

Local Communities: Relationships between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ social capital

Sonia Liff

Warwick University, UK

Sonia.Liff@Warwick.ac.uk

Abstract. The paper explores forms of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ social capital within a geographical area of the UK comprising 65 ‘communities’. Measures of real social capital based on formal community organisations were compared with web-activity relating to the same communities. Three main types of websites were identified: first a local government scheme which created ‘identikit’ websites for each of the places which could then be taken up by local people; second a similar scheme operated by a private company and covering the whole of the UK; and third independent, bottom up sites created by social entrepreneurs or community groups. Numbers and forms of organisations and websites, and levels and forms of community web-based participation were measured for each community at two points in 2004. The analysis suggests no strong correlation between these measures of real and virtual social capital. The analysis further suggests that providing a ready made website rarely results in the creation of a developed community site – although it may provide outlets for more limited information exchanges. However bottom up sites which reflect the heterogeneity of real communities are also rare. Interviews with participants suggest the need to understand more about the social networks, practices and organisational forms that sustain community engagement with community websites.

Community-based ICT initiatives have often involved the establishment of place-based websites which provide a ‘virtual’ representation of that community to itself and the wider world, a site for discussions about community initiatives, a forum for projects such as local history groups and so on. Alongside community locations providing access to the internet and computer training such websites have been seen as having the potential to make an important contribution to community regeneration by promoting local issues, re-establishing a sense of

identity and promoting communication. This is an approach which has been described and endorsed by a range of practitioner and academic accounts (in the US, examples include Schuler, 1996; Schon et al, 1999; Mele, 1999).

This paper explores the relationship between real communities and their virtual representations within a diverse geographical area and highlights the extent to which different kinds of community networks appear to be able to engage community participation.

The Wider Relationship between Real and Virtual Social Capital

The successful examples of community engagement with ICTs highlighted above can be seen as a useful antidote to earlier dystopian visions of the internet creating an homogenised global culture and destroying people's engagement with their local communities, neighbours, and even fellow household members. However such cases are normally the result of intensive and sustained community capacity building activities. For this reason the question of whether there is a more general relationship between the health of local communities and the development of local community networks (and if so of what type and in which direction) remains contested.

One way of measuring the strength of communities is to assess their social capital. Putnam (2000) defines this as the connections between individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Putnam further distinguishes between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the strong, multi-layered, forms of connection which are usually thought to be characteristic of kinship relationships and traditional communities. Bridging social capital is characterised by looser relationships, which might for, example, provide a link between distinctive social groupings. Putnam uses a wide range of measures to judge the extent of social capital, ranging from personal socialising through to membership of formal civic organisations.

Putnam (2000) raised a number of concerns about the ways in which the internet might be destructive to social capital. These included the consequences of differential access ('the digital divide') for people's access to internet-based social networks and the tendency of people to use the internet to engage with very narrow communities of interest which might be destructive of bridging social capital. He suggested that rather than community networks creating social capital, the opposite might be true with local communities with strong social capital being a necessary pre-requisite for effective community networks. However, Katz et al (2001) and Wellman et al (2001) both find positive empirical associations between internet use and various dimensions of social capital (although the

survey methodology they employ makes it difficult to be sure about the direction of these links).

These studies are based on internet use (or non-use) in general rather than specific involvement with local community networks. In relation to the latter, Kavanaugh & Patterson (2001) argue that even if Putnam is right about the initial need for effective communities, there is additional potential for a community network to build social capital locally by drawing in new participants. Interestingly their empirical work shows that the longer people have been on-line the more likely they are to use the network for social capital building activities. In a similar vein Jankowski et al (2001) argue that community integration can be seen as both a consequence and / or an antecedent of community media use.

Overall then the evidence seems to suggest that there is no necessary conflict between internet use and social capital and indeed that one might expect to their co-existence. Most of the empirical evidence (Kavanaugh & Patterson excepted) is based on data on individuals rather than communities. As such, while it can look at demographic variations between individuals it is not in a position to comment on outcomes in different kinds of community. Nor have the studies looked at whether outcomes can be related to the different kinds of community networks in which participants might engage.

The current study provides an opportunity to consider some of these issues by comparing outcomes in a variety of different types of community in relation to different types of web presences. It allows different types of questions to be asked. For example would we expect more atomised communities, such as those with a high proportion of residents who commute to work elsewhere, to engage less in community networks but perhaps use the internet in more instrumental ways (which might be characterised as bridging rather than bonding social capital) or would one expect to see examples of individually initiated websites, or none at all?

Of course whatever the strength of such dynamics one would not expect to see the relationship between real and virtual social capital existing in isolation from other variables. Both might be expected to be influenced by factors such as the size of the community and its demographic make up. Further, it seems at least possible that such structural variables will not fully explain the emergence of particular forms of social practice relevant to understanding the form of website / community network use that arise from, say, links between communities or the presence of individuals with a particular mix of skills.

Study of Local Websites in a District Authority Area

Research has been carried out within an area defined by a second level tier of local government (and English District Council) and which contains 65 settlements ('communities'). The area is largely rural, consisting mainly of small

villages (with various levels of identity, clearly defined boundaries and separation from each other). There are also a small number of larger places. Public transport is poor and some settlements are defined as isolated on this measure. However the main road network provides quite good links to major regional settlements, for those with their own transport. In the 1980s and 1990s the area was subject to relatively high unemployment as a result of mining closures and this led to a range of regeneration measures (which have now largely ended).

A sense of the way these settlements vary can be gleaned from an assessment of the number and type of formal community organisations which exist. This has been assessed on the basis of a database (Infolinx) held by the County Council and covers organisations ranging from sports clubs, self help groups, and societies based on shared interests or around a particular event. This database is available via the websites discussed below but existed prior to their development and is maintained independently of them. It is of course likely that such a database, with which there is no particular incentive to register and which does not have the resources to seek out, or even validate, the information it is given is far from a perfect measure. In particular it is likely to over-represent formal organisations such as Guides or Scouts, Churches or sports activities linked into national leagues and under-represent the relatively informal interest based groups. However there seems no reason to assume that it will be differentially inaccurate between the communities studied here. Additional information on these communities comes from local knowledge.¹

This data show that of the 65 settlements 39 had none or one registered community organisation. Some of these places are tiny and may see themselves primarily in relation to another settlement. As such this finding would not imply that the residents had no collective activities. However not all the cases can be explained in this way. At the other extreme 8 places had 20 or more organisations registered. These were all the larger settlements in the area. There does not appear to be any straightforward relationship between the affluence of the communities and this measure of social capital.

The District Authority area falls within that covered by a rural partnership body (this encompasses representatives from County and District authorities, police and other service providers, rural community council etc. and runs shared projects but is not a level of government as such). As part of its ICT strategy this body has established a website for every 'rural' settlement (in practice everywhere except the County town). These websites (which can be found via www.leicestershirevillages.com) are mainly based on generic information held by the contributing bodies, supplemented by a number of shared national links. The websites have a central area which contains an image of the place (invariably an

¹ My engagement with this study is both as an academic and as a participant observer. As a resident and an 'active citizen' I am able to draw on local knowledge that goes beyond the formal methods described.

image of the built environment) and an invitation to contribute local content and to become involved in the administration of the site (see figure 1 for an example).



Figure 1 An example of a village page on LeicestershireVillages

Individuals need to register before they can post their messages which then appear on an area originally called *Your Pages* and now re-titled *Local Pages*. Other than content contributed by residents the strongest element of 'local' content is the use of databases collected by various parts of local government for a variety of purposes which can be searched to 'find my nearest ...' in a variety of categories including accommodation and football teams.

These 65 websites were examined for evidence of any local content resulting from citizen engagement with the initiative. There are only certain places where local people can post on the website so the parts which formed a basis for this search was clear. However not all thing posted in these places originated with the community. For example under *Local Contacts* the community development officer for the area has posted her details for every village. Under *Local News* there were similar multiple posts from the library service. *Local Events* took one to a generic site with arts events – although in this case it was possible to post additional local ones. The Local Web Directory had a mixture of links to business, local authority and community sites but none appeared more local than the District Council level. These things may clearly be relevant to the local community – but they are not from the community. Where community-generated content did exist it was recorded and categorised, with one area of interest being

whether it appeared to be evidence of some type of community engagement (e.g. postings from local groups, announcements of meetings, discussion of issues of local concern) or whether it seemed to be a more individual exchange of information (e.g. small ads, offers of business services). This analysis was repeated 7 months later to get a sense of the extent to which such participation was on-going, and to avoid the problems inherent in analyses carried out at one point in time.

These 65 settlement names were then used as the basis of a search on GOOGLE to find other web representations of these places. The top 50 hits relating to each place name were examined. Most of these could not be considered as village websites. Instead they were what could be called directory sites – usually relating to hotels, but also to pubs, churches and other establishments. These effectively use the search for a particular place to take one to a site which claims to be able to, for example, ‘Find a hotel near X’. The quality of the information found varies, with many being very poor, but in any case they do not even claim to provide any wider information about the place and its community and so were excluded from further study.

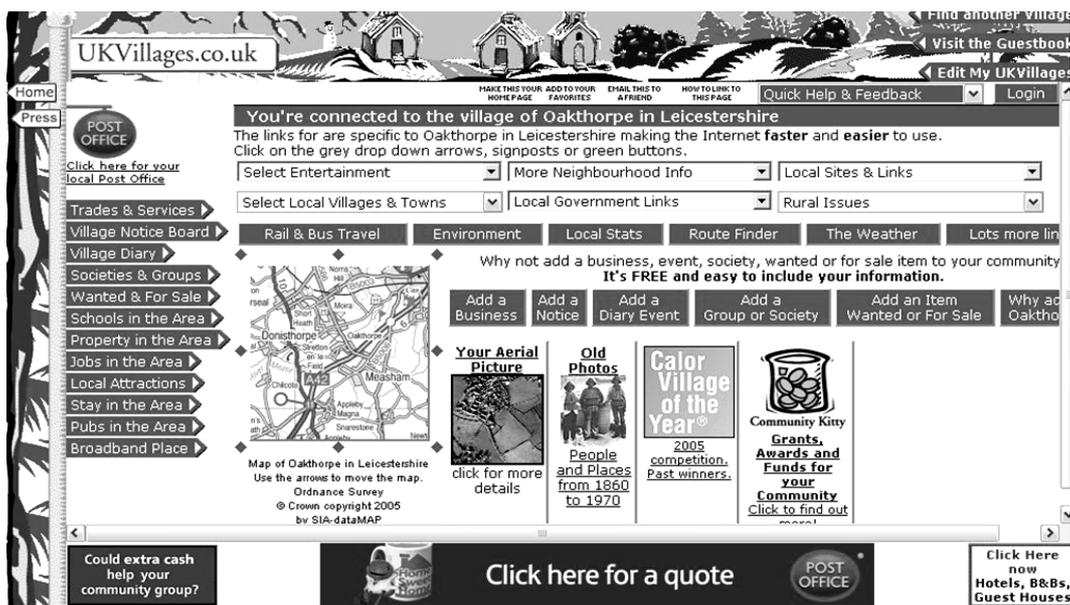


Figure 2 An example of a village page on UK Villages

UK VILLAGE sites appeared for a significant proportion of the places (www.ukvillages.co.uk). This is a national commercial site which claims it has created websites 31,000 ‘communities’. These again contain largely generic links (although of quite a high level of sophistication in terms of taking one to a part of the linked site relevant to the geographical area of interest, and avoiding the problems of searching only within postcodes that plague many such sites). As with LEICESTERSHIRE VILLAGES (and a number of other such sites) they

encourage local content in the form of individual posts to places with labels like ‘Village Notice Board’. Again such sites (see Figure 2 for an example), where they existed, were examined to see whether local use was being made of the site and if so in what form. This analysis was also repeated at a second point in time as described above.

A number of independent sites were also identified via the Google searches. These included sites which appeared to be established by local small businesses (usually offering commercial website creation or related ICT services) which said that they had been created for village use. Other sites appeared to be a spin off from some local heritage or related project, often funded with public sector grants. A small number were established by individuals or by independent community groups (see Figure 3 for an example). All these sites were explored for the breadth and depth of community engagement. All these investigations also provided an opportunity to assess more informally other aspects of social capital, in particular ‘bounded solidarity’ where Pigg & Crank (2004) argue that there have been no empirical studies. They identify five dimensions of social capital using the term bounded solidarity to mean ‘a source of collective identity and a resource for action against threats from external sources’ (4).

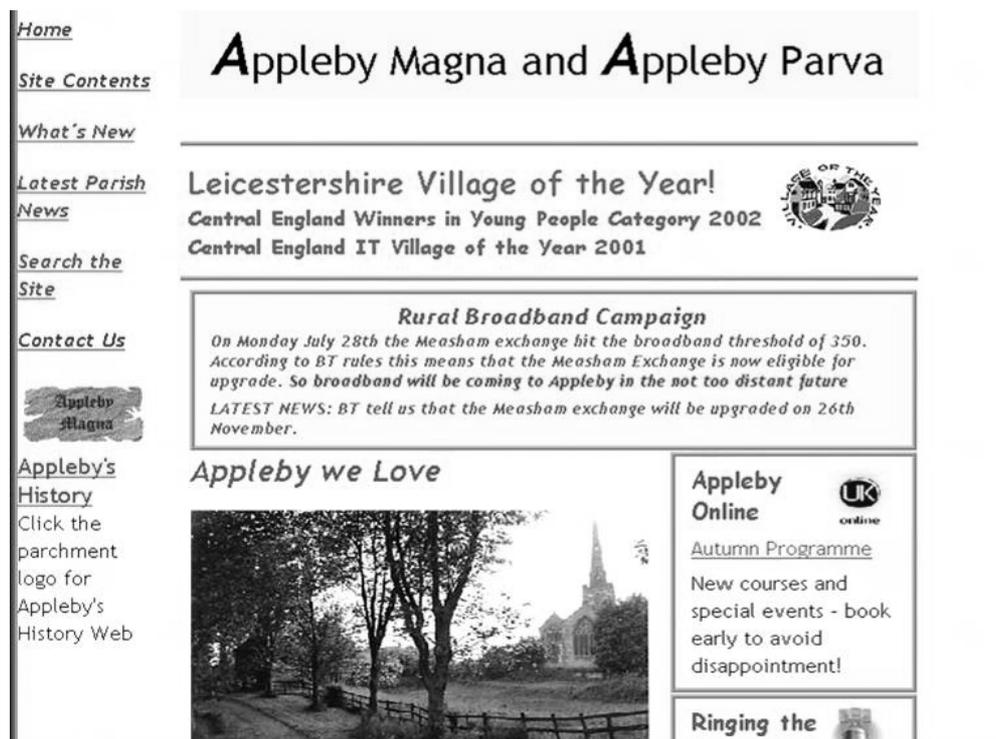


Figure 3. An example of an independent village website in the area

In addition to web-based research, face to face interviews were held with those responsible for the UK VILLAGES and LEICESTERSHIRE VILLAGES sites and with

some of those running independent sites.² These interviews covered a range of issues relating to the origins of their website, why it had taken the particular form it had (structure, design, funding etc.), their interest in local participation and views on how it could be encouraged, and how they saw their positioning relative to other websites also intending to represent these local places.

Evidence of Virtual Social Capital

This study was not intended to explore the role of community networks in 'real' community life. It was rather intended to explore the circumstances under which such community networks might exist, including any association with the characteristics of the community in terms of levels of real social capital. It was also intended to explore whether the 'technical' characteristics or the ownership of sites appeared to be significant in encouraging (particular types of) participation. Such participation is taken as key for a web presence to be seen as a site of virtual social capital.

The study found a range of independent sites which varied in the breadth and depth of community information and participation. The original analysis found a local group of churches which had created sites for 6 places and had included some broader community information. Local heritage and environment projects were the basis for 2 sites and a further 2 were created by local regeneration projects. Social entrepreneurs and local community groups had created sites for 6 places and a further 2 sites were originated by individuals or families. Seven places were making some use of the LEICESTERSHIRE VILLAGES sites through the then 'your pages' facility. However in only one case was this a standalone, relatively rich community facility (in one case the site simply linked through to the independent community site, in other cases there were individual postings relating to business services or to single societies or events). No 'community' use was made of the UK VILLAGES sites, although there were a few individual postings of business services.

Taken together these findings appeared to indicate relatively high levels of virtual social capital. However this was primarily of the 'bridging' type involving individual instrumental participation around the exchange of goods and services. This was particularly (though not exclusively in either direction) the case in relation to the multiple web presences created as part of the UK VILLAGES and the LEICESTERSHIRE RURAL PARTNERSHIP. Sites with a wide range of community activities represented virtually were relatively rare (less than 10% of the places explored) and predominantly (although again not exclusively) relating to the

² The data reported here is work in progress and to date has only involved those at the 'producer' end of these websites. There will be further interviews with local residents which are needed to address the participation issues more fully.

larger, more affluent settlements. In some cases this appeared to be simply contacts for different groups making it was difficult to determine the range of actual community participation. So in only a few cases were there any discussions of village issues, reports from community groups etc. There was no automatic mapping of the real onto the virtual with examples of places with apparently high real social capital but with little or no web presence and visa versa. In some cases these might be explained by a more detailed consideration of the characteristics of places and communities (including a richer measure of real social capital than the one used here) but it seems likely that the interventions of various regeneration bodies and the actions of individuals with distinctive skills are also intervening variables. The strongest cases did seem to involve the co-existence of rich and diverse real social capital with some more specific expertise in technical and design skills.

The second analysis, seven months later, acted as a check on any over-optimistic interpretation of the web-based analysis. In many cases descriptions of events remained in identical form despite the fact that they were now in the past. Similarly some sites, or elements within them, which had promised that they were in the process of development remained frozen in time. Nevertheless there were some developments, showing that a methodology which tracks changes over time can provide a better indication of live social capital (as opposed to both the institutionalised remnants of past activities, or a one-off initiative that never became fully embedded in community practice) than does one-off surveys.

Social Practices that sustain (virtual) Participation and Social Capital Building

Those running both the multiple sites discussed in this paper stressed that one of their objectives was local participation. For the local authority site this satisfied wider social objectives relating to community regeneration as well as more specific targets relating to internet access and participation in e-government transactions. The commercial organisation also saw themselves as providing a genuine resource for the community. However in addition such local information was a resource for their website, likely to increase its credibility as a provider of local information and increase visitor numbers. This in turn had proved useful for negotiating contracts with public sector bodies who wished to link into the data and / or have a presence on the site (a conscious decision had been made not to accept commercial advertising on the site since this was felt to detract from its community feel, but links with bodies such as the Post Office or Tourist Information were not seen to have this disadvantage).

Both bodies also stressed a range of advantages that they had over bottom up initiatives. These included their ability to appear early in search engine generated

lists of sites and the economies of scale they could achieve, both by using resources from a number of projects and through the replication of information across a range of websites that made updating relatively more efficient. They both also felt that participation in their sites was much easier than it was on the typical community site. By this they meant that contributors did not need to know anything about web design or software such as Frontpage. Instead they made their contribution more in the style of an email. However it is worth noting that this is a very 'technical' definition of 'easy to use' in that it does not take account of the social skills and confidence needed for this form of participation, nor of the sense of being part of something that might make such participation meaningful. It is also incidentally based on a view of participation in a community site not shared by the community activists interviewed. In general they did not see those who simply brought in photographs or a handwritten notice that they wanted on the website as not being full participants. One commented "I try to get them to scan it in but often they don't want to know, it scares them to death ... but it's the result, they see it up there and say 'hey that's my picture'. That's full participation".

UK VILLAGES felt that they had achieved good levels of local participation and stressed the numbers of posts they received and specific local sites where there was a lot of activity (however the area under consideration here did not have any such sites or high levels of participation). LEICESTERSHIRE VILLAGES was keen to get higher levels of participation and recognised that this did require some engagement with local communities rather than just waiting for it to happen automatically. They had taken photographs of all the places and used these to give the websites at least some distinctive local feel. There was also concern to engage 'community champions' although they lacked any clear strategy for identifying and reaching them. Interestingly they had rejected a route that might have given them regular contributions on matters of local interest by people who at least on some definition might be considered 'community champions'. This occurred as a result of the decision to provide a parallel set of websites relating to each location's Parish Council (the lowest tier of local government). The reasoning was that the Parish Council as a formal body should not be associated with the type of informal and perhaps more critical commentary that could be expected on a village site (in contrast many bottom up local sites would see Parish Council activities as a central part of their coverage)..

On the basis of this analysis it would appear the multiple identikit community website model has limited ability to engage community participation. In some cases this is likely to be, at least in part, because the locations targeted had very little going on in the way of 'real' social capital. If people do not identify in a social sense with the place where they are living then they are unlikely to want to participate in a website that defines itself in this way. In other cases there did appear to be real community activity (as defined by the presence of community

organisations) which did not 'translate' into virtual participation. In some cases it may be that the community's knowledge and use of the internet is insufficiently high for participation to occur without a much more developed community-based ICT project. However it may also be that this standardised model of local websites gives insufficient weight to the desire of communities to see themselves as distinctive from their neighbours and to choose their own way of representing their identity (the bounded solidarity aspect of social capital referred to earlier). This suggests a greater need to draw on concepts of community as a symbolic resource which Cohen (1985) argues is as much about articulating difference from one's neighbours as it is about articulating one's own shared values. This certainly seemed to be an issue from the perspective of one community activist who had introduced an interested group to the options of either having a site within the Leicestershire Villages format or designing their own. He was clear that the appeal of a website was that it incorporated their own design. More detailed, research would be needed to assess the balance between these explanations.

This is not to suggest that the bottom up initiatives were inevitably successful in translating 'real' social capital into a virtual presence or in creating a virtual presence in the absence of much evidence of social organisation. In a number of cases they too were unable to sustain any continuing or widespread community participation. In these cases it may well be the fact that those responsible for the sites were not themselves well integrated with the social networks of the place they were attempting to represent. In others it may just be the well established problems of sustaining initiatives for which there may well have been initial enthusiasm. Some local community sites which were well maintained were arguably stronger examples of communities of interest (for example in relation to environmental projects) than they were representations of the whole community. This is both a cautionary reminder of both the changing nature of communities (or as some would have it the myth of a form of community that has never really existed) and that any particular virtual representation of place is inevitably partial – and in a healthy real and virtual community contested!

The Wider Significance of Participation in Different types of Community Networks

It is important to relate such findings to an understanding of the terms of competition between the different types of sites identified and an analysis of its likely outcomes. Location based websites which have developed as the result of some bottom up initiative (either by someone resident in the place or by one or more community based organisation) are likely to have community participation and ownership as central operating principles. While top down sites owned by

the Local Authority or commercial organisations may solicit local content and contributors their format and the content is not likely to be under the ultimate control of the community. As can be seen these differences and other factors do not completely determine the extent of locally generated content but in general there is a connection between the type of site and the type of participation (if any) in favour of the independent sites.

This is an important finding since a number of commentators (Kubicek & Wagner, 2002; Carroll & Rosson, 2003) suggest that that bottom up community initiatives may be incorporated, taken over, or stifled by larger scale developments such as the multiple sites discussed here. This relates in part to their economic and other advantages detailed earlier but may also involve more active intervention. For example in this case one local body had taken the view that, since websites had been created for all areas by the Rural Partnership, grants relating to community ICT initiatives should be used to encourage the take up of such sites rather than to create alternatives.

The relative rarity of even community run sites which do engage widespread, forms of participation suggests the need for better understandings of the social practices (Brown and Duguid, 2002) which influence how such social outcomes are achieved in a variety of contexts. It is clear that the assumption that the provision of a website and a relatively simply technical means to upload information will result in the creation of community sites which will in their turn support local communities is ill founded. While this is unlikely to come as a surprise to those with experience of other examples 'community development' imposed from above, it is important to demonstrate the distinctiveness and significance of a different model of community networks if they are to survive.

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