The affordances of social media for inclusive urban communities and the need for ‘multi-scalar’ approaches

Graeme Mearns
Newcastle University
Claremont Bridge,
Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 7RU
graeme.mearns@ncl.ac.uk

Ranald Richardson
Newcastle University
Claremont Bridge
Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 7RU
ranald.richardson@ncl.ac.uk

1. INTRODUCTION

During the past three years, communities have once again been foregrounded in political agendas (like the UK coalition government’s ‘Big Society’), ICTs have been reinserted into local policy domains, and claims about people’s galvanizing through social media towards civic participation have been made in abundance [9]. Whilst the concept of ‘community’ is notoriously slippery and has been widely contested within the social sciences since their inception [5], a new phase of attentiveness to community has clearly been entered in the UK context. Against this backdrop, this work is concerned with what social media add and subtract from the concept of community, and what this might mean for how social media are approached at the local level to support social inclusion.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA FOR INCLUSION

As Shirky [11] makes clear, social media are changing how many people interact on a huge scale. This is truest in terms of younger people, often said to be part of the ‘digital natives’ owing to the fact that from the early-1980s, successive generations have been born into an era characterised by pervasive technology [15]. Whilst Boyd and Ellison [1] make useful distinctions between several types of social media (for example, social networking websites versus micro-blogging platforms), collectively, these tools differ from those of Web 1.0 because they bend towards consumption and leisure (rather than production and work), have greater reach and speed (especially via mobile devices) and give way to user-generated content that facilitates a richer and more interactive multimedia experience [7]. In turn, many have cited these features in suggesting that social media offer new means for engagement with marginalised individuals and groups and thus, broader social inclusion [14].

As geographers we approach such claims critically, investing ‘conscious thought into how technology actively relates to the spaces and places bound up with human territorial life’ [6]. Chiefly, we do so because ‘geography’ is often missing in literature focusing heavily on homogenous user groups and exper-

1 Here, we mean both geographically located and in a subjective sense, say, according to axes of difference such as gender and/or class.
workers refraining from digital-creative engagement activities that harness these tools within communities deemed ‘hard to reach’ (HTR) [9].

4. A YOUTH SECTOR IN FLUX

With the focus of our work on young people’s experiences of social media in place, the entry point for our empirical inquiry was to map key actors within the North-East’s youth sector and identify those working in HTR locations. These were also chosen on the basis of being best able to foster understanding of how social media are currently being used for creative engagement at a local level.

Initial findings from this institutional component of the study show that the youth sector in the North-East is undergoing considerable change in terms of both funding and the types of services offered but not in respects of how young people’s interests and energies are being engaged and galvanized. The UK government’s austerity measures are the main drivers of this shift, with consensus across the organisational interviews that engagement activity with HTR youth has now entered a ‘state of flux’. Funding is being scaled back and there is mounting emphasis on voluntary actors that is forcing many youth providers to re-focus their activities towards an advisory role.

Pressure is also impacting the youth sector from the bottom-up, with the ‘target group’ of digital natives further necessitating the integration of social media tools into youth sector provision to prevent the region’s actors falling behind [18, 19]. In this light, how social media work in practice with young people and how these tools might be brought to bear on the social issues confronting them is of particular importance in the North-East because it is already described as a lagging region in terms of employment – whereby, youth unemployment reaches a rate of nearly 30% in some wards and the region scores among the highest nationally overall.

However, our analysis also suggests that the delivery of engagement activities with HTR youth in the North-East was already suffering a lack of continuity prior to government spending cuts. Each of the interviewees described tensions inherent to ‘short term funding’ that has characterised the growth of the youth sector over the past decade. This has resulted in a complex network of actors working through partnership, but with few signs of a robust framework for measuring the outcomes of engagement with HTR youth specifically.

5. DIGITALLY NATIVE WHERE?

Case studies of successful engagement activities with social media in the North-East have been difficult to attain despite the ‘territorial nature of youth’, young people’s ‘limited access to transport’ and difficulties in ‘locating HTR young people’, being cited as key barriers to successful engagement. Each of the organisational interviewees were also keen to emphasise that across the youth sector, providers have been ‘slow to understand and utilise social media’ despite recognising the popularity and potential of platforms like Facebook among young people of various socio-economic backgrounds. In the case of the latter, concern was expressed that social media remain limited to the promotion of engagement activities as opposed to being integrated into the provision itself. Similarly, one youth practitioner suggested that social media tend to be considered as part of an ‘intervention portfolio’ as opposed to a means for reaching and engaging with the HTR explicitly. There are also apparent knowledge asymmetries that we are especially keen to investigate further in going forward. These are made clearer in the following informant’s claim that:

The problem is that digital technology is actually the most powerful learning tool that has ever been created. But if you don’t understand learning, it is of no use to you. You can’t even go on to Google and ask a question because that way of thinking is alien to you.

Whilst knowledge of how to use digital technologies (as enablers of social media) is of course crucial, the ‘alien thinking’ referred to here perhaps masks experiences of social media that are gained beyond structured learning. This leaves little room to understand how, young people might gain digital literacy through mundane activities, experimentation, play and/or peer-support.

More importantly, such an emphasis suggests that the youth sector is not learning from possible vernacular strategies for innovative youth work with social media. Should this emphasis on structured approaches extend across the region, digital-creative engagement activities are unlikely to be wide enough to capture the varied abilities of young people who will likely see their worlds differently according to place-specific contexts within which (their ever more technologically-mediated) lives unfold. As a result, our current fieldwork concentrates on youth actors and young people in the West End of Newcastle upon Tyne (an area scoping highly on the indices of multiple deprivation) and aims to complement “in their own words” accounts of social media usage from young people with emotional maps of layered ‘online’ and ‘offline’ experiences. Together, these will get young people to think about their knowledge and use of these tools in and according to the places their daily lives are lived and felt.

6. THE LIMITS OF NETWORKS

Having also considered the interleaving of social media with the slippery concept of community, the initial findings of this study support the view that there is a need for more nuanced approaches to projects seeking to mobilise tools such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (and/or their supporting digital technologies) for inclusion. Whilst a renewed emphasis on communities is becoming apparent, a focus on networks remains dominant among those concerned with how technologies intersect with society and space. Developed from competing definitions of the ‘network society’ by Craven and Wellman [4], Van Dijk [13] and Castells [3], network approaches are undoubtedly important, but the growing normalization of social media in many advanced economies reveals significant limitations.

With a focus on ‘delineating structures of relationships and flows of activities’ rather than the ‘confinement of analysis to territorial units’ [16], network analysis has highlighted how community can be socially and spatially diversified at an individual level, often characterized by ‘person-to-person’ networks over ‘door-to-door’ and ‘place-to-place’ connectivity. For Wellman [16] the networked individual (the person) is the portal to community. Central to this idea is that new community formations are emerging that are local and global (or ‘glocal’) in scope and that individuals, groups and organizations are no longer bound by places but liberated from them. It is in this respect that social media call into question the need for multi-scalar approaches. Crucially, this is because the focus on linkages and flows has tended to subsume place, as the following extract from Wellman [16] makes clear:

CMC will be everywhere but because it is independent of place, it will be situated nowhere. [...] The person – not the place, household or workshop – will become even more of an autonomous communication
node. Contextual sense and lateral awareness will diminish. If people
listen to favourite radio stations wherever they are, they become less
aware of the importance of gospel music to southern Americans, farm
news to Midwesterners, and hip-hop to northeastern city dwellers.

Even under a condition of person-to-person connectivity, social
media make troublesome the idea of a ‘diminishing contextual
sense’ of place. Whilst Internet-mediated communities have
historically been approached as distinct, ‘placeless’, and lacking
in implications beyond the screen, there is growing evidence to
suggest local communities are investing in and are the containers
of the transnational solidarities this person-to-person connectivity
evokes. In this light, network individualism’s privileging of the
global seems restrictive in terms of capturing how young people’s
interaction through social media may be playing out in and
according to Newcastle’s West End – perhaps for example,
reaffirming existing communities at the local level and overlaying
new communities of interest and practice among young people on
top of these.

For instance, despite the number of tools catering to music fans
(to extend Wellman’s example of radio listening), many people do
not listen to radio stations beyond the place in which they are
located but simply stream their local radio stations online and
connect with others who are listening nearby through tools like
Twitter. Similarly, hyper-local digital content (and mobile
devices) now make it possible to not only sit in a café in England
and hear a hip-hop track originating from the northeastern United
States, but via LastFM, Shazam, SongKick and other social media
apps, instantly ‘pull-in’ real-time data that shows the track’s
place-of-origin, the places where that track is popular, who else is
listening nearby (and afar) and which concerts the hip-hop artist
will play in those localities. In other words, social media are
making very clear that place matters immensely as it is within and
between places where the effects of differing levels of
connectedness are felt and lived out.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has briefly introduced a key argument underpinning
two studies currently being undertaken by the Social Science
Perspective in the SiDE-hub at Newcastle – that place matters and
‘multi-scalar’ approaches are necessary for understanding the
potential of social media for supporting socially inclusive
communities at a local level. We have not advocated a
romanticized search for ‘imobile’ local solidarity here, nor
necessarily the return of local boundaries into analyses. Instead,
we have contended that local group solidarities continue to be
marginalised in and through a focus on networks (and network
individualism in particular) and that place, as a ‘particular, unique
point of intersection within networks of social relations’ [8]
deserves renewed attention to address this imbalance. This means
starting with, better accounting for, and responding to
geographical specificities (be these social, cultural, economic,
and/or political) in considering the ways in which social media
might support the inclusion of marginalized individuals and
groups whose experiences differ according to place. This could,
for example, be particularly relevant in thinking about how such
tools could aid communities in securing locally-distributed
resources more effectively or having greater say in
neighbourhood-level decision making.

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