportunity to use this new world as an opportunity to address our major problem of democratic deficit.

The challenge in doing this is not technical, as the development work is understood and can be implemented – it is social and political - as we look for ways to create a civic space which is not only technically web native with the tools and features of the popular social websites

but more importantly socially web native with the ideas of co-creation and networked content embedded throughout the space.

My argument is that we need to create something pervasive - the Virtual Town Hall - which can serve as a permanent presence for democracy online and where we can start to re-engage the public with the ongoing process of discussion and deliberation which is so essential to democracy.

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NOTES

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