

HOW HAVE SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTED THE INSTITUTIONS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE TRADITIONAL REPRESENTATIVE PRACTICES OF COUNCILLORS?

by

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Abstract

The thesis explores changes in local democracy through an analysis of the challenges for councillors created by the growing phenomenon of social media. New platforms for online dialogue such as Twitter and Facebook offer the potential for more participatory forms of democracy at the local level (Coleman and Blumler, 2009) and it might therefore be expected that councils and councillors would have been using these online platforms to increase engagement with citizens (Xenos and Moy, 2007). The thesis addresses the question of how councils have engaged with the new technologies and adds to current knowledge by building a normative picture of social media use in local government over a three year period. The impact of social media on the everyday roles of elected representatives and on their perceptions of accountabilities in a digitised environment is also examined and analysed using new institutionalist explanations of change (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013). Using rich descriptive case studies of four English local councils the thesis illustrates for the first time how councils' attempts to constrain councillors' use of social media are failing as existing control mechanisms weaken. The findings show that councils' responses to the challenges represented by the unmediated, informal and participatory nature of social media are creating spaces for innovation. The thesis demonstrates that these spaces have been seized by councillors identifying the political opportunities that are offered by social media. Within these spaces, or new arenas for political conversations, councillors are reshaping their roles outside the formal institutional structures. The utility of social media for councillors is seen here to outweigh potential problems and sanctions. The thesis provides a rich account of how councillors have used the political opportunities created by social media in different ways to strengthen the links with citizens, increase transparency and responsiveness and to reinforce their roles as leaders of place. The thesis concludes by drawing out the implications of these findings for institutional design in local government.

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Chapter One: Social Media in Context

Introduction

The thesis originates from an interest in how councillors manage their relationships with the communities they serve. It draws on the researcher's experience of over twenty-five years as a local government practitioner with a background in scrutiny, accountability and participatory democracy as well as an interest in the new technologies. That experience and interest prompted a desire to understand how the advent of the new conversational social media, such as Facebook and Twitter¹, were affecting councillors and local politics. Setting the background for this exploration was the claim that a networked public sphere could enhance democracy (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008) and conversely that the new technologies had a negative and fragmenting effect (Sunstein, 2007) on democracy. Coleman and Blumler (2009), Rheingold (2012) and Dutton *et al* (2013) are among those who have made a convincing case that digital practices, for good or ill, have already permeated all aspects of everyday life and this was the starting point for the thesis. If social media have permeated all aspects of life then what does that mean in the context of councillors and local government?

Research on the use of social media faces a set of initial challenges such as perceptions of the age profile of social media users, whether it constitutes a new political tool which elected representatives will embrace and employ and whether or not the use of social media in politics is genuinely new or simply a progression from other modes of political communication. Those initial concerns began to shift incrementally as the work for this thesis showed that there had been no academic studies of how councillors were using social media in their roles as elected representatives and that there was a wealth of material already in the public domain waiting to be analysed. Timing was also important. The research commenced just as the use of social media began to build Shirky (2011) and the question of how such use might be regulated became increasingly important as politicians found themselves caught out by their online campaign behaviour (Bruns and Highfield, 2013). At the same time both activists and ordinary citizens found that they could lobby and pressurise politicians in new ways (Chadwick, 2013:189). Questions about whether social media was relevant or suitable gave way to questions about what we really knew about how local politicians were using social media and how a deeper study of such a fast-moving phenomenon could be developed.

¹ Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly used social media platforms in councils (Spurrell, 2012).

The thesis uses the new phenomenon of social media to explore change in local democracy. Democracy at the local level, as Sweeting and Copus (2012) contended, is so much more than the familiar form of representative democracy that is created by the regular election of councillors. Elections, they concede, are at the core of local democracy, but they also argue convincingly that a fuller picture of local democracy only emerges through consideration of the different forms of democracy such as 'network democracy', 'market democracy' and 'participative democracy' which sit alongside the familiar forms of representative democracy (Sweeting and Copus, 2012:21). In this thesis the four forms of local democracy are further examined throughout the following chapters as the impact of social media on local democracy is explored.

The thesis also explores in some depth the potential of social media to affect the roles of councillors. The literature on the roles of councillors is extensive, but the definitive categorisation of the role of the representative councillor in a modern governance environment is still '*complex and unbounded*' as described by Copus (2016:5). It is this complex and unbounded terrain that this thesis seeks to occupy and populate with descriptions of how councillors are enacting their daily roles as representatives following the explosive increase in citizens' use of social media (see Chapter Three). Evidence suggests that councillors continue, even as the external environment around them changes, to prefer to operate in what Sweeting and Copus (2012:26) have described as a '*soft Burkean*' mode, where a degree of citizen participation is allowed, but elected members remain firmly in charge. The thesis provides an account of how councillors navigate and manage their roles within the new context of transparency, interaction and citizen voice which has been created with the advent of social media.

The introductory chapter sets the stage and scene, introduces the main themes and gives an indication of the rich descriptive material that will be found in each of the following acts or chapters. The chapter is organised into three sections. Section One explores the genesis of the research question in more depth and sets out the ambitions of the thesis. Section Two describes how the thesis is anchored within the theoretical frameworks of new institutionalism as a study of change and Section Three introduces each chapter with a brief summary of its focus and main themes.

Section One: Social media and local democracy

The broad aim of the thesis was to discover the impact of social media² and social networking (Athique, 2013:102) on local democracy and specifically the role of the councillor. The pairing of social media and local government might seem, at first sight, an odd juxtaposition. The modern practices of social media are very new, with the digital communication technologies having only been in existence for just over ten years, (Ellison and Hardey, 2014), while the modern institutions of local government have their origins in the early nineteenth century (Wilson and Game, 2002:50) and are consequently steeped in history and tradition. What fresh perspectives on local democracy could be gained from an exploration of the impact of social media use by councils and councillors?

Answering that question involves understanding just how councils and councillors have been coming to terms with the new digital technologies over the last ten years. With over 31 million British people reported as having a Facebook account (60 per cent of the population)³ and over 15 million active Twitter users claimed by the micro-blogging site Twitter⁴ (2016 figures), there was a need to understand whether the new media are affecting politics in the UK, particularly at the local level, especially as this areas has been under-researched (Hepburn, 2012:371). Given the uptake of social media by the general population it might have been expected that the uptake of social media by citizens would be mirrored by councils and councillors. It is accepted that digital practices, specifically the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter⁵, have already permeated everyday life (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Rheingold, 2012; Dutton *et al*, 2013).

Social media are used a variety of purposes, e.g. for the provision of peer-to-peer networked information through sites such as Netmums (Coleman and Blumler, 2009:127; Chadwick, 2012:38), for political campaigning by organisations such as 38 Degrees (Chadwick, 2013:189), as an active user-led tool for content creation (Bruns, 2008:74), or simply as a passive entertainment medium for looking at pictures (Dutton *et al*, 2013:25). As Xenos and Moy (2007:715) have commented, given the spread of the use of social media, it might be expected

² Social media are defined for the purpose of this thesis as a set of Internet enabled tools which allow users to network and collaborate with each other, exchange information and produce their own content for online publication.

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271349/facebook-users-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>

⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271350/twitter-users-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>

⁵ Facebook and Twitter are the social media platforms most commonly used by local councils (Spurrell, 2012).

that citizens' use of social media would extend into traditional democratic areas and would already be having observable '*direct and contingent effects*' on politicians and political life. Or, as Durose *et al* (2009:214) have suggested, is there a disjuncture between how local government and citizens are using the new technologies?

There is a need to understand more deeply the effect of social media use on politicians at the local level, councillors, embedded as they are within the rules, norms and cultures of their particular institutions (Schmitter, 2004:48; Copus and Erlingsson, 2013:53). Have locally elected representatives already adopted the new digital practices of their residents and voters, and if that is the case, what does that mean for local democracy and councillors' roles? The question of whether councillors were embracing Facebook and Twitter at the same rate and in the same ways as their voters was a compelling area for further exploration: were they blogging about case work, using selfies⁶ at council meetings as a form of digital representation, having unmediated online discussions with residents on policy directions or simply posting photographs of kittens? The varied roles played by elected members and the ways in which they interact with citizens have been well-documented over the last few decades, (Hecló, 1969; Dearlove 1973; Barron *et al*, 1991; Rao *et al*, 1994; Sweeting, 1999; Karlsson, 2012; Egner *et al* 2013; Klok and Denters, 2013; Copus 2016). Copus (2016:9) has identified how the roles of councillors have already been altered by recent shifts in forms of democracy from government towards governance and Haus and Sweeting (2006) have also argued that councillors now need to operate within different forms of democracy which they categorise as '*representative, user, network and participatory democracy*' (2006:271). The thesis utilises the notion of councillors having to operate within changing forms of democracy and extends its reach by considering the roles of councillors in relation to the phenomenon of social media⁷. How has social media changed the everyday roles of councillors?

Of particular interest to the researcher were the questions of how councillors were using the opportunities offered by social media to enhance their own legitimacy and accountability and how they were navigating the pitfalls and difficulties of the new media. As Enli and Skogerbø (2013) have indicated, social media:

⁶ Selfies are, as the name suggests, photographs of yourself (and others) usually taken on a mobile phone and shared via social media.

...represent semi-public, semi-private spaces for self-representation where borders between offline personal and online mediated relations are blurred (Enli & Thumin 2012). They allow politicians (and voters) to stage their public and private roles, and to shift between them seamlessly and more or less consciously and strategically (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013:759).

The quote above raises the issue of how councillors are managing the challenges to their privacy created by the blurring of the distinctions between private and public aspects of communication that have been identified as such a key feature of the new communicative technologies (Enli and Thumin, 2012:92; Rogstad, 2013:688)? The problem of how councillors could still retain a distinctive role as local leaders in the seemingly global and digitised environment of social media also offered another interesting area for exploration. What did 'local' really mean in a modern governance environment if political interactions were moving online? Chadwick (2012) has framed these concerns by asking:

If political representatives are expected to immerse themselves in these environments, what does this mean for the legitimacy of decision-making processes? How can we balance the well-meaning informational exuberance of political "amateurs" against the "expertise" of ... elected public servants? Are such categories as meaningful as they once were, now that online co-production is becoming embedded in political life? In short: who governs, and who ought to govern? (Chadwick, 2012:40).

Chadwick raises a number of interesting questions and they all lead to the need to understand how the informal and discursive norms of social media (Coleman and Blumler, 2009) might interact with the formal conventions and norms of local government life (Orr and Vince, 2009) or the '*institutional rules through which local democracy takes place*', as described by Lowndes *et al* (2001:1966). Ahlqvist *et al* (2010) argued that some common social media practices were already changing daily practices in other aspects of life:

...community-based communication and collaboration, rating, tagging, enriching messages and so on, are entering – some rapidly, some more slowly, some in a changed form – the physical space of daily life (Ahlqvist, 2010:3).

It might therefore be expected that the institutional arrangements in councils had already changed in order to adapt to the new technologies. The thesis tests this assumption by

exploring how the traditional practices in councils interacted with the adoption of social media by councillors.

Another objective for the research came from the need to understand the potential of social media to increase citizen participation in local government. The period covered by the researcher's own twenty-five year career as a senior manager in local government was characterised by debate about the public's alienation from political institutions and the need for democratic renewal and increased engagement with the public (see Leach and Wingfield, 1999; Burns, 2000; Copus, 2003; Barnes *et al*, 2007:22). It was a period which also saw a succession of centrally driven initiatives, all aimed at increasing public participation (Barnes *et al*, 2007). That those participatory initiatives met with mixed success (see Durose *et al*, 2009) was at least partly due to the tensions between representative and participatory systems of democracy (Leach and Wingfield, 1999; Hepburn, 2014:84). The potential for social media to further increase or diminish the tensions was of particular interest in this thesis. Copus (2003:49) has described the generally negative views that elected representatives hold about the involvement of citizens in actual decision making (as opposed to discursive processes) and the thesis explores the way in which the more participatory practices of social media affects councillors' responses to citizen engagement. Would the informal participatory practices of social media strengthen or challenge the accountability and legitimacy of elected representatives?

The task of developing and shaping a research question which could encompass and address these diverse issues started with the need to identify what changes were occurring within councils, when it came to social media. Were the initial expectations identified by Xenos and Moy (2007:715) that political institutions would be mirroring the social media practices of their citizens robust? That social media represented a new and under-researched phenomenon led initially to the selection of an open research question: *How are social media changing the roles of councillors in local government?* The openness of the initial question was deliberate in that it was designed to allow an exploratory approach that enabled an investigation of the nature of the phenomenon as well as tracking any changes that were observable in local government. The openness also allowed for a descriptive and analytical account of the operation of the constraining and facilitating factors relating to social media than might have been possible with a research question which was more narrowly focused. The research question was further

refined, thus: *How have social media affected the institutions of local government and the traditional representative practices of councillors?*

The institutions of local government were further defined for the purposes of this thesis as the rules and conventions (both council and political party) that regulate the behaviour of councillors. Defining the traditional representative practices of councillors was more difficult because there are competing views about how local representation can be enacted (Copus, 2010; Sweeting and Copus, 2013; Klok and Denters, 2013; Karlsson, 2013) and, as Copus (2016) has commented, the office of councillor can be considered as '*multi-dimensional*' (2016:13). The choice was therefore made to steer the study in the direction of two key concepts which are considered to be at the heart of democracy and the representative role: legitimacy (Heinelt *et al*, 2006) and accountability (Beetham, 1996; Karl, 2007) and to explore how social media use could enhance the legitimacy of councillors or increase the accountability of representatives to citizens.

The need to explore concepts of legitimacy and accountability led to further bounding of the scope of the research question by the decision to focus on local democracy between elections (Rubenstein, 2008:618; Esaiasson and Narud, 2013). Considering the impact of social media on everyday interactions between the public and local decision-makers was important because it had the potential to offer insights into relationship between followers on social media and voters. Although, as Judge (1999:20) has highlighted, political accountability can be seen in its simplest functional form as manifest only through elections, this work uses the modern sense of political accountability which encompasses the more participative forms of political control which citizens try to exert on representatives outside elections (Esaiasson and Narud, 2013:4). The issues of legitimacy, presence, trusteeship and local territorial accountability which are all identified by Esaiasson and Narud (2013) as important in '*between elections democracy*' emerge strongly in the later case study chapters.

Returning to the social media component of the research question, a simple working definition was used for the purposes of this thesis. Social media are defined by boyd and Ellison (2008:210) as a set of web based services that link individuals, allow them to construct public or semi-public profiles and to incorporate new information and communication tools. The chapters which follow unfold how each of these features is used in the daily interactions between citizens and elected representatives. The emphasis in this thesis is therefore not on the technological aspects of social media, but rather on the '*affordances*' (Enjolras and Steen-

Johnsen, 2012; Loader and Mercea, 2011; Ellison and Hardey, 2014), or enabling features, that social media bring to local democracy. These affordances are explored in more depth in Chapter Three, which aims to contribute to our understanding of how social media enabled political interactions on Facebook and Twitter can shape democratic practices at the very local level. Leading on from the discussion of the key components of the research question, the next issue to be addressed concerned the overall approach: what kind of study was this to be?

Section Two: a study of change

Providing an answer to the question which was posed at the end of the last section, lay in the wording of the research question itself which should clearly identify the work as a study of change in local government. The research question suggests an underlying hypothesis that evidence of change would emerge from this examination of the clash between the embedded institutional cultures of local government and the cultures of social media, but it was less clear at the beginning of the study what the nature of that change would be. Would it represent simply a modal shift in the channels of political communication or something rather more transformative? The possibility of finding very little evidence of change also existed: as Newman (2001) observed, path dependent organisations like councils have a tremendous capacity *'to co-opt, absorb or deflect new initiatives'* (Newman, 2001:28). Were social media simply intensifying existing institutional norms, or were they genuinely constitutive of something new? The research needed to establish what the drivers of change were and to identify the features which enabled the new digital cultures to be embraced by some local authorities while being rejected by others. What were the characteristic features of a council where change was being constrained and why?

The new institutionalist approach, and particularly the iteration of institutionalism that has been labelled as *'third phase institutionalism'* (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:40) was chosen as an organising approach because it particularly lent itself as a frame for a study of change which included both the organisations i.e. councils and the individual actors, i.e. councillors. The strait-jackets of the three historical strands of rational choice, historical and sociological institutionalism were rejected in favour of a more flexible approach which blurred the distinction between those schools of thought (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:116) and emphasised agential, incremental change (ibid:117). Third phase institutionalism was deemed useful for this study because it looks for explanations of change which allow for the often messy, multi-layered, incremental and uneven pace of change in organisations. Lowndes and

Roberts (2013) have proposed that both change and stability are '*actively constructed out of the ongoing interaction of actors, existing institutional constraints, and contextual challenges*' (2013:130).

Using the formulation above, the actors in this thesis are the elected representatives (councillors), the institutional constraints are the systems which regulate the behaviour of councillors and engagement with citizens in the councils and the contextual challenge is created by citizens' adoption of social media as a method of engaging with local democracy. In this conceptualisation change is seen as a set of multi-level and multi-layered institutional processes through which the behaviour of actors can be shaped and constrained over a period of time, through the gradual '*creation of new institutions and the demise of old institutions*' (Lowndes 1997:61). The relative forces of the enabling and constraining features of social media are understood through the setting out of the formal and informal rules, regulations and procedures of local government, categorised as '*rules, practices and narratives*' by Lowndes and Roberts (2013:52) and the challenges that are presented by the informal practices and cultures of social media. Concepts of layering and recombining drawn from the work of institutionalist scholars such as Streek and Thelen (2005), Crouch (2005) and Lowndes and Roberts (2013) were also harnessed in order to provide simple explanations of the messiness of the real life situations that emerged from the case study councils.

In addition to the explanations of change provided by new institutionalism, the thesis draws on theoretical approaches from the literature on social movements (Snow *et al*, 2007) to help understand the change processes at work (see Chapter Three). Incorporating social movement concepts into an institutional analysis of change is not a new idea (see Barnes *et al*, 2007:43; Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:125), but its use to gain new perspectives on social media use in local democracy further extends its reach as a tool for understanding institutional change. The usefulness of this combined approach is particularly evident in approaching and explaining new phenomena, as Campbell (2005), a social movement scholar, observed:

Key to this approach is the idea that movements confront a political opportunity structure, a set of formal and informal political conditions that encourage, discourage, channel and otherwise affect movement activity. Its particular utility in this context is as a way of describing and explaining a dynamic, innovative and challenging phenomenon (Campbell, 2005:44).

Social media have been described as having the potential to transform relations between members of the public and holder of political authority and enrich democracy (Coleman and Blumler, 2009:10, 11). The main work of this thesis is to establish whether, at the local level, that potential is realised and to understand the relationship between the traditional, hierarchical, rules driven, incumbent institutions of local government and the more participative, informal and transparent cultures and practices of social media.

The final task in setting up the study was to design an approach to data collection which would manage the complex job of collecting material that would illuminate the traditional institutional '*rules in use*' (Ostrom, 1999:38) as well as explaining the more recent and fast-moving phenomenon of social media. The problem was solved by the use of a twofold mixed methods approach (see Chapter Four for a full description). The first phase involved collecting quantitative data on social media use in local councils and this data was used to develop an initial typology (embracing, emerging, avoiding) which indicated emerging norms over a three year period as well as assisting in the final selection of the four case studies. The second phase of the data collection brought together deep and rich qualitative data incorporating interviews and observations in those case study councils. The span of the work across a three year period, as opposed to a simple data snapshot, allowed both comparisons across time (Pierson, 2004), important in a fast moving technological context and the identification of trends, as well as the uncovering of any shifts in actors' behaviour (Kriesi, 2007:75) that might be attributable to the pressures of social media.

Following this process of setting up and framing the whole study it became clear that the initial research question was too broad and open. The overall work needed to produce a typology of the ways that English councils and councillors were using social media, it needed to examine and analyse the patterns of use in relation to local democracy and it also needed to provide a rich description of the use of social media by councillors. The final research question therefore became:

How have social media affected the institutions of local government and the traditional representative practices of councillors?

The next section provides short summaries of the content of each chapter.

Section Three: Chapter summaries

The following section sets out a brief review of each of the chapters of the thesis as an introduction to the main issues that were the subject of the research and which are explored further within the thesis. The chapter reviews below also introduce the main concepts used and the models that are employed and explored throughout the thesis in order to provide an insight into what is examined in much more detail in each chapter.

Chapter Two Evolving and changing: councillor roles, legitimacy and accountability

Chapter Two locates the research firmly in local government and begins the investigation of social media related change in councils by setting out the current debate about the roles of elected representatives. It also highlights how the tensions created by the recent emphasis by successive governments on increasing citizen engagement at the local level have affected councils and councillors. The examination of the roles undertaken by councillors is located within the current debate about the existence of a '*democratic deficit*' (Pratchett, 2006:7) in the UK, which is characterised by low electoral turn-out and declining levels in citizens' trust in politicians (Hay and Stoker, 2009:226; Flinders, 2013:627). As Copus (2016) has indicated, the underlying message from central government has been that local government is:

somehow under-developed, in need of constant reshaping and reappraisal, disconnected from those represented... (Copus, 2016:2).

The chapter then moves on to an exploration of the twin concepts of legitimacy and accountability. Sources of legitimation for elected representatives between elections are discussed and types of legitimation are detailed (Howard and Sweeting, 2007; Haus, 2014): questions of legitimacy are key to understanding some of the utility of social media for councillors that emerges strongly in the later chapters. Chapter Two then introduces a discussion of the ways in which the original definitions of political accountability outside the ballot box have been expanded to incorporate ideas about individualisation, personalisation and responsiveness for politicians (Eulau and Karps, 1977; Denters and Klok, 2006; Rosanvallon, 2011; Eaiasson *et al*, 2013). Accountability is particularly important because, as Bovens (2014:4) has demonstrated, there is a '*relational and communicative core*' at the heart of accountability. The question of whether social media strengthen or weaken that core is addressed. The chapter sets out how councillors' behaviour is currently regulated and constrained using Lowndes' and Roberts' (2013:52) conceptualisation of the institutional

'rules, practices and narratives'. Each of the existing mechanisms is analysed and evaluated for its effectiveness in the current context in order to establish a base line from which to judge the impact of social media upon the effectiveness of these mechanisms in later chapters: which practices are discarded in response to the contentions of social media and which are adapted or converted?

In the chapter there is the construction of an argument, to be tested in the later empirical chapters, that the challenges and contentions created by the public's use of social media are forcing change in councils through the *'neglect'* (Streek and Thelen, 2005:31) of institutional rules and constraints. We also see how local politicians might seek to decouple themselves from the formal institutional rules within which they normally operate in order to create spaces for communication and experimentation outside the formal structures. These spaces for experimentation have previously been described by Hensmans (2003) as *'institutional voids — political spaces of legitimation'* (2003:366) and by Newman and Clarke (2009) as *'emergent spaces of public engagement and action'* (Newman and Clarke, 2009:10). The question of what might be driving or enabling the development of these spaces for experimentation is further addressed in the subsequent chapter which introduces the literature on social media and demonstrates how the use of unmediated digital communication between citizen and elected representative is contesting the current norms of regulation and control in local government.

Chapter Three: Overlapping terrains: the interface between council institutions and social media

Chapter Three brings in the new technologies and explores the interface between council institutions and social media. The scene is set with an account of the polarised debate about the contribution of social media to democracy: is it a genuinely disruptive technology with the potential to change democracy or simply a new communication channel which sits alongside emails and websites? The two extremes (and the myths which often accompany the debate) are evaluated and compared. The pragmatic position favoured by Coleman and Blumler (2009) is adopted: they argued that the new technology offers the potential to transform relations between the public and holders of political authority by challenging elites and inverting the *'few to many architecture of the broadcast age'* (2009:8). The literature on social media is reviewed to provide a full account of the features of social media which relate to its democratic potential such as: shrinking time and distance between citizen and representative; reducing reduce the hegemony of *elites* in controlling and mediating the forms of public

participation; mobilising opinion, providing scale and volume to political discourse in a way that was previously unthinkable; and creating a public that is more informed about politics and policy.

Having set out the overall terrain occupied by social media as well as the current debates about its democratic potential, Chapter Three then examines the situation in English councils. How are councils coping and how are councillors responding to social media? The adoption of social media by the general public is described and the dissonance between this public adoption and use and that of councils is introduced. The boundaries of the study are further defined, for the purpose of the study, with the selected focus being on the use of social media by elected representatives in their local democratic roles rather than on the service provision or consumer side of council life. The tensions between the informal cultures of social media and the more formal cultures of local government are identified and the key themes of transparency, responsiveness, personalisation and leadership of place begin to emerge. These themes set the context for the subsequent case study chapters. However, before the case studies, a short chapter on how the methodological questions were handled is presented.

Chapter Four: Methodological approaches to understanding the impact of social media on councils and councillors.

Chapter Four outlines the theoretical approaches which were applied: new institutionalism and social movement theory. In addition, the rationale for choosing a mixed methods design is explained and defended. The choice of mixed methods was primarily related to three features which were peculiar to this study: the fast-moving nature of the technologies which meant social media were changing throughout the study, the lack of a substantial body of existing academic material and the open and exploratory nature of the research question. The decision to divide the data collection into two phases, quantitative and qualitative, is described and explained and the choice of mixed methods is critically reviewed. The strengths and limitations of the use of a qualitative case study approach in the second half of the data collection exercise are explored and the strategic selection of the four case study councils is outlined. The specific ethical questions relating to the use of digital information available in the public domain are also covered.

Chapter Five: Lansbury: a case study of a connected and metropolitan council?

Chapter Five is the first of the three case study chapters. It offers an account of the impact of social media on a Labour controlled London Borough. Lansbury council is categorised, using the typology outlined in Chapter Four as an '*embracing*' council in the vanguard of change. The chapter identifies some of the specific constraining mechanisms and enabling features which are shaping institutional life within the council. Direct quotations are used to illustrate how the roles of councillors are beginning to be re-shaped as citizens intensified their use of social media. The chapter also highlights how councillors' practices were seen to be decoupled (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2011:78) from the council's formal systems. The chapter shows that in spite of sanctions imposed on councillors (particularly through council's standard regimes) they continued to use social media and it also illustrates the institutional neglect of the existing rules or conventions around participation and political communication. The chapter uses interview data to explore how a critical mass of digitally confident councillors was harnessing the enabling features of social media in order to reshape their day to day practices as elected representatives.

The chapter documents how existing council rules and practices in Lansbury had been, over time, challenged by the compelling social media '*affordances*' (Enjolras *et al*, 2012:891) of place, personalisation and responsiveness (see Chapter Three). The idea that the pressure from external use of social media in Lansbury was resulting in a decoupling of councillors' practices from the formal systems of accountability is introduced and illustrated with direct quotations. The reframing of democratic communications between residents and representatives which is afforded by social media in Lansbury can be seen as an example of '*drifting*' (Streek and Thelen, 2005:31) towards longer term change. The chapter identifies the ever present possibility of the '*conversion*' (Streek and Thelen, 2005:31) of former practices as Labour Party officials introduce, for the first time, informal social media protocols in an attempt to control councillors' behaviour online. The chapter focuses on evidence that change in Lansbury, initially decoupled and taking place in experimental spaces outside the formal systems, was beginning to be incorporated into councillors' everyday repertoires. The chapter concludes by asking if the changing picture which emerged from these interviews and observations was simply an artefact of Lansbury's critical mass of digitally confident councillors and its urban metropolitan setting and whether these features might also emerge in a very different type of council.

Chapter Six: Cadwaller, a case study of the journey from opposition to incumbency.

The chapter is the second empirical chapter and concerns a very different type of council to that of Lansbury. The case study is of a large, rural, sparsely populated, former county council, restructured in 2009 as a unitary council. The organisational biography of the council is introduced and its distinctive features, including its position on the periphery of the English mainland, are described in detail. While Cadwaller largely shares the same underlying functions as Lansbury, these are seen to be executed in a different political environment: initially Conservative controlled and then moving to a Liberal Democrat and Independent coalition. At first sight this rural council provides a marked contrast to the metropolitan council which was introduced in the previous chapter in relation to its demographics, its politics and its interactions with central government. In spite of those differences this chapter demonstrates that Cadwaller shares many of the features of its urban comparator in relation to social media.

The chapter strengthens the argument that councillors were finding the utility of social media compelling as a way of increasing their democratic legitimacy, regardless of different organisational histories. Social media were identified as enhancing the place-based aspects of being a councillor, strengthening identity as a local leader. The characteristics of social media were also shown in Cadwaller to be assisting in the strengthening of councillors' representative roles, particularly through the increase in personalisation and responsiveness. Evidence is provided that for Cadwaller councillors social media practices were not just a key part of their resistance to the controlling incumbent administration, but also, over time, an important component of how they engaged with local citizens, aggregated preferences and shaped policy narratives.

Chapter Seven: Repertoires of resistance in two councils.

Chapter Seven takes a different approach from the previous case study chapters by presenting the two remaining case studies in a combined chapter. The rationale for this is that although the chapter gives an account of two very different councils in terms of political control, structure and organisational history, those councils emerged from the field work as sharing so many common features and patterns of behaviour in relation to social media that presenting them separately would have been repetitious. The second reason is that presenting the two case studies together within the same chapter was an effective way of illustrating the strength

of common themes and, in addition, providing the opportunity to analyse rival propositions about the role of elites in relation to the adoption and impact of social media.

Shawborough and Wallingsworth were originally identified in the case study selection process as being of particular interest, partly because they were not early adopter councils but rather councils which were just beginning to engage with social media and therefore more typical of the majority of councils in the sample set. In addition, Wallingsworth Council was selected because it provided the opportunity to examine whether the adoption of the mayoral system made a difference: see Copus (2012) and Hambleton and Sweeting (2004) for a more detailed description of this mayoral political management model) to uses of social media. Copus (2008) set out the early prediction that accountability could become more public and open with the election of well-known and visible mayoral figures (Copus, 2008:591) and the question of whether social media could play a part in increasing profile and local legitimacy was considered. The leaders of Shawborough and Wallingsworth were both active users and promoters of social media and their inclusion allowed an exploration of whether innovation by the leaders alone, '*elite sponsorship*' (Lounsbury *et al*, 2003:94) would be sufficient to drive the pace of change. The chapter goes on to document the constraining features that were present in the two organisations which, taken together, acted to limit the extension of the social media practices modelled by the leaders.

The chapter illustrates how '*context specific and deeply contingent*' (Lowndes and Roberts 2013:144) social media related change was in these two councils. This chapter supports the arguments of Pratchett (2006) and Coleman and Blumler (2009) that technologies on their own cannot support democratic renewal. It also reinforces the argument made by Koopmans (2004:24), a social movement scholar, that the availability of political opportunities does not automatically lead to change and it is his argument that it is the dynamic interaction or combination of contentions that ultimately result in transformative change that is elaborated in the final chapter.

Chapter eight: From the margins to the centre

The chapter brings together the empirical data (both quantitative and qualitative) from the previous chapters and begins the task of analysing the findings using a new institutionalist framework. What do the findings tell us about social media related change in local government? The chapter supports the case made early in the thesis: that the contentions of

social media do not represent a form of punctuated equilibrium in which change is a response to conflict or external shock (Jones and Baumgartner, 2012), but rather that they represent something closer to Streek and Thelen's (2005) conceptualisation of gradual change where organisations pass through phases of '*displacement*', '*layering*', '*drift*' and '*conversion*' (2005:31). The findings provide examples of all of these phases and also illustrate how each phase can co-exist as councils and councillors respond differently to their local environments.

The chapter provides evidence from the research of institutional resistance to change and of strong path dependency: there are examples of the traditional repertoires of institutional control, such as banning the use of Facebook and Twitter, the sanctioning of councillors through the use of the standards regime and the suppression of tweeting in council meetings in all the case study councils. As was illustrated in Chapter Seven, the contentions created by the public's use of social media, taken as a purely technological phenomenon, were not enough to precipitate change in councils and overcome institutional resistance. What was evident from the findings was that the efforts of young, enthusiastic council communications officers were insufficient to drive the adoption of social media and it was also clear that that *elite* sponsorship of social media by politicians, including the elected mayor, could not of itself bring about change: councillors were seen to be particularly resistant to top-down attempts to force particular social media practices.

The chapter highlights the challenges to that picture of resistance and path dependency and this came from several directions. The main challenge is external: the inescapable fact of the pervasiveness of social media in other aspects of daily life represented a form of social movement which exerted external pressure and made claims on the existing systems of local democracy. Those pressures from the public, the research showed, called forth responses from both councils and councillors, responses of resistance as outlined in the previous paragraph, but also responses which acknowledged the new opportunities afforded by social media. The research showed that digitally confident councillors were adapting social media to their own particular circumstances. The chapter reveals the explanations for the compelling utility of social media for councillors in their interactions with citizens, in social media's role in shrinking the perception of social space between citizen and representative; in its enhancement of the territorially based '*place-making, place marketing and place shaping*' (Hambleton, 2015:107) locality leadership roles of elected councillors; in its amplification of scale and velocity in political communication; and its effect on accountability and legitimacy. All of these features

play a part in enabling councillors to operate more effectively within what Haus and Sweeting (2006:271) have categorised as the more '*participatory democracy*' that characterises the current governance environment.

The final chapter in the thesis emphasises the opening up of new spaces within which looser, more conversational forms of local democracy could be created. The research revealed how the weakening of the current regulatory systems governing interactions between councillors and citizens had allowed '*cracks in the institutional fabric*' (Lowndes and Wilson, 2013:127), where councillors could experiment with social media without fear of sanctions. Lowndes (2005) has previously suggested that entrepreneurial actors (here, the digitally confident councillors) can use these informal spaces to extend their repertoires as representatives through strategies of '*remembering*', '*borrowing*' and '*sharing*' (Lowndes 2005:299).

The findings are used to engage speculate about how councils (and parties) might manage to control digital interactions with citizens in the future. What new rules might emerge from the current practices of early adopter councils and digitally confident councillors? That current rules will have to change is supported by the research, but also by the work of Goodin (2008:155), who has argued that the modern dispersed network modes of governance will mean that politicians would have to switch to more '*discursive forms of accountability*'. The chapter considers the options for the future shaping of institutional rules, '*rules in use*' (Ostrom, 1986:11) in relation to the use of social media.

Conclusion: Towards the mainstream

The introduction to this thesis provides some indications of the rich and varied terrain that will be covered in the subsequent chapters. The idea that social media practices are gaining ground and into the mainstream becomes more apparent as each chapter unfolds. During the period of the research perceptions of social media could already be seen moving from the trivial and largely irrelevant towards becoming a core part of local political life, partly realising the democratic potential of the Internet as envisaged by Coleman and Blumler (2009):

There is scope for the online civic commons to become an integral and accepted part of the representative process. Local government councils, which have been weakened in terms of both powers and legitimacy in recent decades, could use their local commons to re-establish direct communication with communities. (2009:171).

The thesis establishes for the first time that the changes envisaged above by Coleman and Blumler (2009) were already gaining ground in local government as councillors found new ways of shaping and enacting their everyday interactions with the public.

The introductory chapter has brought forward the idea that it was the convergence of a set of interdependent processes or interactions (Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008:649) which began to create an environment in which social media use could develop and grow within the democratic sphere. The later chapters will unfold the different pressures created by the increasing personalisation of politics (Denters and Klok, 2013:675), the emergence of more fluid and networked decision making environments (Haus and Sweeting, 2006) as well as the pressure to increase participation in local government (Durose *et al*, 2009). In the subsequent chapters we will see how councillors have had to learn how to operate in this new digitised environment for maximum effect and how councils are trying to adapt their existing modes of operation accordingly.

The evidence in this thesis suggests that change is already under way; that the new participatory norms of social media have already begun to take root in local democratic life and that there is no going back. The next chapter sets out how those social media related changes can be located within an understanding of the complex and evolving role of the councillor. The focus of the next chapter is primarily on issues of legitimacy and accountability, core concepts at the heart of understanding the elected representative role in modern governance. If social media have indeed opened up new spaces for citizens to engage in direct dialogue with councillors outside the well-trodden paths of meetings, ward surgeries and organised consultations, has it also changed the nature of legitimacy and accountability? The next chapter explores the challenges represented by social media to the traditional forms of local government.

Chapter Two: Evolving and changing: councillor roles, legitimacy and accountability

Introduction

The first chapter introduced the question of what might be changing for councils, and for councillors, as a result of social media. The second chapter explores the potential for social media related change by considering the particular role of the councillor and asks whether citizens' use of social media is acting to change and disrupt those roles, particularly in relation to legitimacy and accountability. It is the first of two theoretical and literature review chapters which together present the context for this thesis. The two chapters also act together to set the scene for the analysis of the subsequent empirical findings by locating the work within the theoretical perspective of new institutionalism.

In this study new institutionalism is harnessed for its power in explaining how change takes place at organisational level and in the actual day to day practices of councillors (Lowndes, 1996:190). For Lowndes and Roberts (2013) systems are the formal and informal patterns of '*rules, practices and narratives*' that make up institutional life (2013:46). In this chapter the '*well-developed institutions*' (Olsen, 2013:447) of local government life, such as formal constitutions, are illustrated but informal institutional behaviours are also highlighted as important in change processes. Described by Ostrom (1986:11) as '*rules in use*' and by Karlsson as '*hidden constitutions*' (2013:681), the informal rules that shape councillor behaviour are not necessarily written down, but nonetheless regulate and shape political practice. It is the study of these informal rules that new institutionalists, such as Lowndes, have brought back firmly into the analysis of political organisations:

New institutionalism moves beyond the descriptive traditions of previous institutional approaches. It is interested less in describing formal structures and constitutions, and more in unearthing the 'rules of the game' that influence behaviour (Lowndes, 2008:55).

In order to understand how the rules of the game are changing the chapter focuses on the roles of councillors, with a particular emphasis on how social media are affecting councillors' own concepts of representation and participation. The ways in which social media are having an impact on councillors' views of legitimacy and accountability are also explored in depth as a

way of understanding how existing councillor roles, legitimacy and accountability might be disrupted by social media. This chapter is organised into four sections.

The first section explores the literature on the roles of councillors, both internal and external (Egner *et al*, 2013:12) and identifies some of the pressures on those roles, particularly those created by recent trends in network governance (Rhodes, 2003:101; Sørensen and Torfing, 2009:239) and by an increased emphasis on participatory governance arrangements within democratic systems (Gemetis *et al*, 2006:15). The concept of democratic legitimacy is explored in relation to the question of the potential of social media to provide new sources of legitimacy for councillors. Haus and Heinelt (2005:15), drawing on Scharpf (1999), have identified three processes of legitimation, input and throughput and these categories used in this work to understand how traditional sources of legitimation might be challenged by citizens' social media use between elections.

The second section draws upon theories of representation from Pitkin (1967) and Judge (1999) to explore how councillors might be under pressure to re-frame their roles and their accountabilities in an increasingly digitised and interactive environment. The link between the role of the elected representatives and concepts of accountability is demonstrated, and the potential of social media to increase the legitimacy of councillors through the strengthening of local territorial identities is explored in order to highlight the potential of social media to have an impact on councillors, in particular on their attitudes to increased citizen participation in local government. As Howard and Sweeting (2007) have suggested, the demands of modern local government mean that it is now:

...necessary to combine elements of representative democracy and participatory democracy in local governance if the legitimation provided by participation, accountability and effectiveness are to be given equal weight (Howard and Sweeting, 2007:647).

Concepts of accountability are then given more detailed attention in the third section, partly because of the importance of elements such as transparency and responsiveness for community leadership, (see Haus and Heinelt, 2005:24 and Klausen and Sweeting, 2005).

The fourth and final section draws on a variety of sources as well as the experience and tacit knowledge of the researcher to offer a descriptive account of the current systems that are used to control and regulate the accountability of councillors in English councils. The potential

for change to be precipitated through the interaction of the embedded norms and conventions of local government life and the new, more open and participative norms contributed by social media are further highlighted. Here the discussion centres on the historical view that councillors' role perceptions and behaviour in relation to public participation are determined by their attitudes to democracy and the nature of representation as well as by institutional pressures (Heinelt, 2013:634, Copus, 2003:33). The account given in this chapter supports the idea that the participative pressures created by social media have real potential to disrupt the existing systems of governance. The exploration of that idea begins first with a review of the relevant literature on the role of the councillor in English local government.

Section One: The role of the councillor

In examining the question of whether social media have the potential to reshape the traditional forms of representation this section locates the discussion firmly within the literature on representation. It does this to explore whether social media have an impact upon the ways in which elected representatives might conceptualise and consequently enact their own roles and accountabilities in their daily political lives? Particular attention in the review was given to the question of whether social media was contributing towards a move away from traditional and formal concepts of democratic accountability towards more modern and liquid concepts of 'responsiveness' (Rao, 1998; Baumann, 2007; Eulau and Karps, 2009; Rosanvallon, 2011). The potentially disruptive qualities of social media, which are considered in much greater detail in the next chapter, relate to its dimensions of informality, openness, speed, virality and interactivity (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren 2013; Chadwick, 2013).

The starting place for understanding the potential for disruption to the existing roles of councillors was a review of the literature on the classic styles of representation and on the classic roles of '*Trustees, Delegates and Politicos*' identified by Eulau *et al* (1959) and Wahlke *et al* (1962) and extended by Rao (1998). The categorisations of types of elected representative are conceptualised around different ideas about the nature and purpose of representation: juristic representation involving some form of contractual relationship between the representative and others, sociological representation where the representative is typical of the group that he or she represents and political representation which has some of the features of the two previous categorisations but also accepts the wider interests of a group, such as a political party, Rao (1998), Sartori (1968). These ideas have been further categorised into three typical styles of representation: trustees, delegates and party soldiers

(Karlsson, 2013:98; Sweeting and Copus, 2013:123). In this categorisation, 'trustees' can be free agents in the Burkean sense of being able to use their own judgement (Pitkin 1967:174; Judge, 1999:47), 'delegates' who have been strongly mandated by those who elected them, constraining their ability to act as independent agents (Judge, 1999:96), or party soldiers who follow the party line (Karlsson, 2013:98). Rao (1998:31) also developed an additional category of 'politicos' who are seen as able to be more flexible in their style of operation, incorporating some elements of both of the other categories.

Klok and Denters (2013) usefully explored the role perceptions of councillors, identifying the importance of different tasks and contrasting that with actual role behaviour (2013:73). Sweeting and Copus (2013), found that in a representative system there was some relationship between types of councillor and attitudes to increased participation by citizens, with those assuming the trustee role least likely to consult with constituents: they also found that when decision-making functions were threatened, party soldiers were also likely to be hostile to different participation mechanisms (Sweeting and Copus, 2013:135). In addition Sweeting and Copus (2013) found that local politicians who identified themselves as being on the right were more hostile to increased engagement with citizens, but more importantly, for the purposes of this thesis, they also found that councillors' actual behaviour indicated limited support for increased participation by citizens. The significance of this finding will be seen in the examples given in the case studies of the direct forms of engagement between representative and citizen which are enabled by social media.

Rao (1998:31), in her work at the local level of politics, argued that the traditional categorisation of trustees, delegates and politicos was too rigid and that representation should be seen more as a continuum of styles. She also contended, following a study of councillors' own perceptions of their roles, that neither councillors themselves nor the public were clear about their role as representatives, concluding that:

Indeed, there is no single role for the elected representative in British local government
(Rao, 1998:29).

That the roles of councillors in modern local governance are wide ranging and under pressure from participative democratic trends was further supported in the literature by the series of essays in Egner *et al* (2013), in which the varied roles played by councillors across Europe were

reviewed and analysed. The next section goes on to examine those roles more closely in relation to the specific question of legitimacy.

Section Two: Sources of legitimation for elected representatives

The role of the modern councillor, the last section concluded, is wide ranging and under pressure from participative trends and this has particular implications for the sources of legitimacy for councillors outside elections. Esaiasson and Narud (2013) argue that the representative relationship changes after the election is over, shifting to a focus on decision-making and the justifying of actions to the public (2013:3) in order to maintain legitimacy. Developing on from Scharpf (1999) and Haus and Heinelt (2005), Howard and Sweeting (2007) identify three core processes which can act as sources of legitimacy for councillors: '*input-legitimation*' through participation and the demonstration of popular consent, '*throughput-legitimation*' through transparency and accountability and '*output-legitimation*' through effectiveness and promotion of the common good (Howard and Sweeting, 2007:636). These are discussed in turn below.

Input-legitimation

With regard to participation, the literature reveals that public bodies such as councils and the councillors often act as gatekeepers seeking to control participatory initiatives (Barnes *et al*, 2007; Karlsson, 2012). In addition, Copus (2010) in his work on citizen engagement in local government, has reminded us that councillors' continued anxiety about an increased emphasis on participation in modern governance is shared across the political spectrum and is not confined to one political party. He concludes that each of the different types of representative ultimately share the same negative attitudes towards the increasing trend of emphasising citizen participation mechanisms particularly around the final making of a decision (Copus, 2010:587; Sweeting and Copus, 2013:134). Copus argued that that the way in which councillors viewed or responded to local issues was partly determined by their position on the continuum of trustees, delegates and politicians, with some councillors being expected to feel the pull of party, or ideology, more than the pull of local ward issues (Copus, 2004: 184). Copus argued that:

Indeed, the research here indicates that while councillors are supportive of greater involvement, their determination to retain decision-making power and their adherence

to a Burkean interpretation of representation, could act as a barrier to developing the community advocate role and to greater citizen involvement. (Copus, 2003:49).

In spite of the reluctance from councillors, the literature suggests that increasing participation actually increases legitimation for elected representatives. Klausen *et al's* (2006) study of thirty-two policy initiatives in Europe and New Zealand showed that *'...deliberative/selective community involvement is associated with high levels of legitimation...'* (2006:204). Vabo and Aars (2013) equally concluded that legitimation *'needs to rest on some kind of authentic participation'* (2013:707) and argued that authenticity comes from allowing the possibility of dissenting voices to be heard in the process of local policy formulation. Haus and Sweeting (2006) also argued that leaders can further enhance *'public legitimacy by facilitating the activation of formerly passive, marginalised and alienated groups'* (2006:280). Social media, it is suggested in this thesis, is one vehicle through which participation, and particularly the participation of dissenting voices, might be strengthened and the concept of strengthening legitimacy through online participation, allowing dialogue and interaction with different citizens and community groups, is one that is followed up in the next chapter.

Through-put legitimation

With regard to transparency, Haus and Heinelt (2004) highlighted the need for openness and visibility in modern governance systems in which the:

...social environment has to understand how measures are taken and who is responsible for them (Haus and Heinelt, 2004:15).

Social media provides open and transparent platforms for political discourse which makes it difficult for councillors who use online channels to shield their activities from public view or criticism. This transparency has the potential to make it difficult for councillors to balance their accountabilities to council and party on one hand and local citizens on the other. Councillors, for example, have traditionally been able to give the appearance of opposition to a local planning application in their ward or to a controversial policy when speaking to objectors in their wards while in fact being whipped into voting with the party line on the final decision. The high visibility and virality of social media means this is more difficult and runs the risk of

potential reputational damage for politicians (the so-called Twitterstorm⁸ is one example) and accusations of inauthenticity. How citizens might evaluate the authenticity of politicians in a digitised environment is illustrated later in the case study chapters when councillors report on the challenges of maintaining legitimacy online with multiple differentiated audiences. The next part of the discussion about the salience of the different sources of legitimation for councillors moves on to another important aspect of social media driven change, that relating to responsiveness.

Output legitimation

Ideas about responsiveness are important to this thesis because of the enabling features of social media, allowing councillors, if they so choose, to increase the speed with which they react to citizens. With regard to effectiveness, Denters and Klok (2006:46) make the case that local political leaders, in a modern governance setting, seek to enhance their legitimacy by increasing their accountability through delivery and responsiveness. Rao (1998) has argued that responsiveness has been emerging as a significant feature of local democracy in recent years: her analysis contends that the demand for local representativeness being replaced by increased demands on elected members to demonstrate responsibility (shaping policy, showing local leadership) and increased responsiveness. Rao termed this trend '*issue congruence*' (1998:20): where councillors were increasingly expected to act in their ward interests, the common good, regardless of personal or party considerations. Haus (2014) offered a critique of the legitimacy expectations generated by the concept of output legitimation, arguing that it pushes towards a market influenced interpretation of legitimation as mainly achievable through performance and Copus (2014) reinforced this perspective with a similar assessment of the trend towards legitimation through service delivery: the politics of provision (2014:1).

The issues of temporality must also be considered in relation to the search for legitimacy through increased responsiveness, given the speed of social media (Panagiotopoulos and Sams, 2011). That speed has the potential to re-shape existing practices: one example might be the abandoning of the writing of an email or attending councillors' surgeries, in favour of swifter, more direct, forms of contact such as posting on Twitter or Facebook. The former temporal conventions in local authorities, where letters and emails are responded to within

⁸ Twitterstorm is the term given to a tweet which is widely circulated and gives rise to pressure and potentially controversial debate.

ten working days are therefore challenged by the immediacy and 'always-on' nature of social media (Baron, 2008; Loader and Mercea, 2011; Dutton, 2013). The temporal norms of social media can be seen to present a challenge to the monthly rhythms of local government life (Rogers, 2010) and this question of the disrupting effect of the velocity of the new technologies is illustrated in the later case study chapters, particularly in the description of councillors' online behaviour in Chapter Five. Traditionally councillors may have interacted with citizens at pre-defined intervals which were mutually understood as the proper way of doing things, for example through questions at monthly council meetings, or by correspondence in a weekly newspaper. Rogers (2010:50) contrasts this traditional temporal rhythm to the immediacy of the new rhythms created by social media where the online accounts of politicians on Twitter and Facebook may be checked by citizens several times throughout the day and councillors may be expected to respond very quickly.

Online messages are generally visible to others in a shared communicative space (Loader and Mercea, 2011; Ellison and Hardey, 2013) and this visibility puts pressure on the representative to reply quickly. As one councillor in a London borough put it:

I certainly respond quicker on Twitter to residents who have got in touch with me. I will respond because I know it is public, as opposed to if someone gets me on my email (Councillor, Lansbury Interviewee, 08).

The literature suggested that another way of increasing legitimacy was by the visible formation of a strong local identity. Hambleton and Sweeting (2004:482) identified that developing a 'distinctive local response' was a key aspect of legitimacy for politicians seeking to generate trust from the wider population and the question of how social media might act to enhance the local identity and responsiveness of councillors is explored in more depth in the next chapter.

Overall, addressing the literature on legitimacy has surfaced several themes for further exploration in understanding the potential for social media to disrupt the existing systems, including visibility and transparency, the promotion of responsiveness and the search for legitimacy through enhancement of a local, authentic identity. All of these dimensions of legitimacy, it is argued, are already being shaped by the contentions of social media, but in order to understand the mechanisms of change relating to social media, some more detailed

attention must first be given to the role of accountability mechanisms as core components of local governance. Attention turns firstly to the concepts of accountability.

Section Three: Political accountability: definitions, types and conditions

Definitions of accountability

Day and Klein (1987) described the history of accountability as stretching back to Athens in fifth century BC: for them accountability started with '*individuals in simple societies*' and ended with '*institutions in complex societies*' (1987:4). That finding modern definitions of public accountability which are appropriate for the twenty first century is difficult, particularly in the context of an increasingly fragmented and pluralistic public sector, is supported by the work of Bovens *et al* (2014) who identified the bewildering diversity of definitions. Definitions of accountability are of interest in this thesis because social media has the potential to open up new channels for the public to call citizens to account. In a more digitised society the often somewhat inchoate demands of the public that someone must be held to account can be published online in seconds. The weight given to traditional forms of accountability in local government, it will be seen in this thesis, is likely to shift and take new forms when citizens have access to the communicative immediacy and interactivity of social media.

Accountability for the purposes of this thesis is defined through the two different usages of accountability used by Bovens (2014), '*accountability as a virtue and accountability as a mechanism*' (Bovens *et al*, 2014:7) and both of these strands are used to evoke different dimensions of local government life. The literature on the definitions of accountability is reviewed in order to situate the role of the councillor in local decision-making processes (see Klok and Denters, 2013:63). Using Schmitter (1991), and Rubenstein (2007), types of, and conditions for, accountability within the complex and plural systems of modern governance are also reviewed in order to understand how social media is affecting how councillors engage with new forms of citizen participation. Accountability emerges overall in this chapter as a kind of palimpsest: each new definition is written or layered on top of the old definition while still retaining its fundamental sense of simply giving an account or providing a reckoning (Day and Klein, 1987:6; Bovens *et al*, 2014:3).

Complex modern societies have called forth the need for complex and multi-level re-workings of both the conceptual and practical definitions of accountability. The difficulty of finding settled definitions of this elusive concept can be illustrated by the variety of terms coined in

recent years to describe modern political accountability: accountability has been described by Mulgan as a *'complex and chameleon-like term'*, (2000:555); by Aars and Fimerite as *'stretched'* (2005:239) and by Sullivan as now involving *'many hands'* (2003:353). Koppell (2005) labelled the current portmanteau approach to defining accountability in the public sector as a *'multiple accountabilities disorder'* (2005:94) and argued that the concept of accountability was becoming meaningless as a result. Bovens (2010) was also sceptical, describing accountability as an ever-expanding concept and suggesting that:

Much of the academic literature on accountability is rather disconnected as many authors set out to produce their own specific definition of accountability (Bovens 2010:946).

Some of the more recent burgeoning of new definitions has been triggered by the growing body of work on network governance⁹. Network governance was the term coined to describe the systems or mechanisms of decision-making and accountability in these complex relationships which are outside the traditional institutions of representative government (see Nyholm and Haveri, 2012). Network governance literature emerged strongly in recent decades as scholars wrestled with the issue of how the traditional lines of accountability have been affected by the fragmentation of government, the emergence of non-elected quangos, new public management (NPM)¹⁰, shared service delivery and the privatisation of government services (Aars and Fimreite, 2005; Mathur and Skelcher, 2007; Sørensen and Torfing, 2009; Davies, 2011; Griggs and Roberts, 2012). The literature on network governance is pertinent to this thesis because it encapsulates the complexity of accountability systems in a changing municipal environment which is characterised by the move from formal government to more informal governance (Lowndes, 2001; Copus, 2010; Heinelt, 2013; and Plüss, 2013).

For a more pragmatic route through the maze of definitions Mulgan's (2000) frequently cited work on accountability is helpful in understanding how social media has the potential to affect the perceptions of councillors about who has the right to call them to account. Mulgan accepted that accountability in the current circumstances is still *'an ever expanding concept'* (2000:555), but he also asserted that the core of accountability still signified *'external scrutiny, justification, sanctions and control'* (Mulgan, 2000:557). He outlined the ways in which the

⁹ See Nyholm and Haveri (2012).

¹⁰ The term New Public Management (NPM) is used to describe the concept that private sector business ideas can be applied to the public sector (see Ferlie *et al*, 1996).

core features have been '*expanded*' in modern times to include: increased expectations by citizens of responsiveness, i.e. the extent to which governments are prepared to listen to and pursue the wishes of citizens outside elections; and the trend for accountability to be seen in the form of dialogue or public discussion (Mulgan, 2000:2). The latter additional definition of accountability as much more dialogic than in the past is particularly relevant to this work given the interactive and conversational nature of social media.

As well as the work of Mulgan, Pratchett's earlier work (2006) on e-democracy¹¹ is especially germane to this thesis in understanding modern concepts of accountability in relation to social media. For Pratchett accountability is at the heart of democracy and he predicted that the emerging interactive communication technologies would have a great deal of potential to enrich democratic debate. His predictions speak to the themes of this thesis and are worth quoting in full. He contends that e-democracy:

... consists of all electronic means of communication that enable/empower citizens in their efforts to hold rulers/politicians accountable for their actions in the public realm. Depending on the aspect of democracy being promoted, e-Democracy can employ different techniques: (1) for increasing the transparency of the political process; (2) for enhancing the direct involvement and participation of citizens; and, (3) improving the quality of opinion formation by opening new spaces of information and deliberation (Pratchett, 2006:5).

Those themes of increased transparency, participation and the opening up of new spaces for democratic discourse are particularly important here in locating social media as providing new political opportunities for councillors and one of the opportunities that emerged strongly from the literature as significant was the possibility of more direct accountability to citizens without mediation through the formal structures of local government. Having considered definitions of accountability, the next area for discussion is that of types of accountability. Why does this matter? It matters because social media provide, as outlined below, the potential for citizens to subvert the existing rules and conventions about who has the right and who has the access to call elected representatives to account at different levels.

Types of accountability: vertical, horizontal and reputational

¹¹ The term 'e-democracy' is defined here as efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with each other and their elected representatives via the new technologies.

If politicians are accountable downwards, to the voters, at election time, what does the literature have to say about the types of accountability that prevail between elections? Bovens (2010:954) coined the term the '*spatial*' to describe types of accountability and the dominant spatial accountability tradition in the U.K. has been vertical and hierarchical, as illustrated by the Westminster ministerial model (Rhodes, 1988:15). In this model councils are seen as agents of central government and accountable upwards to them. Vertical accountability might be directed upwards to central government or regulatory and judicial processes, or downwards, to citizens, through the election of representatives (Coleman, 2005; Bovens, 2006 and 2010; Aarsæther *et al*, 2009; Bourgon 2009). Dearlove (1973, 25-31) debunked the idea of a simple electoral chain of command, pointing out that political parties play an attenuating role. Sullivan (2003:354) argued that the increased emphasis on horizontal or more citizen-oriented accountability systems had already weakened the traditional vertical chains of accountability. Additionally, Sullivan *et al* (2006), Barnes *et al* (2007) and Durose *et al* (2009) argued that the current emphasis on more participatory forms of accountability was leading to a bewildering proliferation of consultation and citizen participation initiatives at the local government level rather than to clearer accountability chains for the public.

The recent literature presents examples of the development of more horizontal forms of accountability, for example accountability to partnership organisations, to fellow politicians or to community organisations (Scott, 2000; Bovens, 2006 and 2010). Horizontal accountability through social media, as the later empirical chapters will demonstrate, has the potential to provide new channels for political accountabilities, offering horizontal lines of communication between representative, communities and citizens without the mediation of party or council bureaucracy. Social media offers new tools for governance: citizens can tweet or post views on policy issues or service delivery directly and immediately to elected representatives. The modal shift that is created by social media moves away from the formal structured modes of citizen engagement towards more informal participative modes. The potential impact of this modal shift is explored in more detail in Chapter Three.

The accountability debate also needs to be anchored within the context of the recent history of central/local government relations in England. A series of consultative papers including Local Democracy and Community Leadership, (DETR, 1998a), Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People (DETR, 1998b), Local Leadership: Local Choice (DETR, 1999), and Strong Local Leadership: Quality Public Services (DTLR, 2001) proposed that councils should become

more accountable to citizens by adopting a variety of initiatives aimed at enhancing participation and increasing horizontal accountability. Proposals included the separation of executive and scrutiny powers in order to increase the visibility and accountability of decision makers and the creation of a cadre of back-benchers or non-executive members who would spend more time in their local communities being '*...accountable, strong, local representatives for their areas...*' (DETR, 1998b: 3.42). In 2008 the proliferation of ideas about participation and more horizontal forms of accountability reached its apogee with the voluminous White Paper, *Communities in Control* (DCLG, 2008). The themes of increasing localism, participation and accountability to communities continued on into the Coalition government elected in 2010, with the passing of the Localism Act 2011 which heralded:

...a series of measures with the potential to achieve a substantial and lasting shift in power away from central government and towards local people. They include: new freedoms and flexibilities for local government; new rights and powers for communities and individuals; reform to make the planning system more democratic and more effective, and reform to ensure that decisions about housing are taken locally. Plain English Guide to the Localism Act (DCLG 2011).

The literature revealed that centrally driven attempts to secure more horizontal accountability were not always successful. Durose *et al* (2009), in their study of the impact of efforts to improve participation in neighbourhoods, noted the scepticism and resentment of citizens in response to participation initiatives, particularly where these were seen as one way and aimed at '*manufacturing consent*' (Durose *et al*, 2009:24). Sullivan (2003) commented on the continual top down nature of these participation initiatives, noting that:

...despite the expressed commitment to restoring local accountability, the mechanisms that are being most rigorously developed are those which reinforce accountability upwards to central government (2003:365).

The erosion of more formal types of accountability means that reputational accountability becomes more important, as identified by Keohane (2003:9). The more participative or horizontal forms of accountability offered by social media intensify concerns about reputational accountability. Reputation for politicians can be seen to be increasingly important in a media rich environment, described by Chadwick (2012:45) as an era of '*informational exuberance*', and by Dahlgren, 2013:37) as involving new interactive and communicative

practices. If social media can provide new spaces online for citizens to engage in scrutiny of local politics and therefore exercise a watchdog or oversight function (Bertot *et al*, 2010:51) new challenges are likely to emerge for politicians who take the opportunities offered. Challenges for politicians include the visibility and potential virality of online utterances and there are many examples of these so called '*Twitter gaffes*' (Bruns and Highfield, 2013:677).

Another form of horizontal accountability that is important for this consideration of social media is that identified by Copus (2003), i.e. the accountability of councillors to the political party. He offers evidence that local politicians have to be cognisant of different dimensions of accountability, looking 'Janus-like' towards both citizens and the party groups (2003:32). Copus has vividly described the '*crisis of representation*' (2003:32) that can be caused when politicians find that the increasing demands for more participative and responsive forms of representation are conflicting with the demands of party group loyalty. In the case study chapters in this thesis it will be seen how elected representatives, especially Labour councillors, were using social media to try to balance these complex and conflicting accountabilities. The next discussion further adds to the complexity of defining accountability in a modern digitised environment by considering the question of conditions for accountability.

Conditions for accountability

Is social media use by citizens likely to facilitate or hamper the ideal conditions for political debate and the opportunities for citizens to engage with councillors and call them to account? Answering that question in the context of accountability helps to set the context for this thesis overall because it locates the discussion within two important and interwoven strands in the literature: the work of Habermas (1989) in exploring the ideal conditions for democratic discourse and the extensive literature about more participative and deliberative forms of democracy (see, for example, Elster, 1998; Fishkin, 2009; and Barnes *et al*, 2007).

Habermas's early work on political debate in the public sphere, published in English in 1989, was predicated upon informed citizens helping to provide legitimacy for political action through debate (Habermas, 1994:9). In addition, those participating are assumed to have understood the rules governing debate (Held, 2006:231). In this Burkean model, it is assumed that participants in democracy are educated, homogenous in terms of background and status

and that they understand and observe the conventions of the debate (Schudson, 1992:161). Burke himself noted that:

Where there is a wide discrepancy in the world view of individuals, in their assumptions about how to deal with each other, and in their conceptions of fair play and politeness, political society becomes very difficult if not impossible (Burke, quoted in Hampsher-Monk, 1987:36).

That model has underpinned much of the literature on deliberative democracy (see Bohman, 1998 and Dryzek, 2000), where, ideally:

...popular control is substantive rather than symbolic, engaged by critical, reflective and competent citizens (Dryzek and Dunleavy, 2009:209).

The question of how the facilitating conditions can be created to enable the realisation of a democracy in which critical, reflective and competent citizens engage in a '*...rational-critical discourse on political matters*' (Calhoun 1992:9) has exercised deliberative democracy scholars for decades. As Coleman and Blumler (2009:25) have highlighted, political elites have long maintained hegemony on political discourse. Bruns (2008), writing about the potential of social media to disrupt existing control mechanisms, commented that:

...even in spite of events such as 'town hall' meetings and public consultations, policy is developed in the main by a limited set of actors in the party room, behind closed doors, and is offered to the public by way of the mass media as a complete package which it can choose only to accept or reject, to buy or not to buy at elections; feedback from citizens to politicians is limited and takes place only in the abstract form of opinion polls and focus groups, not through direct involvement of citizens in the policy-making process (Bruns, 2008:78).

The direct, unmediated and very visible nature of social media can be seen to have the potential to subvert those structured arenas of participation and might therefore be perceived as offering a threat to the established hierarchical modes of democratic discourse (Saward, 2005:192).

The tensions between the traditional forms of representation and more participative forms are not new, but Coleman and Blumler (2009:22) help to set that debate in a modern context by noting that the concern of elites about the '*limits of public competence*' (2009:22) can be seen

to be further intensified by the unmediated nature of discussions on social media. The idea that there are limits to public competence will be familiar to anyone who has looked online at the often semi-literate and abusive comments published on what Graham and Wright (2015:317) describe as the '*below the line*' sections of newspaper articles, i.e. the forums for public comment. It is true that the anonymity of the online public sphere makes it open to online abuse (Hepburn, 2012:385) but Coleman and Blumler (2009:22) have argued that nonetheless the Internet, the cybersphere¹², with its cacophony of different voices competing for space, has the potential to strengthen the conditions for democracy by enabling the public to be more informed, to help shape the policy agenda and to hold councillors to account.

Ranged against the Habermasian model of the ideal conditions for debate are a number of commentators who have argued that this model of an ideal public sphere is unrealistic and utopian in plural societies (Fraser, 1990; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Young, 2000; and Dahlberg, 2001). The concept of ideal conditions has also been challenged on the basis that it ignores issues of power, gender, diversity and inclusion (Young, 2000:119). Fraser (1990), writing before the advent of social media and using language that could almost be prefiguring the noisy pluralities of digital discourse, contended that plurality and diversity in political debate was in fact desirable:

... in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive overarching public (Fraser, 1990:66).

The idea of a plurality of publics emerges again in the next chapter which explores how social media have extended ideas about the ideal conditions for political discourse to encompass different public voices operating outside hegemonic cultural values. In his original writings Habermas could have never envisioned how interactive political debate might be '*strengthened, broadened and deepened*' (Drache, 2008:55) by the development of low cost online channels for heterogeneous publics to engage in the debates. Chadwick (2012) defends the contribution of social media to democracy and identifies its potential value:

¹² *'The realm of information technology and electronic communication, especially the Internet: our attempts to police the cybersphere can be likened to a solitary bobby on a bike patrolling the M1.'* (Oxford English Dictionary 2015)

While it may not live up to the high ideals of the deliberative public sphere, some of this [online] behaviour has real value in online consultation and public policy making. (Chadwick, 2012:12).

Social media offers the potential to contribute to the extension and strengthening of accountability by creating conditions or opportunities for different groups of citizens to interact with local politicians *'beyond, around and across institutionally controlled channels'* (Coleman and Blumler, 2009:83). Whether that potential is fully realised is the subject of the case study chapters in this thesis.

Having located the thesis within the larger themes of legitimacy and accountability, the next section moves into a closer examination of how those themes translate into the mechanisms of control and permission which shape the behaviour of councillors. It offers a descriptive account of the current *'rules, practices and narratives'* (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:46) that shape local government life in the twenty-first century. The next section provides a base line against which the social media related changes which are outlined in the subsequent case study chapters can be measured.

Section Four: Rules, practices and narratives

The previous section established the importance of legitimacy and accountability as major influences on shaping councillor behaviour and this section moves on to examine in more detail how that translates into council activities. The section draws upon a breadth and variety of sources, including 'grey literature' such as online sources and documentation from councils themselves, as well as researcher observation, in order to set out the current *'rules, practices and narratives'* (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:46) which, taken together, have traditionally formed the institutions of local government and shaped and constrained councillor behaviour. This approach sits within the new institutionalist tradition of understanding the *'rules of the game'* (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:49).

The rules or formal constraints which are described here provide a description of the enduring bureaucratic traditions of local government (Orr and Vince, 2009) and this is complemented by an account of the informal practices currently operating in councils. Karlsson (2012:683) argued that formal processes tended to be weaker at the local government level and therefore advised that a study of the prevailing informal processes, particularly relating to councillors themselves and the parties to which they belong, would yield more insights. Karlsson's idea

has guided this study and the focus is therefore on what the everyday practices of councillors tell us about the pace and trajectories of change in relation to social media. In addition, the role of the informal narratives of local political life, described in Meyer and Rowan's influential work as '*powerful organisational myths*' (1977:343) and by Orr and Vince (2009:656) as '*webs of belief*' are also explored. Unpacking the existing rules, practices and narratives of local government life here sets the scene for a new institutional analysis of the constraints on change and the first dimension of constraint to be examined is the suite of rules that govern the behaviour of councillors in their interactions with citizens.

Rules

Formal rules in local government are enshrined in three main forms: in the constitution which underpins all of the decision-making processes of the council as well as the speaking rights of councillors and the public; in the council's scrutiny arrangements; and in the local code of conduct (usually enforced at the local level by a standards committee). Issues of ethics and behaviour are locally determined since the abolition of the national Standards Board for England in 2012, and most local committees base their workings on an illustrative standards' code provided by the DCLG (2013).

Why might constitutional rules be affected by something as seemingly remote as social media use? Constitutional rules currently determine who can speak for the council, whose voices will be privileged and how councillors can be held to account within the formal processes (see Section 37 of the model constitution provided for councils to adopt in preparation for the changes brought in by Local Government Act 2000 in Appendix A). Controlling who can speak publicly in local government can best be illustrated by considering the formal choreography of a typical full council meeting. A full council meeting can take just over an hour (Rutland County Council meeting, 9 February 2015) or nearly six hours (Cornwall Council meeting 14 July 2015). Of that period councils allocate a varied, but limited amount of time for public questions submitted in advance, for example fifteen minutes in the case of Arun District Council (and three days' notice)¹³, forty-five minutes in Hartlepool Borough Council (and five days' notice)¹⁴ and one hour in Wokingham District Council (and seven days' notice)¹⁵. Social media have the potential to subvert council's constitutional rules intended to constrain the time available for

¹³<http://www.arun.gov.uk/public-question-time>

¹⁴https://www.hartlepool.gov.uk/forms/form/187/public_question_time_at_council_meetings

¹⁵<https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/council-and-meetings/meetings/ask-a-question-at-a-meeting/>

public participation in meetings by opening up new spaces for questions and comments on the business being conducted in real time during the meeting. Examples of this are given in each of the case study chapters to follow.

A sample of 84 English local council constitutions, carried out for this thesis, revealed that only 31 of the sample councils made any reference to social media and in addition only 59 councils had made any revisions at all to their constitutions between 2010 and 2015. It might therefore be surmised that formal constitutional rules are slow to adapt to changing practices. Lowndes and Roberts (2013: 126,127) argue convincingly that formal institutional change can be slow and incremental because its pace depends upon a variety of environmental forces, such as organisational receptivity or resistance.

The formal rules that shape councillor behaviour also include the standards regime: councillors who have been deemed to have breached the ethical Standards Code can be held to account by the local standards committee (composed of councillors and at least one independent person) (Localism Act 2011). The local Code of Conduct is overseen in each council by the Council's Monitoring Officer and must cover declarations of interests, expected standards of behaviour and the sanctions required for any breaches (Macauley and Lawton, 2006:706). Sanctions for ethical breaches might include the requirement for public apologies, public censure of the councillor's behaviour or other disciplinary action. It might be surmised therefore that breaching the formal Standards Code would lead to considerable reputational damage for a councillor and that therefore online channels where potential gaffes or breaches were very visible in the public domain, e.g. on Twitter would be likely to be avoided by councillors. In spite of the potential for breaches of the formal ethical code which have been created by the transparency and visibility of social media, it will be seen that in the case studies that councillors continued to conduct their everyday dialogue with citizens on the new media platforms.

There was one particular area of formal constitutional activity that was curiously absent in the review of the rules in relation to social media and that was in the 'monitorial' role of the scrutiny councillors charged with holding the executive decision makers to account. While it might have been expected that the formal scrutiny of decision making would have been strengthened by use of social media to call senior politicians to account there was no evidence that this was taking place. That absence may partly be explained by the argument that scrutiny committees are not seen by councils as core to local democracy, as evidenced by the decline in

resources or effective, as evidenced by the lack of 'call-ins' (Centre for Public Scrutiny annual survey 2014). The lack of effectiveness of scrutiny committees over the last fourteen years of its operation has been the subject of several articles; see for example Copus *et al*, 2002; Coulson, 2011; and Coulson and Whiteman, 2012).

Other existing rules which act to shape councillor roles and behaviour that provide a context for this study stem from the political parties (Wilson and Game, 2002:276; Copus, 2004:124). Examples of those include standing orders and protocols and permissions to determine who can speak on particular issues (Leach and Wingfield, 1999; Copus, 2004) and this includes signing-off protocols or permissions where councillors get agreement that they can issue press releases, make statements or write to newspapers from within the council or the party structures. In addition newly elected councillors are usually provided with some basic training and induction which introduces them to local government rules: see for example the LGA guide for new members (2013) and the Committee on Standards in Public Life report (2014). Councillors are also required to sign up to some form of 'Acceptable Use Policy' which governs use of computers and the Internet (see example at Appendix B).

Practices

Turning to an examination of less formal 'practices' the literature shows that the main everyday practices of elected members in local government (outside the formal council meetings) can be categorised under three broad headings: place based activity including ward 'surgeries' (Martin, 1997:540); media focused activity such as writing articles or letters in the local newspapers; and finally case work responding to letters and emails from individual ward constituents (see Barron *et al*, 1991). Councillors' ward work was the subject of a White Paper from the Labour government in 1998 when councillors were exhorted to:

...spend less time in council meetings and more time in the local community, at residents meetings or surgeries. They will be accountable, strong, local representatives for their area. They will bring their constituents views, concerns and grievances to the council through their council's structures. Their role will be to represent the people to the council rather than to defend the council to the people. (DETR, 1998b: para.3.42).

The convention has developed over the decades that that councillors, like Members of Parliament, are generally expected to make themselves physically accessible to citizens in the ward, or division, on at least a monthly basis, although this still varies according to individual

inclination and political party (see Hecló, 1969:191). The key focus of the ward surgeries has always been primarily face-to-face case work responding to individual problems (Barron *et al*, 1991:5,159). This strongly territorial form of local political work has the potential to be challenged by social media practices which are virtual and decoupled from the need for physical presence, with the possibility of virtual surgeries via Skype and the online accessibility of politicians anywhere, any time through Facebook and Twitter.

Examples of the disruption of territorial spatial practices are given in the later case study chapters when councillors provide accounts of shifting case work online. Coleman and Blumler (2009:27) have posed the question of whether some of the deeply embedded ideas about the sovereignty of place in government are likely to survive the creation of virtual digital spaces for social and political interaction. Although it might be expected that citizens' or councillors' sense of place would be eroded when there was no longer the necessity of physical embodiment through meetings the opposite can be demonstrated (explored in more detail in Chapters Five and Six): the digitally confident councillors who are using social media report their conviction that a sense of place and local belonging can be strengthened through social media.

The pressures for councillors to change their practices and engage with social media emerges from the political opportunities created by the decline of local print media as a channel for political expression (Press Gazette 2012a) at the same time as there was a growth in online media (Press Gazette 2012b). The existing habit of writing to local newspapers, traditionally a favoured occupation for councillors (Martin, 1997:540), therefore faced either continued decline or displacement into the new online spheres. The convergence of the burgeoning of social media and waning of traditional vehicles for political debate has, it is argued, combined to create a context for gradual institutional change, opening up '*creative spaces*' (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:127) in which councillors can adapt to the new circumstances.

Narratives

The dominant narrative of institutional life for councillors which emerges from the literature is that of trust in politicians. Trust is significant for this study because levels of trust are linked to questions of legitimacy for local politicians in their roles as leaders of the local community and as builders of relationships with other stakeholders (Howard *et al*, 2006:142; Gemetis *et al*, 2006:300). Trust in councillors still remains a great deal higher than for national politicians in

the U.K. where there has been a decline (Wilkes-Heeg *et al*, 2012). A 2014 poll carried out by Populus for the Local Government Association (2015) showed that seventy-five % of people trusted their councillor to make decisions about local services, in comparison to the nine % who trusted their MP and the six % who trusted Government ministers. Nonetheless, citizens' trust in politicians has continued to be challenged by the decline of traditional cultural norms of deference and distance (Coleman, 2003:137). That narrative of trust in councillors continues to be offset by the negative public images of politicians at the local level that were described by Copus (2016:134).

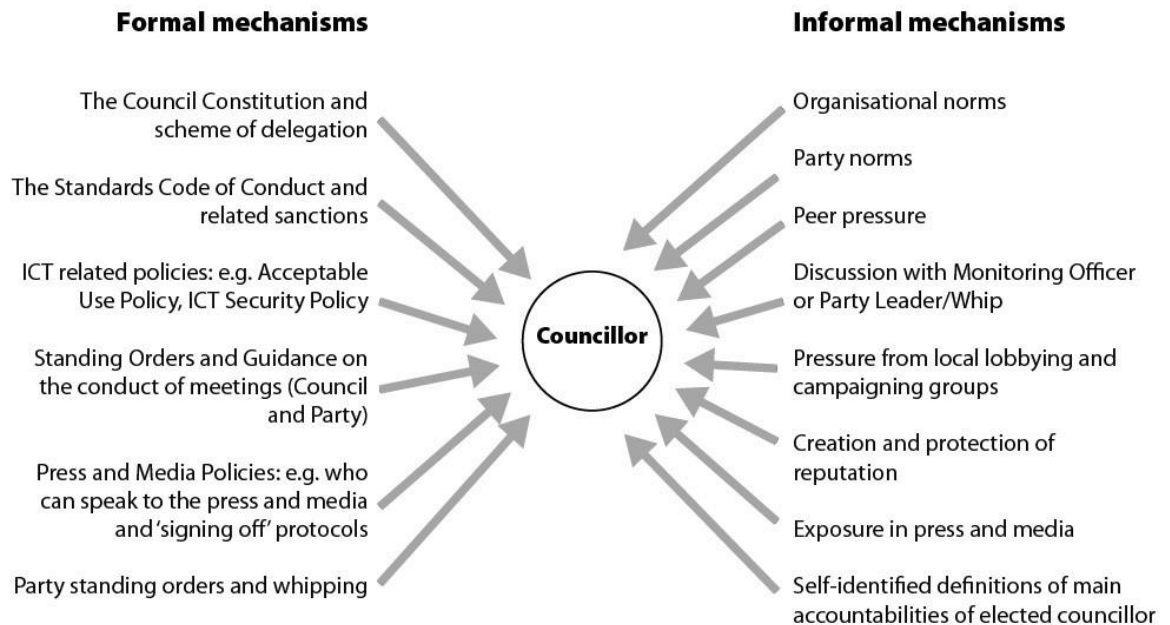
The efforts of successive governments to arrest the decline in trust and voter turnout by focusing on participatory initiatives (Barnes *et al*, 2007:9) received a sceptical reaction from voters. Indeed, Barnes *et al*, 2007:200) concluded that the success of many of these participatory initiatives has been over-claimed. Her conclusion was supported by Durose *et al* (2009) who identified that the '*rhetoric of citizen governance is not always matched by substance*' (2009:211). The question that arises for this thesis relates to the advent of social media: has it had any role to play in increasing trust between the representative and the citizen. The question of whether online interactions between councillors and their constituents, interactions which promote visibility, personalisation and responsiveness, can shift the current narratives about trust at the local level is addressed in more detail in the next chapter, but it is worth providing at this point a quote from the fieldwork which gives an indication of a councillor's strongly expressed view of the potential for social media to assist in the task of renewing trust between councils and the public:

*...you know public support...we're at the back of the queue. We're, you know, most people don't come out to vote for us, they don't like their local council...So we need to do something different now because otherwise we're f*****. And the services that we will lose, [are the ones] that hold communities together (Cabinet member, London Metropolitan Council).*

The councillor's views support the thrust of Tony Blair's influential 1998 pamphlet 'Leading the Way: A New Vision for Local Government', that voter turnout is low, that councils' decision making processes can be seen as opaque and that councillors themselves are distant and unresponsive. Later in this thesis we shall see whether there is any evidence that social media, with its potential for transparency, responsiveness and personalisation, was being harnessed by council and councillors to make democracy more tangible to the public.

The section concludes with a diagrammatic overview of the existing formal and informal institutional mechanisms which act to constrain and regulate the behaviour of councillors in English local government.

Figure 1. Formal and informal mechanisms constraining councillors



Source: Developed for this thesis.

The diagram gives an indication of the wide range of both formal and informal constraints on the behaviour of councillors and the relative strength of each of those constraints is examined in greater detail in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. It was populated primarily from the researcher's own experience as a former Monitoring Officer and informed by the work of Wilson and Game (2002) on the formal workings of local government, Orr and Vince (2009) on the traditions and Copus (2004) on the pressures of party, ward and community.

Conclusion: Redefining legitimacy and accountability in an online world

The title of this chapter begged the question of whether the traditional roles of councillors in local government, particularly in relation to their perceptions of legitimacy and accountability, were static or evolving. In addressing that question in relation to the potential challenges of social media several core themes emerged. The first of the themes was the important role played by ideas about participation. There was evidence of an intensification of pressure on

councils and councillors to increase engagement with citizens, with the series of White Papers from central government. The context for the trend for greater citizen participation in local government was defined by the perception of a democratic deficit (Skelcher *et al*, 2005; Pratchett, 2006; Sweeting and Copus; 2010; Plüss, 2012) that had been created by decreasing voter turnout (Hay and Stoker, 2009) and low levels of public trust in political decision-makers (Flinders, 2013).

The chapter determined that pressures for '*greater citizen engagement with local government*' (Copus, 2003:33) were not just coming from central government: in addition there were also increased demands in modern governance systems for policy formation and decision-making to be opened up to the public gaze (John, 2009:20); there were demands from citizens to exercise power over representatives between elections (Esaiasson and Narud, 2013:7); and there were pressures on politicians created by the popularisation of politics where the traditional boundaries between the personal and the political had become blurred (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013:758). The demands of modern governance systems must also be placed in the context of the decline in the culture of deference to political authority (Coleman, 2003:137; Drache, 2008:5). Increased demands for communicative responsiveness to the public also emerged as a key component of strengthening legitimacy for elected representatives. In addition the role of place, or perhaps more accurately the importance of place-based community leadership, emerged as a substantial feature in perceptions of legitimacy outside elections. The potential advantages of the construction of a locally rooted identity for local leaders (see Painter and Philo, 1995; and Massey, 2004) were also seen most clearly in the case of the directly elected mayors in English local government (see Hambleton, 2017:250): how social media might assist in the creation of those local identities re-emerges in the next chapter.

The theme of how accountability has to adapt to more plural audiences in modern governance systems also emerged strongly from the review of the critical literature on the ideal conditions for democracy envisaged by Habermas (1989). Building upon the critiques of those ideal conditions, the next chapter discusses how social media might enable the participation of more differentiated, noisy and dissenting publics in democratic discourse. As Coleman and Blumler (2009) have commented in their work on the impact of the Internet on democratic spaces for citizens:

By reducing the costs of finding contacting and maintaining communication links with others, the Internet has made it much easier for dispersed groups of people to form associations, share knowledge and mobilise for political action (Coleman and Blumler, 2009:117).

In these new and evolving democratic spaces, definitions of political accountability emerged as not fixed, but as *'expanding'* (Mulgan, 2000:13) in order to respond to the needs of modern governance. That expansion of definitions was seen to include the increased significance of reputational accountability as well as the concept of accountability becoming more discursive and deliberative in nature (Goodin, 2008:155).

All of the above point to new challenges for the institutions of local government, particularly in relation to shaping and managing councillors' interactions with citizens in the more participative systems enabled by the digital technologies. How might councils adapt their existing systems of institutional governance to respond to the challenges created? Using the three existing pillars of institutions described by Barnes *et al* (2007:59) as *'regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive'* it might be expected that councils would respond to the challenges created by the participative challenges created by the new technologies by adapting their regulations, e.g. constitutions, and by changing their normative practices in relation to the constraints on councillor behaviour e.g. regulation and standards regimes. In addition, given that the Habermasian and Burkean ideals of fair play, politeness and mutually understood rules for political discourse were seen as under challenge from new publics, as outlined above, it might be expected that the cultural-cognitive practices around accountability would also be seen to change, with councils encouraging councillors to adopt more interactive modes of operation.

What might be expected from councillors themselves? How would they be likely to respond to the participative pressures of governance in a more digitised environment? It might be predicted that they would begin to frame and describe their roles and accountabilities as representatives differently and that they would be seizing the political opportunities or spaces offered by social media to develop new repertoires.

In this chapter the tensions created by the trends towards participation and the concomitant emphasis on citizen engagement between elections were identified as having had an effect on the roles of councillors. Taken alongside the evidence of a decline in deference and a reduction

in trust in political elites, the environment for councillors in modern governance systems is undoubtedly under pressure. The next chapter outlines the additional pressures related to citizens' increased use of social media and asks whether the enabling qualities of the new technologies be used for democratic renewal at the local level. What is the potential for social media to enhance elected representatives' legitimacy and accountability to citizens, and, given the trends in governance identified above, what is social media's potential to bring innovation to the role of the councillor? Here the task of understanding how new repertoires, or new ways of enacting the local representational role, are being shaped by the arrival of social media begins. The next chapter unpacks the role of social media in democratic renewal and sets the scene for an in-depth exploration of the shifts in the institutions of local government and the traditional representative practices of councillors.

Chapter Three: Overlapping terrains: the interface between council institutions and social media

Introduction

The chapter begins by introducing the debate about the contribution of social media to democracy. That debate is not a new one, but here it takes a new approach by using the lens of the research question to focus on the local level of government and on the impact of social media on the roles of councillors. The debate centres on whether the new social media enabled capacity for individuals and communities to interact directly with politicians online is having an impact on democracy (Hepburn, 2012:370; Ellison and Hardey, 2014:21) and particularly on the roles of councillors in local democracy. Is the appeal of the openness of social media for councillors strong enough to push them towards more participative modes of operation in spite of the fact that historically have held somewhat lukewarm attitudes towards increased participation by citizens, as Sweeting and Copus (2013:121) have evidenced? The chapter addresses these questions through a review of the relevant literature and an examination of the current debates about the new technologies and it asks whether social media simply represent a different way of doing the same thing or whether something new is happening. Is it possible through this thesis to demonstrate that social media have the potential to trigger some form of transformational change for elected representatives in local government? The chapter considers that potential in some depth and ranges widely through the available literature and it is divided into four sections.

The first section reminds the reader of the general background and the location of the work within the frame of third phase new institutionalism approach employed in the thesis and introduces the use of (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013). The section also introduces the idea of conceptualising social media as a form of social movement, here used as a device to allow representation of the exogenous, but gradual, pressures created by citizens' use of the new interactive technologies. This borrowing from social movement theory also facilitates a focus on the idea that social media play a key role in opening up '*political opportunities*' (McAdam *et al*, 1996:2) which can then be used by councillors to reframe their representative roles.

The second section addresses the question of whether social media, as a set of interactive technologies, actually represent a genuinely disruptive technology which is having a measurable impact on local democracy. It does this by examining the contested and

sometimes polarised views about the potential contribution of social media to local democracy, by setting out some of the current debates about social media in relation to governance and by interrogating the three main myths which continue to circulate in that debate.

The third section turns from the general to the specific, examining social media use in English local government and highlighting three areas of tension which can be attributed to the use of social media: structural tensions, such as those between central and local state; tensions stemming from the cultural differences between social media and the formal and informal rules determining the incumbent systems of accountability; and, finally the tensions which arise from the actions of individual agents, the councillors. The discussion of these tensions leads into the fourth section which highlights the enabling characteristics of social media and reflects upon the potential of those characteristics to precipitate change in local democracy.

Section One: Background and organising approach

The role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in government, after some decades, is widely understood (Pratchett *et al*, 2004; Ferguson, 2005; Benkler, 2006; Wingfield, 2006; and Yildiz, 2007), but this is not yet the case for social media. ICTs, enabled by the first iteration of the World Wide Web¹⁶, were used by local councils to develop web-sites and transactional capacity, e.g. for the payment of council tax. In this first phase of the World Wide Web citizens were largely passive consumers of the static content (Kersting, 2012:11; Ellison and Hardey, 2014:32). The development of Web 2.0¹⁷, which allowed users to interact with each other, converse online and generate content (Coleman and Wright, 2008:4), only began in 1999. The advent of these interactive features of Web 2.0 began to enable what O'Reilly (2010) has termed an '*architecture of participation*' and it is this new architecture which led to the burgeoning of social networking platforms such as Facebook (developed in 2004) and Twitter (developed in 2006). Facebook and Twitter have been identified by Spurrell (2012) as the platforms most commonly used by councils. These social networking sites (SNS) became collectively known as social media and all share key characteristics, as described by boyd (*sic*) and Ellison (2008):

¹⁶ The World Wide Web is a system of linking pages on the Internet which is '*open by default*', and was created by Tim Berners-Lee (O'Reilly, 2010:24-25)

¹⁷ Web 2.0 is the term used to describe technology which allows collaboration, engagement and the interactive sharing of user-generated information (see Chadwick, 2012:19)

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (boyd and Ellison, 2008:211).

Our familiarity with these new characteristics of social media is only just over a decade old. That newness is exciting, but it also poses problems for researchers and particularly for research at the level of local government. The first problem encountered was that much of the pre-existing literature on e-democracy and English local government was framed around issues of information provision, data transparency and the service related dimensions of e-government (see, for example, Pratchett, 1996; Ferguson, 2005; Hood and Margetts, 2007; Yildiz, 2007; and Beresford, 2014), although Hepburn (2012, 2014) and Ellison and Hardey (2012, 2014) have begun to redress that balance. As Abbott (2012:97) has noted, academic scholarship has struggled to keep up with recent technological change, indeed Hepburn (2012) in his work on citizens' use of social media during the Manchester congestion charging referendum, noted that this whole area was under-researched, particularly at '*the level of local governance*' (Hepburn, 2012:371).

The approach to dealing with the lack of literature which specifically addressed local government was to draw upon the wider literature relating to the impact of social media on democracy and apply those insights to the local level. The second problem was that there was no established theoretical approach upon which to draw in an examination of the democratic aspects of social media at the local level and this was addressed by understanding the research question as an enquiry into change, focused on the everyday practices of local level democracy rather than new technology and driven by an interest in the changing roles of councillors rather than specific platforms used.

Part of the challenge of understanding the potential impact of social media on local democracy was the need to disentangle the effect of the use of the new technologies by councillors for democratic purposes from the effects created by councils' use of social media to deliver services, e.g. citizens' online reporting of service failure such as missed refuse collections. For the purposes of this thesis a clear distinction is made between the service provision role of local government and the political roles of councillors. If the role of elected representatives using social media is seen simply as a channel for the more efficient articulation of residents' problems, then democracy becomes reduced to a transaction between providers and

consumers. Haus and Sweeting (2006:275) have contended that New Public Management (NPM) has pushed councillors towards this more consumerist role. Copus (2014) has supported this analysis in his work on the continued diminution of the roles available to councillors, attributing these attenuated roles to a rise in network governance and the dominance of NPM approaches. He has argued for a reappraisal of the role of the councillor as:

Inextricably linked to but also separate from any service provision function held by local government in its purpose as a governing and representative role with a democratic mandate of its own (Copus, 2014:1).

Making this distinction clear is important in the context of social media because much of the literature relating to social media use in local government is weighted towards service delivery issues rather than its democratic potential (Ferguson, 2005; Yildiz, 2007; Dutton, *et al* 2013). This work adopts an approach which emphasises the representative role of the councillor as a local politician rather than on managerial concerns. The key question being addressed in this chapter is therefore how social media have challenged 'the *rules of the game*' (Lowndes, 2008:55; Lowndes and Roberts, 2013) and the emphasis is therefore firmly placed on councillors as actors embedded within the formal and informal institutions of local democracy.

As well as utilising new institutionalist perspectives, this thesis also harnesses perspectives from the literature on social movements to help in the task of understanding of how social media may be precipitating as well as shaping change. Social movement approaches, which are now seen by several commentators as increasingly converging with new institutionalist approaches (Lounsbury, 2005:73; Davis *et al*, 2008:389; and Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:125), offer a different way of thinking about citizens' use of social media. Conceptualising social media use by citizens as a type of social movement through which external pressure is exerted on the incumbent systems of governance offers a different prism through which to view changes in local government.

Historically social movement theory had its roots in the studies of race and protest campaigns in the United States (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1988; and Davis *et al*, 2005). The rise of social movements in which citizens press governments for change was originally explained in social movement theory through the use of three main models: '*social breakdown*' (Buelchler, 2007:47) where discontent and alienation lead to protest, '*resource mobilisation*', which posited that demands for change were dependent upon the availability of different types of

resources (Edwards and McCarthy, 2007:116). The third model developed as more diffused societal movements such as feminism and environmentalism emerged and scholars such as Tarrow (1998) and Tilly and Tarrow (2007) coined the term '*contentious politics*' to define social movements more loosely: in this construction any major change process, linked to politics, in which citizens make claims on institutions which might affect incumbent interests can be described as a social movement. McAdam's (1982) work criticised this approach and introduced the third model, the '*political process model*' (1982:251) which restored concepts of power in change processes. For him:

What marks social movements as inherently threatening is their implicit challenge to the established structure of polity membership and their willingness to bypass institutionalised political channels (McAdam, 1982:25).

McAdam (1982), in work which was further developed by Schneiberg and Soule (2005), Schneiberg (2013) and Fligstein (2013), also argued that the success of social movements in bringing about change is dependent on the availability of '*political opportunity structures*'. For McAdam the key questions to be explored in any examination of change are: how open or closed institutions are to change; the capacity (or autonomy) for members to act; the availability of an infrastructure that can be utilised; the existence of incentives for participation; and a shared collective sense (and language) about how existing systems might change (McAdam, 1982:48). Exploring each of these dimensions later in this work offers further insights into how social media use has acted to open up political opportunities for councillors. For example the case study chapters, especially Chapter Five, illustrate how local politicians have seized the opportunities created by social media to operate within the spaces of what Hambleton has termed place-based governance (2017:245). As Scullion (2015), drawing on Soule (2004:301), found, utilisation of opportunities intensified when social media use was diffused among a group of councillors through reciprocation, where early adopters promoted ways of operating within the new conversational spaces amongst their less digitally confident peers. The next section goes on to set the scene, through a review of the literature on social media and democracy, for understanding how the new technologies have acted to create these new spaces and political opportunities.

Section Two: A genuinely disruptive technology? A review of the literature on democracy and social media.

The first part of this review considers the debate about the democratic potential of Web 2.0 to transform the relations between politicians and citizens. It is a debate which has been well-rehearsed in recent literature (Benkler, 2006; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Castells, 2012). The debate about the impact of the new technologies on democratic governance is one which has been characterised as 'utopian' (Loader and Mercea, 2011:758) and also dystopian: Sunstein, (2001:75), for example, argued that the Internet was more likely to undermine democracy and to polarise groups. Margolis and Resnick (2000) were also sceptical about any change stemming from the Internet and argued that it was in fact more likely to reinforce the status-quo while others such as Morozov (2011) maintained that social media would not open up government but rather call forth increased censorship and regulation from governments.

The utopian faction is represented predominantly by the work of the Marxist academic Castells (1997, 2012), who has argued that the new technologies are genuinely disruptive and have changed the rules of the game of democracy in response to the culture of freedom created by decentred networks (Castells, 2012:231). Castells claimed that traditional political institutions would disintegrate in the networked society (1997:80). Benkler (2006:130) joined Castells in predicting that the declining price of computation and the consequent adoption of the digital information technologies would lead to transformational change in democracies. More recently Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) have cited the innovative nature of social media in Obama's 2008 campaign as evidence that social media is now transforming politics and Khondar (2011) and Fletcher and Young (2012) have cited the role of social media in underpinning protest movements such as the Arab Spring as evidence of its transformatory and disruptive power. On the other side of the debate are the scholars who counsel caution about over-claiming the transformatory effects of social media on democracy, whether those were dystopian or utopian. Hand and Sandywell (2002), Pratchett *et al* (2004) and Margolis and Moreno-Riaño (2009) have all challenged the view that technology has driven transformation as a form of determinism which cannot be supported by the evidence. Dutton *et al* (2009) in their bi-annual survey for the Oxford Internet Institute suggested more modest effects:

The Internet does not have a set of pre-determined outcomes. It does not make people more sociable or lead people into civic engagement. However, it does provide a

resource for people to pursue their interests in seeking information, communicating with others, and being entertained in ways that could well advantage them over those who choose not to use the Internet (Dutton et al, 2009:27).

Coleman and Blumler's (2009) work rehearsed the potential for the use of social media to enhance democracy by creating new spaces for dialogue with and accountability to citizens. They argued that the new technologies did have the potential to improve democracy and to transform relations between the public and holders of political authority. Coleman and Blumler (2009) also presented the political value of social media as representing a potential mechanism to increase citizens' practical participation in political processes. Their influential work proposes that social media could: reduce the cost of engagement in civic life because citizens could participate online at a low entry cost; provide citizens with more information about government and decision-making; create opportunities for more direct and unmediated debate; enable citizens to pressurise politicians in considerable numbers; shrink physical distance between representative and constituent; and enable more responsiveness from office-holders to citizens. Other scholars in the field of social media and politics, such as Margolis and Moreno-Riaño (2009) and Landsbergen (2010), have accepted the idea that social media could have an impact on democracy, but found that the potential was as yet unrealised: the area is still under-researched.

Another theme which emerged from the literature on the new technologies and politics was the potential for social media to play a role in enhancing trust between representatives and the represented. Rosanvallon (2011:191) identified the '*politics of presence*', i.e. reducing perception of distance between the citizen and elected representatives through personalisation, as important in increasing legitimacy and trust and Enli and Skogerbø (2013:757) have argued that social media can act to enhance positive perception of politicians. Enjolras *et al* (2012:891) added a further dimension: drawing on the work of Granovetter (1973), they highlighted the network structures that underpin social media, particularly friends' lists, as facilitating the spread of information and increasing participation (mobilizing agency) as well as shaping how citizens receive political information. These characteristics of social media were also identified by Coleman and Blumler (2009) and are known in the social media literature as '*affordances*' (Enjolras *et al*, 2012:891).

The enabling characteristics or affordances of social media which relate to the work of councillors will be illustrated in the later descriptive case study chapters. Overall, the burden of

the ideas outlined above supports the position taken by Coleman and Blumler (2009) who argue that social media have potential to transform relationships between citizens and politicians in democratic processes without going down the technological determinism route. This thesis also takes the position that it is not the existence of the new technologies which is driving change, but rather it is the critical interaction between the technologies, the formal and informal institutions of councils and the actions of the individual agents, the councillors, that is stimulating change in practices. Pratchett's (2006) paper on e-democracy for the Council of Europe summarises this position well:

New technologies, in whatever form, are socially and politically neutral devices and have no inevitable consequences for democracy, participation or political engagement. However, the way in which such technologies are used and the purposes to which they are put can have radical consequences for the practice of democracy. The design of particular tools and their association with existing democratic practices (and other aspects of governance) shapes their value and impact, as does the way in which citizens and intermediary bodies (such as the news media, political parties and so on) adopt and use the technologies (Pratchett, 2006:3).

As Pratchett has indicated, the impact of social media on local democratic practices has to be understood in relation to a variety of other influences as well as its enabling and constraining features. It is to the constraining features that the discussion now turns in a specific examination of three of the continued myths which have emerged regarding the political use of social media.

Social Media: Myths Creation and Myth Busting?

The potential of social media to enhance democracy can be better understood by exploring some of the more pervasive myths about it. In the interviews with councillors which follow in later chapters some of these myths reappear as reasons for them not engaging with the public on social media. Three of the most common objections to social media being seen as part of political life are: firstly that its use is confined to young people for superficial purposes (Lenhart *et al* 2010:21); secondly that the Internet has resulted in a Tower of Babel in which there is no way of controlling or filtering information (Dahlberg 2001, McNair 2009); and finally that it lacks the traditional features of political engagement, leading to superficial 'clicktivism' (Vissers and Stolle 2013, Halupka 2014). Indeed Durose (2009) speculated that voting from

home using the Internet could become a '*random and non-reflective act*' (2009:200). Each of these myths is now investigated in turn.

Myth 1: Social media not a serious channel for political debate

In countering the myth that social media use has no place in democracy because its use is confined to young people for trivial purposes it is useful to review the evidence of citizens using the new social media platforms. Shirky (2008) and Rheingold (2012) provide extensive evidence of citizens using social media for debate, comment and engagement with each other as well as institutions and commercial companies. In the first quarter of 2013, 43.5 million adults, 86 % of the population in the UK, were reported to have recently used the Internet (Office of National Statistics, 2013). By 2016 87.9 % of adults had recently used the Internet and that figure rose to 99.2 % for 16 to 24 year olds (Office of National Statistics, 2016). Reliable audited figures for Twitter and Facebook usage are hard to find, but Statista quoted 33 million UK Facebook users in 2016 and 15.8 million for Twitter. More significantly, in terms of social media, there has been a marked increase in the creation and production of content by users (Dutton *et al*, 2011) and the emergence of a next generation of young active Internet users, Dutton *et al*'s '*digital natives*' (2013:5).

Early social media use was identified as '*personality-driven*' (Bruns, 2008:80) with popular television programmes and media celebrities cultivating large numbers of online followers (for example one reality television programme, The Great British Bake Off, for example, had over a million Facebook followers in October 2016), but there was also evidence that politicians, particularly at the national level, had begun to adopt the new communication channels for dialogue with citizens, albeit more slowly. In that same period, October 2016, the mayor of London had less than 600 thousand Facebook followers. Another example of the gradual trend of adoption of social media by politicians was the take up of the new platforms by British MPs: by 2014 72 % of MPs had Twitter accounts (Westminster Affairs, 2014), but by 2016 some 87 % had signed up (Mpsontwitter, 2016). Take-up of Twitter also varied slightly by party: the Liberal Democrats had 82 % of their MPs actively using Twitter, with Labour following at 75 % and the Conservatives at 67 % (Mpsontwitter, 2016). That social media have been adopted as an acceptable form of political communication at the national level can be further illustrated by a snapshot of MPs' tweets in just one day in 2016.

Table 1. Snapshot of MPs Tweets period 4/10/16: source <http://www.mpsontwitter.co.uk/#>

Number of Tweets Today by Party
1,156 tweets posted by UK MPs in the last 24 hours
565 tweets posted by Labour MPs today (48.88%)
376 tweets posted by Conservative MPs today (32.53%)
168 tweets posted by Scottish National Party MPs today (14.53%)
12 tweets posted by Liberal Democrat MPs today (1.04%)
10 tweets posted by Green Party MPs today (0.87%)
10 tweets posted by Plaid Cymru MPs today (0.87%)
25 tweets posted by other parties

There are no reliable figures for the daily tweets by councillors, but the figures for MPs show that at the parliamentary level this form of communication is now considered a legitimate part of political life. It is evident that the myth that social media platforms are only being used by the young, or for trivial purposes can no longer be sustained, at the national level at least. For a picture of use at the local level the reader must wait until the case study chapters which will reveal a much more mixed picture of adoption at the local level.

Myth 2: A Tower of Babel

The idea has developed that cybersphere is a chaotic and cacophonous place with no mechanisms or filters (Wright, 2009; Brants and Voltmer, 2011; Portwood-Stacer, 2013) and this idea is supported by the proliferation of citizen journalism where anyone can blog or post views online (Bertot *et al*, 2010:54; Coleman and Wright, 2008:2). The idea of chaos can be countered by the popularity of peer to peer filtering sites (described as co-assessment sites by Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013) such as TripAdvisor and Mumsnet which are seen to be trusted and authoritative sites that mediate and filter information for the user. Benkler (2000:79) argued that the new media is not as distributed and diffuse as might initially be imagined and that only a minority of sites get a large number of hits: in other words there are only a few online posters or speakers to whom most people listen. That this is the case can be supported by the

example of Google which promotes the dominance of a small number of popular trusted sites by its use of algorithms based on popularity and links (as well as commercial considerations, see Benkler (2000:76), and aggregation sites like academic citation indexes work on similar principles. Vissers and Stolle (2013) noted that existing broadcasters, such as the BBC, also offer an authoritative and trusted voice in this context:

Network-mediated news are also seen as more credible, as the information is first assessed and filtered by someone people know, hence validating its importance and quality (Vissers and Stolle, 2013:940).

Trusted commentators as a filter for information suggests the potential for councillors to act in that role through online community networking: Dahlgren (2013:48) notes that *'online traffic tends to gather around key topics and people'* and it is proposed here that councillors can place themselves at the heart of that traffic as key local people. The opportunities for councillors to use the online properties of social media to develop their roles as trusted and legitimate commentators within a local community is further explored in the case study interviews (see particularly Chapters 5 and 6). It can be seen that the democratic potential of social media in this case relates to the *'through-put legitimation'* described by Klausen and Sweeting (2005:222), in their work on legitimacy and community involvement.

Myth 3: Superficial clicktivism

The final myth concerns the view that online politics are somehow not real politics, as Vissers and Stolle (2013) make clear:

The critique is that these online activities are not costly enough and too simple, and that addressing concerns with a mouse click induces the idea that individuals who practice these activities contribute to changing the world, when in effect, they do not (Vissers and Stolle, 2013:939).

The criticisms have been directed at mass email campaigns aimed at politicians, such as those from the UK's 38 Degrees movement, which have recently become more prevalent. Described by Chadwick as a *'hybrid mobilization movement'* (2013:187), the 38 Degrees organisation runs online petitions and automated mass email campaigns on particular issues, using their million plus members. More recent examples of political campaigning which have used pro-forma

material include political bots¹⁸ used during the EU referendum (Howard and Kollanyi 2016). We are left wondering if online campaigning by email is part of a real political engagement alongside the more conventional engagement measures such as writing letters or signing a paper petitions (Wilks-Heeg *et al*, 2012:15) or is virtual politics just that, virtual?

The position that social media are no different from conventional media is represented by Karpf (2010), who argued that online mass emails are entirely equivalent to the written petitions and postcards of offline campaigning and are simply an addition to the repertoire of political engagement. Others argue that there is a qualitative difference, particularly in the engagement of new groups, with different social demographic profiles from those who have conventionally engaged in politics, people who have been mobilized into participating in political debate through social media (Enjolras *et al*, 2012:896; Vissers and Stolle, 2013:940). Social media have increased access to political debate with the barriers to access lowered by, for example, web-casting of council meetings. Certainly web-casting has the potential to increase access to council meetings: the research for this thesis discovered that Cornwall Council had an average of 345 people tuning in to their live webcasts of monthly council meetings in 2013 (Council's own figures). The picture is however mixed: just putting council meetings online did not guarantee increased participation, for example Stoke on Trent only averaged 25 viewers for their webcasts in 2012, with one meeting attracting only one viewer (Stoke Sentinel, July 13, 2012).

The myth that social media are not used for political purposes can be laid to rest by the evidence of use by MPs and other prominent political actors; the myth that the Internet is simply a Tower of Babel with no filters is countered by the literature on mediating and aggregating sites and the myth that online activity has no impact on democratic activities is at least partly countered by the mobilising activity of petitioning organisations. Indeed the Brexit campaign, where social media provided platforms for prolific comment by both leavers and remainers, offers another more recent example of how online comment has moved from the margins into the mainstream, influencing other forms of communication such as newspapers and television. That these three myths still exert an influence on the debate about whether social media are suitable for use in a modern democracy is an indication of the dilemmas presented to councillors as they pick a path through the opportunities presented by the new

¹⁸ Bots are automated social media accounts that can interact with other users.

platforms and choose to adopt or reject the new technologies for their own political repertoires.

Having described the wider debate about social media and democracy, identified some of its characteristics and discussed the potential contribution of social media to politics, the next part of this chapter turns to the local level and begins to examine social media in relation to English local government.

Section Three: Moving from macro to micro: locating social media use in councils

The discussion of the impact of social media at the local level has to be viewed against the background of the discussion in the previous chapter on the ongoing tensions between central control mechanisms and local autonomy on the issue of citizen participation (Rao, 2000, Lowndes and Wilson, 2003, Newman, 2005, Barnes *et al*, 2007, Ellison and Hardey, 2014). Modernising initiatives to increase understanding of the role of councillors as well as levels of citizen participation and engagement were seen in that chapter to have been a preoccupation for central government for over a decade (DETR 1998a; DETR 1998b; DETR 1999; DTLR 2001; ODPM 2005; DCLG 2008; DCLG 2011). The concerns of central government that councils and councillors were not in touch with citizens, the decline in voter turnout and evidence of declining levels of trust in politicians and public services (Barnes *et al*, 2007; Hay and Stoker, 2009; and Flinders, 2013) as well as a perception that accountability at the local level was becoming more 'opaque and inefficient' (DETR, 1998a:18) were all leading towards more participatory initiatives. Newman (2001) summarised the thinking:

The government clearly linked what it saw as a lack of strong and visible leadership with problems of accountability, including through the assumptions that the public know little about how councils make decisions, or who to complain to or how to hold them to account when there are problems (Newman, 2001:30).

Central government was pushing for the adoption of mechanisms to increase transparency in councils, for example through the Freedom of Information Act (2000) and the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency (2013). A review of the available grey literature, such as government and press reports, confirmed that pressures on councils to become more open online really began to intensify around 2010 (O'Reilly, 2010; Ahlqvist *et al*, 2010; Wilks-Heeg *et al*, 2012). Web 2.0 had enabled a burgeoning of citizen

blogs¹⁹ (Coleman and Wright, 2008; Bruns, 2008; Wright, 2009; and Bertot *et al*, 2010), with some critical bloggers taking the opportunity to film council meetings and post them online: see for example the Wirralleaks blog. The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations (2012) obliged councils to provide reasonable facilities for the public to use social media to report meetings and, as the press release states, ‘...thereby opening proceedings up to internet bloggers, tweeting and hyperlocal news forums’ (DCLG, 2012). Council were slow to respond and the 2012 regulation was quickly followed by a new guide entitled ‘Making Councils More Transparent and Accountable to Local People’ (DCLG, 2013) in which the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government was quoted as saying:

Modern Technology has created a new cadre of bloggers and hyper-local journalists and councils should open their digital doors and not cling to analogue interpretations of council rules (DCLG, 14th June 2013).

Following reports that some councils were still banning filming and ejecting bloggers from council chambers, the guidance was followed quickly by a press release which confirmed that the Secretary of State was determined to make councils open up to citizen bloggers and tweeters. In that press release Tower Hamlets Council was criticised for barring a 71 year old resident from filming due the risk of reputational damage to the authority. Equally, Stamford Town Council faced similar criticism for placing a ban on journalists tweeting from meetings due to the risk of them not accurately portraying a debate (DCLG, 22nd August 2013). In June 2014 the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government returned to the issue of opening up councils by challenging the new media policy from the National Association of Local Councils which recommended that councillors obtain written consent from the council before speaking to the press:

I am concerned that this Stalinist guidance will have a chilling effect on public life. I am making clear its contents are utterly opposed by the government and it should be withdrawn immediately. We should be championing the independent free press, not trying to suppress it (Municipal Journal, 19th June 2014).

¹⁹ Blog is an abbreviation of weblog and describes a web page, often produced by an individual, which is regularly updated and written in a direct informal style (see, for example, Wright’s 2009 study of political blogging).

In August 2014, the Minister issued yet further guidance entitled 'Open and accountable local government'. In the section headed '*Why are there new national rules?*' the guidance stated:

We now live in a modern, digital world where the use of modern communication methods such as filming, tweeting and blogging should be embraced for enhancing the openness and transparency of local government bodies. This will ensure we have strong, 21st century, local democracy where local government bodies are genuinely accountable to the local people whom they serve and to the local taxpayers who help fund them (DCLG, August 2014:5).

These guidance documents revealed some of central government's frustration with local government's desire to resist or regulate the public's use of the new technologies to tweet, blog and post online. The literature review revealed that problem wasn't lack of awareness of the new technologies: Spurrell (2012) found that 96 % of councils were already using social media, mostly the platforms of Facebook and Twitter, and a 2013 survey echoed that finding (BDO, 2013). Further interrogation of councils' social media sites for this study (see Chapter Four) pointed to part of the problem: the council sign up rates did not sufficiently identify actual usage of social media. There was evidence of what might be termed 'place-keeping' behaviour (see Chapter Four), where a site was set up for a council but not populated with any content. There was also evidence of council social media sites which might be categorised as being stuck in '*providing a stream of information mode*' Landsbergen (2010:140). In these cases conventional press releases were re-issued on the social media platforms with little or no interactivity with citizens, fixed in what Coleman and Wright termed '*broadcast mode*' (2008:4). Ellison and Hardey (2014) describe this as:

...using social media 'passively' as one means, among others, of pushing information about local services to the public (Ellison and Hardey, 2014:32).

As well as evidence of councils' resistance to central government's attempt to coerce or micro-manage their engagement with the new technologies, evidence emerged in the literature review of attempts by councils to engage in the new media, often unsuccessfully. Some councils found it hard to manage the informality required to succeed on the new platforms: for example Stockport council made the national newspapers in 2009 when six months after setting up a Facebook page to engage with local citizens it had only garnered six 'Facebook friends' (Manchester Evening News, 2010). Coleman and Blumler (2009) were critical of these

types of top down engagement by organisations describing them as pseudo participation lacking credibility with the intended audiences:

...e-democracy from above can be read as a strategy for disciplining civic energy within the constraining techno-political sphere of managed cyber-space (Coleman and Blumler, 2009:115).

That the spaces of social media-enabled discussion were difficult for councils to discipline and control can be evidenced from the rash of often short-lived critical blogs and Facebook pages aimed at councils, for example 'Nottingham is Crap', 'Broken Barnet' and 'Wirral Leaks'. These examples of councils failing to connect with citizens underline the arguments made by Polat and Pratchett (2009), that:

...there is a significant disjuncture, therefore, between the way in which local governments are seeking to enact citizenship and the ways in which citizens themselves are realising their own political efficacy online (Polat and Pratchett, 2009:204).

The disjuncture between the managed spaces of formal local government life and the informal, direct and participative spaces of social media remains a real obstacle for councils and councillors in using the technology for purposes of local democratic renewal and the following case study chapters offer some further examples of councils failing to gain audiences by setting up their own new online sites rather than '*going where the eyeballs are*' (Carr-West and Dale, 2011).

Reputational damage

There were early attempts to constrain or regulate social media use, particularly where it was perceived as damaging to a council's reputation. Reputational accountability was seen in Chapter Two as having an increasing salience for councils. One early example was that of South Tyneside council which went to court in California to establish the identity of a Twitter user who had been allegedly posting libellous statements about councillors and council officers (BBC website, 2011). Councils which sought to avoid the possibility of reputational damage by restricting the choice of platforms included East Herts council, which stopped using Facebook on the grounds that they could not control who commented or posted on it:

An East Herts spokeswoman explained: "When we set up the council's Facebook account, the functionality was set to ensure only we – the council – could post

information on it...However, a technical change by Facebook has meant that we're now no longer able to prevent comments being posted by others. As a result, we have closed our Facebook account and opened a MySpace account instead. MySpace allows comments to be restricted – they can still be sent to us, but will not be posted on the profile (Herts and Essex Observer, 30 July 2010).

Attempting to control or constrain negative comment from the public and restrict reputational damage by banning or closing sites is only one of the dimensions of social media which is likely to make councils reluctant to engage. Howe (2013) describes the dilemma for councils well:

This is not to say that there are not considerable reputational and personal risks to going online - more open interaction with the public will bring with it the potential for abuse which will become part of the digital footprint of the politicians concerned. However, it can be argued that this is a risk that needs to be actively managed by means other than non-participation, as non-participation merely creates a vacuum where the democratic representative voice should be (Howe, 2013:14).

The concept of reputational damage had become increasingly important in more networked governance arrangements in the first decade of the century: where institutionalised accountability mechanisms are weak, reputational accountability grows in importance (Keohane, 2003:138). The power of reputational damage is illustrated by the case of Argyll and Bute Council, which was criticised in the national media in February 2012 for using council officers with covert identities to set up fake accounts to spy on community groups critical of the council (BBC website, 10th February 2012); the council was forced to apologise. The same council sustained viral damage to its reputation when it tried to ban a nine year old schoolgirl from posting critical reviews of her school meals on her blog (BBC website, 15th June 2012): the blog received 10 million hits. There was also early evidence of other types of resistance to social media, with attempts to constrain usage by staff being one of the major mechanisms employed: the high profile examples in the early days of social media use by councils which made the mainstream media included Hampshire County Council which completely banned staff usage in 2009 (BBC website, 10 March 2009), while Manchester City Council only allowed 96 of its employees to use Twitter (Manchester Evening News, 8 December 2009).

Further examples of attempts by councils to constrain social media use, manage reputational damage, reduce risk and control councillors' unmediated online output will appear in the later

case study chapters. If the risks for councils of engaging with social media were high, at least in reputational terms, what does the literature tell us about the enabling features? The enabling features of social media, which are detailed below, are identified in this thesis firstly as new tools for councillors to use in their roles as elected representatives and secondly and more importantly, as precipitating factors for gradual, but transformational change in the interactions between the councillor and the citizen. The next section of this chapter unpacks the enabling dimensions of social media and examines the opportunities opened up for elected representatives.

Section Four: The enabling features of social media

Having discussed some of the risks and challenges of the new platforms for councils as organisations this section now moves on to uncover some of the reasons that the benefits of social media might outweigh the risks, particularly for elected representatives. The enabling features or characteristics of social media are often referred to in the literatures as ‘*affordances*’, using the term coined by Enjolras *et al* (2012), who argued that:

Social media sites... have distinct, inherent properties, conceptualized as affordances and network functionalities. These properties reduce the cost of civic and political participation very considerably (Enjolras et al, 2012:892).

As well as reducing cost, the other affordances which their work identifies are: the increased possibilities of citizen mobilisation through the strengthening of networking and connectivity, the growth of ‘*information cascades*’ and the potential use of social media to increase the personalisation of politics (Enjolras *et al*, 2012:893-4). Coleman (2005) argued that social media have the potential to change the rules of the game in a number of ways:

Traditional barriers to accountability, such as the speed of decision-making and the physical distance between representatives and their constituents, are becoming obsolete. Public networks of digital mediation, with their capacity for synchronous communication and asynchronous storage and retrieval of information, are well suited to permanent communicative relationships (Coleman, 2005:191).

These affordances, or enabling qualities, of social media (mobilisation and networking, information cascades, personalisation, temporality and local identity) are now interrogated

below in order to gain more understanding of their specific potential to change the behaviour of councillors and disrupt the existing norms of local government.

The architecture of participation

In terms of mobilisation and networking, the potential lies in the power of social media to provide more interactive communication faster and thereby facilitate the '*architecture of participation*' identified by O'Reilly (2010) as a set of technological changes which collectively transform '*one to one*' communications (e.g. telephones) and '*one to many*' relations of communication forms (e.g. emails, broadcast media) into the '*many to many*' interactions of social media (Athique, 2013:55; Kersting 2012:11). Shirky (2008), in his popular work on social media driven change, has described the vast mobilising power of social media with fairly banal examples such as the recovery of a lost mobile phone, but also noted its use in political protest, such as in Egypt (2008:166). The work of Shirky (2011), Vissers and Stolle (2013) and Ellison and Hardey (2014) all contribute to an understanding of how the enabling characteristics of social media can act to mobilise a large number of people, through use of their person to person connections (friends lists). The power of being able to communicate with a large number of people instantly could also be described as a modern networking equivalent of the power of the family, friends and community networks which were contained in Granovetter's (1973) work in which he demonstrated how even distant or weak connections could act to enhance employability. Rheingold (2012) also identified how '*digitally networked publics, online participation...can translate into real power*' through the cumulative impact of individual behaviours (2012:112).

The importance of social media in enabling that mass communication relates not only to its speed (Vissers and Stolle, 2014:940), networking (Shirky, 2008:25) and preference aggregation (Chadwick, 2009:27) characteristics, but also to its potential to increase the participation of citizens in democracy. Like a social movement, the mobilisation capacities of social media have happened largely outside the historical modalities of voting or joining a political party. The decline in voter turnout in terms of numbers (Rallings and Thrasher, 2013) has also been associated with a decline in the role of established political parties in mobilising participation in politics as well as the rise of civic action outside the more formal political processes (Hay and Stoker, 2009:226, Dahlgren, 103:67). Online interactions with citizens and the reciprocity enabled by social media, such as the etiquette of following those who follow you on Twitter following (Panagiotopoulos and Sams, 2010:36; boyd and Ellison, 2008:223) increases the

potential for participation in democracy by the citizen. The potential for online collective action, mobilisation, is therefore established (see Hale *et al*, 2013 for a description of its use in petitioning the UK government).

Direct and unmediated communication with citizens

Another relevant enabling characteristic that was identified in the literature was the facilitation of direct unmediated communication between citizen and local politician (Cameron and Barrett, 2013:3). While it is true that citizens and politicians have always been able to interact face to face through mechanisms such as ward surgeries, the enabling characteristics of social media can be seen to increase the scale, volume and immediacy of such interactions to new levels (Dahlgren, 2013:35). Using social media facilitates low cost mechanisms (no need to write letters or attend meetings in town halls) by which the citizen can communicate directly, and often with immediacy, to the politician (and *vice versa*) without mediation by either the traditional media (e.g. local newspaper editors) or the formal processes of government (e.g. formal consultation meetings). Coleman and Blumler (2009) described this social media enabled direct communication as shifting the balance from indirect to more direct forms of representation, lowering the threshold of access to politicians. They also contended that social media could reduce perceptions of distance between citizens and politicians providing a tangible sense of connection and mutuality (2009:70).

Responsiveness

The open and unmediated nature of online interactions between citizen and politician, it is argued, has the potential to create tensions between the representative forms of democracy, as represented by the elected local councillors, Lowndes' '*institutionally embedded agents*' (Lowndes, 2005) and the more participatory forms of democracy which are represented in the digital public sphere (Bell, 2011). One tension uncovered in the literature (and in the empirical research) was the impact of social media on responsiveness by politicians. Responsiveness, as was established in the previous chapter, is seen as a key component of modern governance (Bovens, 2006). The research for this thesis showed that councillors responded to citizens directly and quickly online (see Chapters 6 and 6), in a manner which was decoupled from the usual formal case management systems provided by council or party.

Given the temporal expectations of social media it becomes increasingly difficult for councillors to observe the existing conventions of local government life, such as getting public

comment approved by the council's press department or by the political party. That social media are acting to disrupt the existing practices of councillors in terms of temporality can be illustrated by a quote from one of the case study interviews:

A tweet has to be done then and there. Tweeting about something you did yesterday is of no real consequence to anyone I don't think. With writing letters you do have time to think about it, re-read it, get somebody else to have a look. I don't think anyone would ever suggest, oh can you check my tweet for me before I send it out, that would be a very weird conversation (Liberal Democrat backbencher, London Borough, L23).

Responsiveness, at least in terms of speed, can therefore be seen to be disrupting and shaping the day to day practices of councillors, but responsiveness also has to be seen in the wider context of models of representation. Pitkin (1967) made the case that the elected representative must be seen to be responsive by taking account of the interests of the represented (1967:155). As Denters and Klok (2013) have commented:

In Pitkin's procedural conception of responsiveness, councillors should (a) be aware of the concerns of the voters and be willing to express these in the debates of the council and (b) be willing to engage in a public debate in which the councillors explain and justify the council's political decisions to citizens (Denters and Klok, 2013:665).

Examples of how social media provide political opportunities for councillors to express the type of representational responsiveness conceptualised by Pitkin (1967) will be provided in the case study chapters.

Information cascades

The next enabling characteristic identified in the literature as giving social media the potential to have an effect on local democracy is that of the provision of information: enabling politicians to know more about citizens, improving the collection of interest articulation and preference aggregation (Haus and Sweeting, 2006:272). The information characteristic is described by Enjolras *et al* as 'information cascades' and they make the case that:

The technical architectures and social dynamics of information that characterize the production and exchange of information through social media are modular, flexible, mobile, and decentralized. They allow many people to act in conjunction and to

coordinate actions which cohere and aggregate, by way of information cascades across digital networks (Enjolras et al, 2012:893).

The importance of the information cascades to which they refer can be located in the discussion of the conditions for accountability in the previous chapter: the need for an informed public in a democratic society (Habermas, 2006). Social media enable councils to provide citizens with much more information about policies and decision-making processes (Ellison and Hardey, 2014:36), but as importantly, social media also enables two way unmediated communications with citizens, bringing the possibility of the *'facilitation of the reciprocal, many-to-many interactions of the kind that social media have made progressively more feasible'* (Ellison and Hardey, 2014:24). Coleman and Blumler describe this particular affordance of social media, the ability to interact with many people at once, as representing a shift from *'transmission to dialogue'* (2009:85).

The shift from the traditional modes of issuing press releases and writing to newspapers to unmediated dialogue with citizens is not unproblematic: social media-enabled information cascades and two-way interactions with the public also bring potential challenges for politicians. The unregulated, direct nature of social media means that politicians' lives are more visible online and the informal nature of social media, where the lines between the personal and the political are blurred, pushes further personalisation. The trend towards the increased personalisation of politics is not new, as Haus and Sweeting (2006) have noted in their work on elected mayors, but social media can be seen to be accelerating that trend. Enli and Skogerbø (2014) have also argued that social media are challenging the boundaries between the political and the private for politicians, while Denters and Klok (2013) linked personalisation to the decline of party politics maintaining that the modern emphasis was on *'a role conception that emphasises the personal responsiveness of representatives'* (2013:675). Landsbergen (2010:135) also made the case that social media facilitate the creation of a more personalised identity in political life.

Personalisation and visibility

While becoming more visible online might challenge the privacy of politicians it also has the potential to help representatives maximise votes by increasing personalisation. As Fenno (1975) in his seminal work on US Congressmen observed, voters may prepared to go outside their party political affiliations on the basis of their perception of a candidate as *'a good man'*,

someone authentic who could be trusted (1975:51). Eulau and Karps (1997:248) described this as '*symbolic responsiveness*', whereby citizens feel represented, whether or not the representative is delivering. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999:224) have also claimed that in a world of media abundance politicians must aim to demonstrate their '*regular guy*' qualities because the proliferation of media channels means the dilution of politics into human interest stories. Apter (2006:251) has pointed out that modern politicians are constantly under pressure to provide more personal information, such as stories about a hard childhood, as a mechanism for making them seem more human and less elite. Landsbergen (2010) has commented:

The less that government is seen as a "faceless" website, and more as individuals who have a name, have a reputation, and can give a commitment about what can and will be done, the easier it will be to see government as something (someone) working on their behalf (Landsbergen 2010:136).

Why might the increased personalisation enabled by social media have an impact on the roles of councillors? Part of the answer is that constructing an identity online can be seen to have a role in assisting forms of what Judge called '*micro-representation*' (1999:21). In the case of social media this does not necessarily mean that politicians should present an online identity as male or female, black or white, Muslim or Christian, but rather that they should intensify the presentation of themselves as close to voters and very local. Social media have the potential to intensify what Rosanvallon (2011), in his work on democratic legitimacy and trust, termed the '*politics of presence*' (2011:187) where citizens have a sense of proximity to politicians without having met them. For Rosanvallon the more fluid concept of the politics of presence in modern political life, rather than formal mandates, meant that representation should be seen as more of a narrative (2011:192). Social media, as will be illustrated in the later case study chapters, can therefore be seen to have the potential to provide new spaces for councillors to present narratives about themselves as more individualised and personalised local representatives.

It will be seen later in this thesis, especially in Chapter Five, how representing the shared experience of living or working in a locality through the use of social media can act to anchor councillors within a particular conversational space and also within a particular geography, strengthening more territorial place based identities for local politicians, as Lilleker *et al* (2010) noted in their study of the use of Web 2.0 and social media by the Liberal Democrats:

'...citizens and their representatives can build links based on actual geographic connections' (Lilleker *et al*, 2010:106). Massey (2004), in her work on identity and political responsibility, emphasised the relationship between identity, space and place (2004:10) and it is evidenced later in the case study chapters that councillors' use of social media provided citizens with conversational spaces that were very much linked to place. Athique (2013) calls these virtual communities a *'disembodied yet emotionally connected polity'* (2013:60). Barnett (2011) has made the case that the growing importance of network governance at the local level has pushed councillors towards a *'democratic anchorage'* role spanning the tensions of space and place (Barnett, 2011:283) and it will be seen later in the thesis how some councillors have sought to use social media to anchor their roles in localities. Hambleton (2015), focusing on cities, also highlighted the need to revisit place based leadership, arguing that place based identity matters and that local leaders can gain collaborative advantage by being identified as working with local people (2015:84).

The enabling features of social media in increasing opportunities for political mobilisation and networking, participation, information provision, personalisation, responsiveness and place based leadership all represent the possibility of strengthening democracy and it is to a final discussion of how that potential might be manifested at the local level that this chapter now turns.

Conclusion: The potential contribution of social media

The chapter provided a picture of the potential contribution of social media to local democracy and local democratic practices. Together with the previous chapter key themes have emerged and the scene has been set for the research contained in the later empirical chapters. The focus of this work has been very firmly placed on the democratic aspects of social media use and in particular on the impact on the roles and accountabilities of elected representatives, partly in order to fill the gap created by the dearth of academic material on social media use in relation to local democracy. The problem created by the emphasis of past studies on the technological and service related aspects of social media was identified and the framing of the work as a study of change within the traditions of new institutionalism theoretical underpinning was also introduced as was the subsidiary frame of social movement theory. Conceptualising social media use by citizens as a form of social movement which was putting pressure on councils and councillors was devised as a way of offering a language and a framework for discussing how existing behaviours might be challenged by the new spaces for

online political discourse. Challenges to existing systems and practices, it emerged from the discussion of the literature above, were multi-level: coming from both the mass of citizens using social media, but also from above, from central government's emphasis on transparency and citizen engagement.

The chapter examined the debates and controversies around the contribution of social media to democracy and laid to rest some of the more common myths about social media. It also identified the polarised nature of the debate, from utopians who claimed that a new Athenian inspired democracy would arise from the use of new technologies (see Chadwick, 2012:12 for examples), to those who had a more pessimistic view (see Margetts, 1999: xv). Some of the polarised views of social media are explored in the case study chapters for what they tell us about the impact of social media on the work of the councillor. The specific characteristics or affordances of social media were highlighted one by one, particularly those concerning openness and transparency, lack of mediation, personalisation and authenticity, the shrinking of distance between citizen and elected representative, velocity and scale, immediacy and the potential utility of the new interactive technologies to councillors in terms of creating local place based identities.

Here some of the early difficulties faced by councils as they responded to the wider social trends of new media were exposed for the first time, in particular the visibility and transparency of often critical debate taking place in the public arena. There were indications that the management of undesirable comment and reputational accountability had been particularly challenging for councils, as was evidenced by the negative publicity attracted by some attempts to control or extinguish criticism. That councils' institutional repertoires of ignoring or banning critical comment online were, as was evidenced by the critical blogs, likely to be subverted by the new channels for comment, was also demonstrated. The interactions between councils' attempts to constrain social media use and digitally confident councillors' attempts to embed its practices into their local political repertoires form a substantial part of the material which emerged from the empirical work. Allied to the pressure on councils created by citizens' use of social media was the pressure created by central government relating to the need for local councils to be more accountable to citizens and to increase the potential for engagement and participation in council decision-making.

The potential contribution of social media to the development of more conversational and more participative forms of engagement between citizen and elected representative is a core

thread running through the chapter. The direct nature of digitally enabled, often unmediated, conversations between residents and councillors and this direct communication represents a challenge to the current systems of accountability. If the utterances of politicians cannot be regulated through the mechanisms of accountability identified in the previous chapter, such as prior approval by party or council officials, what might be happening to the current institutional '*rules in use*' (Lowndes *et al*, 2006)? Lowndes and Roberts (2013) drew attention to the possible '*opening up spaces for rule breaking or shaping*' (2013:90) following the failure of old rules. The new media were opening up opening up new spaces and new political opportunities for the enactment of democracy at the local level and the question therefore to be explored in the case study chapters was whether councillors would utilise these opportunities and if so, what would they use them for?

The immediacy and responsiveness of the new media offered potential to open up new channels for discussion of everyday local issues as well as policy issues. Facebook and Twitter were seen in the literature as largely conversational media (Shirky, 2011:6; Ellison and Hardey, 2014:37), which, while not being especially well designed to carry the grand narratives of politics, were seen to suit the more mundane everyday exchanges of citizenship and local political life (Loader and Mercea, 2011:758). Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook may not have been initially designed for political life, but they represent conversational spaces which are already occupied by citizens. As Barnsley Councillor Cheetham commented at a conference (2014):

If you were a local politician and you walked past a room in the Town Hall where people from your ward were having a discussion on local issues why wouldn't you go in – the same is true of social media (Cheetham, 2014).

The quotidian nature of conversations on social media platforms may well offer advantages. As Haus and Sweeting (2006) have observed, recent decades have seen a reduction of public trust in the '*grand narratives of progress in the rational organisations of public administration*' (2006:269) and it may be that the informal quotidian nature of dialogue on sites such as Facebook can help to reduce that distance and mistrust. Using the idea of '*political opportunity structures*' (Kriesi, 2007:69) which contends that both formal and informal political conditions can constrain or enable transformational change (Campbell, 2005:44), the proposition contained within this thesis, and illustrated in the empirical findings from the fieldwork, is that the more dialogic, open and participative features of social media can offer real collaborative

advantages which could potentially strengthen the local leadership roles of councillors. Following on from Huxham (1996:10), it was found that digitally confident councillors have already identified the collaborative advantages as well as mutual benefit in sharing information with citizens, enhancing capacity and advancing a particular vision online. What information councillors are choosing to share with citizens through social media is covered in more detail in the following case study chapters.

Revisiting Lowndes' (2001) definitions of new institutionalism is useful as a way of framing the overall approach to determining what is meant by the use of the word 'institutions' in this thesis:

Institutions, then, provide the 'rules of the game', while organisations—like individuals—are players within that game. At the same time, organisations have their own internal institutional frameworks that shape the behaviour of people within them (Lowndes, 2001:1958).

In this thesis the developing 'rules of the game' in relation to social media in local government are gradually uncovered through an examination of the broad themes which have emerged in this and the previous chapter: that is the themes of participation, legitimacy and identity, mediated versus unmediated communication, transparency, responsiveness and personalisation. The proposition is that the enabling characteristics of social media represented by these themes pose a challenge to the formal and informal institutions of local government and provides an indication of how the traditional representative role of the twenty-first century councillor might be transformed, or at least renewed, as a result. The institutional change described in the later chapters dismisses the narratives of disruptive technologies favoured by Castells (1997, 2012) as representing unsustainable 'punctuated equilibrium' explanations for change (Jones and Baumgartner, 2012) and argues that institutional layering (Heijden, 2011:9) is a better explanation for the changes observed in councils.

The focus of the case study chapters is on evidence of gradual, but ultimately transformational, change in the rules and practices that make up the systems of governance in councils. Within the case studies therefore, there might be reasonable expectation, using Streek and Thelen's (2005:31) typology of gradual transformation, of examples of '*displacement*', as social media practices were adopted, of the '*layering*' of new practices on top of old, '*drift*' as councils no

longer maintained regulatory or disciplinary mechanisms and of the eventual '*conversion*' of old institutions to new purposes. Examples of these categorisations of change will be seen throughout Chapters Five, Six and Seven, but before those chapters unfold, this work must first turn to a short methodology chapter which introduces the research methods used as well as setting the scene for the qualitative descriptive case studies. The next chapter provides an explanation for the methodology employed for the research and its appropriateness of fit in understanding the impact of social media on the roles and accountabilities of the councillor.

Chapter Four: Methodological approaches to understanding the impact of social media on councils and councillors

Introduction

The aspiration of this thesis was to explore and analyse of the impact of social media use in the formal and informal institutions of local government, adding to the current knowledge of the phenomenon. Fulfilling this aspiration within the constraints of a thesis timescale came up against two main challenges: the shortage of previous research upon which to build and the fast moving nature of social media technologies. The chapter describes how those two challenges were addressed by bringing together a set of quantitative data focused on councils and a set of qualitative data focused on councillors. The chapter also maps for the reader the research design strategy which followed on from the decisions, outlined in the preceding substantive chapters, to position the work as a study of change and to situate it within new institutional explanations of change. This methodology chapter therefore acts as a bridge between the more theoretical underpinning provided by the new institutionalist approach outlined in the preceding chapters and the more narrative case study chapters which follow.

The first section of the chapter begins with a brief exploration of the process fixing the boundaries of the original research question, moves on to a discussion of the organising perspective of new institutionalism chosen to provide an overall frame for the study and the reasons for the choice of a mixed methodology as described by Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998:46). It moves on to a description of the quantitative phase of the data collection work before concluding with a report of the findings of the quantitative phase. Those findings provided a picture of the terrain occupied by social media in councils and gave the opportunity to create a new categorisation of councils in relation to their use of the new technologies, providing a baseline for future research, indicating the prevailing norms and providing an institutional context. The findings from the quantitative phase also generated a range of questions and themes to be explored in the qualitative phase of the research: the findings demonstrated that no one single factor is sufficient to explain the complex impact of social media on democratic processes at the local level, indicating the need for deeper, more qualitative enquiries.

The second section describes the qualitative enquiry phase which took the form of four case studies investigating change in English councils. The aim of the qualitative phase was to

understand the impact of social media on councillors' roles within the context of the rules, practices and narratives of local government life (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:46) through the prism of councillors' own experience. This section also gives some thought to the strengths and limitations of the case study approach and provides a justification for the strategic selection of cases. The third section considers the ethical questions around access and informed consent arising from the fieldwork. In addition it addresses the particular ethical issues that stemmed from the researcher's own close involvement with the field. The section closes with a report of a supplementary survey of monitoring officers, carried out in order to provide a fuller account of the role of these regulatory officers in the creation of the institutional environment.

The chapter concludes with a summary of the overall approach to the methodology and identifies the initial themes that emerged from the findings. These themes are more fully examined in the subsequent case study chapters.

Section One: Framing the research question and study

The genesis of this study lay in the researcher's own experience of working with councillors over twenty-five years and observing their early struggles in coming to grips with the informal participatory qualities of social media. The thesis could have taken a technological direction, but the problem which seemed most deserving of an in depth investigation was about how councillors' relationships with local citizens might change once those relationships were being enacted visibly, online and in a new digital '*constellation of heterogeneous networks*', Coleman (2005:193). Were social media in conflict with the existing set of institutions in local government and how would councillors adapt their practices to manage within the new digital environments?

The initial search to frame a specific research question presented several particular challenges. The first challenge was identified in the previous chapter: as Abbot (2012:97) has suggested, academic research has struggled to keep pace with the fast moving nature of the new technologies and, as Hepburn (2012:37) has noted, there was also dearth of similar studies in this area. For example, an initial online search of the forty volumes of the *Local Government Studies* journal which were produced between 2005 and 2012, using search queries combining terms such as 'social media' with 'accountability' or 'legitimacy', yielded nothing of relevance at all.

The second challenge was defining the boundaries of the study: what was the specific nature of the problem being investigated and what were its particular features and characteristics? A study which only looked at what individual councillors were doing in relation to social media ran the danger of over-stating the role of agents, the councillors, while underestimating the role of the institutional systems within which they were embedded. If social media was really having some impact on councillors it might be expected to have created observable, and therefore to some degree measurable, change within the institutions of the council which shape and constrain the behaviour of the elected representatives: as Chapter Three demonstrated, the use of any technology is context specific. The decision was taken to explore change in the set of historic institutions, both formal and informal, that constitutes councils, as well as in the views and the behaviour of councillors as *'actors embedded in routine'* (Hay, 2002:12) with the expectation that the interaction between the two would yield useful material. Using Lowndes' concept of the *'rules of the game'* (1996:183) to anchor the study also helped to focus on the constraining and facilitating qualities of social media for councillors in their representative roles in an increasingly digitised environment. The focus on the *'rules of the game'* shaped the research question to become: *How have social media affected the institutions of local government and the traditional representative practices of councillors?*

Locating the thesis within a new institutional framework which encompasses both councils' formal rules relating to social media and councillors' everyday practices in relation to social media and local democracy raised the question of the most appropriate methodology. The initial thinking was that a quantitative study might be more suitable and this idea was reinforced by the fact that Twitter, Facebook and online blogs, the main social media platforms used by councils were freely accessible (see studies in 2012 by Spurrell and by Ellison and Hardey in 2013). A short pilot study of social media use in the twenty-two councils in Wales was therefore carried out in order to test the feasibility of this approach and to explore the possibilities of using this public domain material.

The initial results of that Welsh test exercise (see Appendix C) identified some interesting findings which indicated that the use of social media by councils was more complex than had initially been envisaged. The findings revealed a pattern of place-marking or place-keeping, where councils were only nominally represented on social media platforms. The pattern of place-keeping fitted with the comments made by Spurrell (2012) and Ellison and Hardey (2013) that there was an absence of real interaction with the public on government social media sites.

The findings from the preliminary survey of Welsh councils also suggested that further data collection which was qualitative in nature might be needed to fill the knowledge gap about what was actually happening in the field. The data which were available online in the public domain did not appear to yield sufficient material to gain understanding about whether rules, practices and narratives were being transformed at the local level or whether what was being observed was just a mechanical transfer of existing practices to a new online channel. The Welsh pilot survey work also resolved the dilemma of whether the main unit of investigation at the quantitative phase should be all councils or just a sample. Although the original intention had been to look at all U.K. councils, the volume of survey work in the pilot led to the pragmatic decision to focus on a sample set of English principal authorities.

Having established the main parameters of the research question and made some early decisions about focus and size the next task was to select an organising or theoretical perspective for the inquiry. The choice of organising perspective is often articulated in the literature as a dualism or a dichotomy where positivist or interpretivist paradigms compete for dominance as described by Patton (1990:38) and Blaikie (2000:160). The forced choice of one of these perspectives was described by scholars such as Guba and Lincoln (1994) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) as paradigm wars. The philosophical claims about what constitutes knowledge still divide scholars (Blaikie, 2000:160). In essence positivists take the ontological position that the world is objectively real, that it exists externally to and independent from the observer and is therefore measurable (Blaikie, 2000:102). Interpretivists view reality as socially constructed and subjectively interpreted by actors and therefore capable of being understood relative to context (see Crotty, 1998:67; and Blaikie, 2000:114). Creswell (2003) has argued that these dichotomous stances have softened in recent decades into more of continuum between the two with studies tending '*to be more quantitative or more qualitative in nature*' (2003:4) allowing broader approaches by researchers and this thesis has utilised Creswell's approach by adopting mixed methods.

Even with the dispensation of 'broader approaches' there were still specific decisions to be made and particular challenges in the choosing of a research paradigm within which to situate the study. There was a need to fill a data gap in order to understand the broader picture of what was happening in local authorities was identified and there was little already available in the way of existing observations or numerical data which described existing patterns and regularities in councils' use of social media. Filling that gap initially suggested a positivist

epistemology and a quantitative methodology. There was another reason for adopting a quantitative approach: as noted above, relevant quantitative data on social media, for example the number of councils' Facebook 'likes' and Twitter 'followers', were easily accessible. The decision was therefore made to mine that data over three years to provide a macro level picture of the overall landscape and capture trends. The quantitative study findings also helped to establish institutional norms in relation to social media and develop some initial lines of enquiry for further investigation at the micro level.

A purely quantitative approach would have been inadequate in gaining an understanding of how the roles of councillors were being affected by social media. In a field characterised by rapidly changing technologies where definitions and interpretations were contested (Loader and Mercea, 2011:762), a more interpretivist approach which explored actors' own interpretations of the phenomenon was also required. As Shakespeare (2012), from the polling company YouGov, suggested, just counting numbers can be misleading. Noise in the system, such as the number of followers, can easily be mistaken for information about the impact of social media. He called for more qualitative approaches:

To understand the influence of social media you need to go beyond mentions and take two more steps – ascertain how those mentions translate into reach and figure out how the impact in the social media world leads to changes in perception and behaviour in the real world (Shakespeare, 2012).

The need to get beyond the 'noise in the system' therefore led to the firm decision to reject the methodological orthodoxy of the exclusive choice of one paradigm in favour of 'methodological appropriateness' (Patton, 1990:39) and 'mixed methods' (Creswell, 2003:4) and to gather data from both quantitative and qualitative sources. As suggested by Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998:1) the use of mixed methods brings with it some challenges, given that this approach combines two underlying paradigms which are generally to be thought inimical to each other: although Denscombe (2010:270), and others, would reject that polarity as false. Following the lead of mixed methods scholars such as Johnson *et al* (2007, 2009), Creswell (2003) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) the approach in this thesis avoided the potential epistemological confusion of mixing methods by developing a typology in the first (quantitative) phase of the data collection and using this in the second (qualitative) phase of the study. The development of a typology (which is explored below) helped manage the sheer amount of data which was potentially available. Most English councils have some level of

electronic interaction with citizens, all potentially providing a thick seam of data. The problem of volume was also addressed by having a clear idea about the unit of study at each phase of the research. Having a quantitative data collection phase enabled an initial focus on the macro level, using the council as the unit of study as well as enabling the generation of themes for further exploration in the qualitative phase, when the focus shifted to micro level and the unit of study was the councillor. The phased approach is described in further detail below.

Section Two: Developing quantitative approaches

The section describes the strategy employed for the quantitative data collection phase. The information from this first phase was crucial in understanding the use of social media at the macro level of councils. Given the absence of recent data in this area it was important to establish just what councils were doing in relation to social media: which platforms had they adopted, how regular and consistent was their use of social media and, given the importance of participative forms of governance identified in the previous chapters, what were the predominant modes of interactivity? In other words, the investigation was aimed at establishing the current norms and practices of social media use in councils and the development of a basic categorisation or typology. Using that typology the study could identify the patterns: which councils were early adopters, embracing social media, which councils were tentative about its use and which councils could be seen to be avoiding social media altogether? Developing such a categorisation was also seen as helpful in carrying out the later task of situating the findings from the subsequent interviews with councillors within the context of the wider digitised local government environment.

The design was correlational in nature, learning the lessons from the original Welsh pilot study which indicated the difficulty of controlling variables in order to argue cause and effect. Rather, the design of the study was seen as the development of a tool for investigating interesting relationships, frequencies and patterns in order to build a picture of social media use by councils at a particular period in time. It was based upon a strategically selected sample of 84 councils, with data collected over the three years, creating a time series data set in order to enable the tracking of trends. As described by Yin (1994:113), a time series is a sequence of data collection exercises where the same data is collected over specific time intervals and it is particularly useful for tracking changes and revealing trends. The initial tasks were threefold: to establish the sample, determine the data points and select the variables to be used and these are described in more detail below.

In establishing a manageable sample size which would be large enough to provide variation yet contained enough to be repeated over the three year period, a decision was taken early in the planning process to exclude local town and parish councils from the total population of eligible English councils and to focus only on principal authorities. The National Association of Local Councils gives a figure of 9,000 parish councils in England alone, with around 80,000 councillors (NALC, 2016). There were two reasons to exclude them from the study. The first reason was pragmatism given the numbers involved and the second was that parish councils are very diverse and often under-represented in urban areas, reducing the reliability of comparisons. Higher level or principal councils share more common characteristics: for example all have websites, paid staff and statutory officers and all have been affected to some degree by central government's modernising agenda.

Having excluded parish councils the next task was to determine the sampling criteria for the councils which would be included in the time series data collection. This required some strategic selection in order to guarantee variation but also to ensure social media related use could be tracked. At the beginning of the study in 2012, there were 352 principal councils of different types: 27 counties, 201 districts, 33 London boroughs (including the City of London), 36 metropolitans and 55 unitary councils (including the Isles of Scilly). The City of London and the Isles of Scilly were then excluded from the sample on the grounds of being *sui generis*. The next decision taken was to exclude the 91 councils which had a fixed broadband score of more than 3 (where 1 is good and 4 is poor, Ofcom 2009). This exclusion of councils which might be considered to be outliers could be seen as biasing the sample, but the reason for excluding the councils which had poor broadband reception was to ensure that the data collection was less likely to be distorted by technical difficulties: if residents couldn't even get a decent signal they were unlikely to be engaging in conversations with politicians on social media.

A sample of 20% was taken from each type of council type, i.e. county, district, metropolitan, unitary and London Borough in order to ensure that all types of councils were represented across the data set. This gave 84 councils in total, enough to retain some heterogeneity of institutional context: 5 counties, 48 districts, 11 London boroughs, 7 metropolitan councils and 13 unitary councils (see Appendix D for the full list). In terms of control 55% of the sample-set councils were Conservative, 27% were Labour, 13% were Liberal Democrat and 5% had no overall control. A small number of councils where the researcher had worked were also excluded to avoid bias and these were replaced with the next council in the alphabetical list.

The time series data collection points were established as annual, midweek in order to avoid peaks or lows in online traffic, and outside the election period in order to avoid distortion by electioneering or the constraints of political ‘purdah’ which prevent councillors from speaking publicly on behalf of their council during that time (LGA, 2017). Overall the advantage that these strategic selections gave was a manageable sample set with which to address the research question with sufficient size and variation to see emerging norms and patterns in the councils’ everyday use of social media. The tests on the 21 variables across the 84 councils were then carried out using SPSS and Excel (Appendix E for further details). Descriptive statistics and simple correlate/bivariate analyses employing Spearman’s rank order correlation tests were used to establish any relationships. Where there was a choice Twitter followers were used as the main independent variable for those tests, selected because the numbers were greater than Facebook due to more take up of that platform (100% of councils by 2014).

Setting the variables and reporting the findings

The next task was to determine the variables (full list at Appendix F) in order to examine any correlations or interactive effects. In the absence of previous data sets upon which to build these had to be carefully constructed and proxy indicators developed in some cases. The selection of 21 variables and the justification for their adoption are discussed in turn below²⁰ and the findings are then presented alongside using a narrative form. The preference of a narrative form for the discussion of these findings over a more conventional table format was based on the experience of the pilot Welsh study (see Appendix C) where the initial presentation of the statistics provided only limited information. The narrative form of reporting of the findings selected here allowed more exploration of the subject as well as the signposting of themes to be examined later in the qualitative phase of the research. The findings are outlined below.

Variable 1, type of council, was selected in order to explore an initial hypothesis that social media was an urban phenomenon and that London Boroughs and metropolitan councils were more likely to attract social media followers. The hypothesis was *not supported*. The results showed that urban areas did not attract more Twitter followers than rural areas. Both Newcastle and Oxford councils had 5% of their population following them on Twitter, with the small district of Wychavon next at 4%, and then Lichfield, Tanridge, Lambeth, Westminster and

²⁰ In addition where possible figures were compared over three years to identify trends.

Northumberland all standing at 3%. In terms of Facebook (which was less intensively used by councils at the start of the study) Adur, Northumberland, Basildon, Barking and Dagenham, Cheltenham, Blackpool and West Somerset were the councillors with the highest level of followership. The fact that the councils with higher levels of followership represented both urban and rural areas and were different types and sizes indicated that, as in the Welsh pilot study, that there were further factors beyond geography and population size to explore.

Variable 2 was aimed at testing the hypothesis that *mayoral councils would have higher levels of followers*. It was proposed that councils with democratically elected mayors (three in the sample set), who could act as very visible figureheads (see Hambleton and Sweeting 2004 and Sweeting 2017), would attract a greater number of social media followers than the mean (calculated by followers as percentage of population). This hypothesis was *not supported*. Hackney, Middlesbrough and Watford, all mayoral councils, had only 2% of their population following them on Twitter, with Tower Hamlets at 1% and at these levels (see Variable 1) the mayoral councils were firmly in the middle of the sample.

Variable 3 looked at *political composition* (determined using the data available on Gwydir Demon which monitors local government political composition every year²¹). This test explored the question of agency: hypothesising that control by one political group makes it more likely that there would be a higher level of engagement with the public measured by followers. Would the Liberal Democrat controlled councils, for example, be more likely to have a large number of social media followers? This hypothesis was *not supported*.

Variables 4 and 5 used *population size and density* as another way of testing the hypothesis that urban metropolitan councils would have a greater number of social media followers than rural councils. This hypothesis was *not supported*.

Variable 6 was used to understand whether the *broadband speed* in an area made a difference to the adoption of social media. The hypothesis was that there would be a clear correlation between broadband speed and online engagement with local councils. It proved not to be a relevant measure as broadband speed improved rapidly during the first year of the research period and was not collected after the first iteration.

²¹ <http://www.gwydir.demon.co.uk/uklocalgov/makeup.htm>

Variable 7 was used as a proxy in order to understand whether there was any relationship between high *turnout* at elections and a high level of followers on social media. The hypothesis was that there would be a strongly positive correlation between existing high levels of turnout (as one signifier of political engagement) and high levels of online followers: in other words, this test examined the likelihood was that those using social media were already politically engaged. The test analysed the turnout figures for the last known council election against levels of followership on social media and the results showed that this hypothesis was *not supported*. Possible explanations for the lack of correlation here include the idea that social media is mobilising the involvement of different groups in politics (Enjolras *et al*, 2012:896) or that age is a significant factor in the use of social media, with older people more likely to vote (Guerres, 2007) and younger people more likely to engage with social media (Dutton *et al*, 2013).

The lack of findings of clear relationships between the different variables that is evidenced in the analysis of this set of variables was initially disappointing for the researcher, but that deficiency exposed the need for a substantial body of data which could be used to describe social media use by councils and to provide a landscape within which further work could be located. The next step therefore was to turn to an analysis of the numerical data and those findings are outlined below.

Variables 8 and 9 were intended to collect simple numerical data but presented a challenge in terms of definition of what constituted a council Facebook or Twitter page. Some authorities had set up a series of small Facebook pages which focused on service delivery: for example Hull City Council, had accumulated 48 different Facebook pages by 2014 (mainly service based, eg museums and swimming pools). The decision was taken to include only Facebook or Twitter pages representing the whole council, endorsed by the council and with recent postings. The status of accounts was then checked on Facebook and Twitter for legitimacy.

The number of Facebook fans and Twitter followers for each council, **Variables 10 and 11**, was collected to provide a proxy measure for effectiveness: if councils don't have followers on social media it can be argued that they are not attracting attention online. The results showed a general increase of followers across both platforms over the study period, but some variations were evident, raising the question of why some authorities had fewer followers than might have been expected. The result flagged up the need to explore, within the later

qualitative study, the factors which made council engagement and citizen followership more likely.

The data collection also sought evidence of a modal shift from the formality of traditional engagement with citizens to the informal norms of social media through the collection of **Variables 12 and 13**, using a simple numerical measurement tool devised by the researcher (see Appendix G). The results over the three year data collection period showed a gradual shift towards informality.

Variable 14, retweeting other organisations and individuals, was another proxy indicator used to test openness and engagement with the wider networks available through social media and again an increase was reported over the time period. The results of these last three variables, taken over time, showed a gradual trend towards more openness and informality indicating that institutional environments were changing.

Variable 15 checked, numerically, for active councillor blogs, using the Bing search engine with the simple query string of 'councillor, council name, blog'. Only the first three pages of results were scanned and any findings were checked for currency in order to deal with the problem of ephemeral blogs. The results revealed an increase in the number of councillors who blogged over the time period as shown below:

Table 2. Trends in councillor blogging 2012-2014

At least one blog	2012	2013	2014
Found	59	70	84
Not found	25	14	0

NB. Only councillors clearly identifying as elected representatives were counted in the study.

A scan of the style of content on councillor blogs revealed varied approaches with some focusing on very local matters and others using their blogs to focus on national party political issues and it is suggested that this is an area which is ripe for more detailed examination in future studies.

The results of **Variable 16**, which involved the numerical count of tweets in the previous twenty-four hours at the annual data collection point and provided a proxy measure of councils' engagement with Twitter, uncovered resistance to change by some councils. In 2012 the data showed that twenty-nine of the councils had one or no tweets in a 24 hour period

(surveyed midweek). By 2014 twenty-eight of the sample councils still had only one or no tweets. At the other end of the range, by comparison, in 2012 Greenwich council was tweeting forty times a day and by 2014 seven of the sample councils were tweeting at least twenty times a day. The findings suggested that the configurations of the councils which were at either end of the distribution curve deserved further investigation, addressing the question of why some councils were embracing the new channels while others still appeared to be reluctant to engage.

The overall picture of councils' use of social media was further explored through the collection of **Variables 17 and 18** which examined online informality and interactivity, using a simple scoring scale designed by the researcher (see Appendix G for details). The scale was used to give a proxy indication of the openness of the council to more participatory forms of communication. This was an important measurement to explore: as was noted in the last chapter the characteristics of social media, such as interactivity and the blurring of public and the private modes of operation were seen to have the potential to '*re-establish trust in government administrators*', (Landesbergen, 2010:135).

Although the results confirmed that there was a gradual shift by councils, over time, towards more interactivity and informality, there was still some variation between councils. In 2014 31% of the sample councils were still sticking to a formal '*broadcast mode*' (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013:769) publishing only notices and press releases. This pattern of path dependency (Thelen, 1999:386), given the pressures on council outlined in the previous chapters, suggested strong path dependency Lowndes and Roberts (2013:39) and institutional explanations for avoiding change that deserved investigation in the qualitative phase of the research. Nonetheless some change was evident: 52% of the sample councils demonstrated some informality, while 17% were found to have embraced the norms of the new platforms more fully. These findings draw attention to the continued '*stickiness of institutional cultures*' (Heijden, 2011:10).

The final variables to be reported upon are the three variables which were added for the 2014 collection point only: **Variables 19 and 20** which determined whether councils had been early or late adopters of the new media and **Variable 21**, total number of tweets since joining. The first figure below reports the trends which emerged and the second simply gives year of adoption.

Table 3. Trends in adoption of Facebook and Twitter 2012-14

Year	2012	2013	2014
Facebook adoption by year (n=84)	43	57	60
Twitter adoption by year (n=84)	75	82	84 (all)

(NB: only whole council sites were counted rather than individual sites for service departments)

Table 4. Stated year of adoption of Facebook and Twitter sites by English councils in sample set

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Facebook*	1	10	20	17	3	9	2
Twitter	5	40	19	12	5	3	0

*No data was found for 22 councils.

It should be noted that the mere presence of an account did not translate into active usage: further interrogation of those accounts revealed that a small number of councils, such as Dover, had established sites but never posted any content. Overall the results showed that Twitter, with its contained 140 character limit, was more popular with councils than Facebook. With regard to total tweets, the rural district council of Tandridge led the field for total tweets as expressed as a percentage of population, with over 10 thousand tweets (14%), followed by Tamworth at 8% and Exeter, Hull, Blackpool and Bath and North East Somerset councils following with 6%. That there was substantial variation in the actual use of the new media can be illustrated by contrasting the councils at each end of the total tweets range: Melton council joined Twitter in 2009 but only managed one tweet by 2014 compared with Oldham council, which joined in 2010, but led the pack with 18,000 tweets.

What conclusions can be drawn from the quantitative phase of the research? The initial hypotheses that were tested were formed by the ideas contained in the previous two chapters that social media had the potential to transform democracy by increasing participation and citizens' day to day engagement with local government. The expectation was that the more interactive platforms of Twitter and Facebook would have been quickly and enthusiastically embraced by councils. The findings of the quantitative data collection exercise told a different story, one in which local government's rate of adoption of social media was slow and uneven.

The results of these initial tests confirmed that the variation in councils' use of social media use cannot be related to one single factor, such as size, density or type of council, but they do point to an overall picture which is explored more fully below.

The overall picture: categorisations and norms

What do the overall results reveal about the change in local government under pressure from a digitised environment? While it might have been expected given the homogenising pressures exerted by central government as described in Chapters Two and Three that the adoption of social media would follow the predictable steady path of website adoption in the 1980s and 1990s (Pratchett *et al*, 2004), this was clearly not the case. The overall picture that emerges is one of heterogeneity in which councils are responding to the pressures of social media use by citizen by adopting and adapting the new technologies to meet their own specific organisational contexts, very much at their own particular pace.

In spite of that heterogeneity a set of patterns or norms merged from the data overall and this facilitated the construction, for the purposes of this thesis, of a working categorisation of councils. Although a full taxonomic approach would be premature at this stage, not least because of the lack of settled shared definitions in the field, three categories of councils emerged clearly from the data from the 17% of councils which were embracing some or all of the enabling features of social media, such as its interactivity and informality, the 52% of councils which demonstrated some level of engagement and finally the 31% which seemed to be minimising or avoiding engagement with more participatory modes of communication. Each of these categories is outlined in more detail below, populated by the findings from the quantitative data, particularly the results of variables 12, 13, 14 (indicators of interactivity) and 16, 17, 18 (indicators of institutional informality). The key institutional features for each category are summarised below.

Embracing

The first feature identified was that these councils were likely to have been early adopters of the new platforms. Frequency of tweeting and posting was also a feature. There were likely to be high scores for interactivity and for responsiveness which created more conversational modes in interactions with citizens and voices that were critical of the council were also visible on the sites (or at least not immediately taken down). Confidence in sharing conversations and information beyond the confines of the council's own output was evidenced by the use of

retweeting both individuals and organisations. Photographs were commonly used to boost content and questions prompting responses were frequently posed to the site users to increase traffic. Colloquial language and the use of first names created a sense of intimacy and human interaction and the staff managing the platforms adopted a conversational and problem solving tone. At 17% of the sample, this was the smallest group and the question is therefore posed: what is different about the institutional arrangements in these councils?

Engaging

Engaging councils represented the largest group of the data set. Determining features of this category included fewer tweets and postings, greater use of Twitter than Facebook, less informality and less interaction with the public. The scores for interactivity were in the middle or low range with fewer postings that were often stuck in what Landsbergen (2010) described as '*providing a stream of information mode*' (2010:140), such as council announcements such as service changes (e.g. swimming pool times), or seasonal content such as summer concerts or winter gritting schedules. The style and language of content, e.g. press releases and notices, meant less informality. In terms of interaction with citizens, it was observed that where citizens raised service issues these were often taken into the offline arena for resolution, so critical voices were less visible. Retweeting was generally confined to tweets from other public organisations such as the Police, rather than say local businesses, the voluntary sector or individuals. The pattern of sharing posts on Facebook was similarly constrained. Overall this category of councils raised the question of where were the areas of conflict between social media use and existing institutional arrangements that were constraining participation and engagement.

Avoiding

A minority of councils, 31%, were identified in the data collection exercise as avoiding engagement with the new technologies. That avoidance took different forms: some councils had registered sites but were not using them (place-keeping) while others were late adopters with infrequent activity. Sites which did exist were strictly controlled with no facility for interactivity, e.g. response to public complaints. Content was primarily council sanctioned announcements and press releases. For this group of councils there was little evidence of retweets, even from other public organisations. These councils seem unlikely to transcend their traditional arrangements for allowing public participation and could be categorised as

overly path dependent as well as resistant to the central government endorsed transparency and openness initiatives that were described in Chapters Two and Three.

The quantitative phase of the data collection resulted in the development of useful categorisations for viewing councils' adoption of social media. It also helped to set the overall context and gave an indication of some of the current institutional norms regarding social media use at the level of the whole council. The use of quantitative methods of enquiry alone could not however address the more complex questions which were raised in the two previous chapters. Why were councils embracing or resisting the adoption of social media at different rates, what were the institutional mechanisms at work within councils which were constraining change and how was this affecting the roles of one group of actors, councillors, who were daily enacting local democratic communication with citizens? To address these questions the unit of study had to shift from the whole council to the councillor and the methodology had to shift to the qualitative phase of the research, the case studies.

Section Three: Developing qualitative approaches

Phase Two of the methodology shifted the focus away from the more positivist paradigm of the first phase into a more interpretivist approach in order to provide a richer, more descriptive, account of how the main actors viewed and interpreted change in relation to the adoption of social media. In choosing a case study approach the aim was to understand the institutional context within which councillors were using social media and also to explore more deeply the rules, practices and narratives of local government life in relation to that use. Yin (1994) proposed that the case study approach was particularly useful in providing depth and detail on emergent phenomena where the boundaries were less clear and the application of this idea to the study of social media seemed self-evident. Yin argued that:

A case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 1994:13).

Part of the rationale for adopting a case study approach was that it offered a way of capturing the interaction between the key actors and their institutions and also, through systematic interviews, a way of understanding actors' own interpretations of social media as expressed through their daily practices as councillors. This qualitative approach was not intended to lead to the development of grand concepts about change but was rather seen as a way of

investigating a new phenomenon through the understanding of everyday practices and by harnessing '*middle range concepts*' (Jreisat, 2011:100).

The case study approach, and particularly the interviews with councillors, was selected as more likely to yield previously uncovered data from different perspectives. In addition, the tacit knowledge (see Nonaka, 2011) of the researcher, given her background in local government facilitated access and reduced the effort of searching out meaning with interviewees, making fewer explanations necessary. Jreisat's (2011:100) comments were also pertinent to the decision to use a case study approach: he described the case study as a research method as one where it helps to have '*a special relationship with the systemic and institutional features of the unit under study*'. The next task was to devise a process for the selection of those case study councils.

Strategic selection

The decision was taken that councillors within a single council would not yield sufficient data and this should therefore be a multi-case design (Yin, 1994:45) with the councils strategically selected for particular characteristics that were perceived as more likely to illuminate the research question. The unit of study was the councillor, seen here as an embedded unit nested within the larger unit of the council which in turn had a number of related constituent elements (de Vaus, 2001:220), e.g. officers, regulators. Each case was intended to stand on its own as an exploratory case study (de Vaus, 2001:227) before any cross case comparisons. The approach selected can be described as both descriptive and explanatory, looking at each council within its historical context and exploring actors' perception of the constraining and facilitating impacts of social media. The final chapter (Chapter 8) then harnesses the case study material for thematic analysis and analytical generalisations as suggested by Rhodes (1997:81) and Blaikie (2000:123).

The case study approach was intended to yield stories as well as facts: it is suggested that there are many powerful narratives to be unearthed about what people in local government, both officers and members, think about engagement with social media. The case study approach, which involves a degree of immersion in the selected councils, also provided a degree of triangulation making the study more robust (Blaikie (2000:263). For example, as one part of that triangulation process the statements made in interviews with councillors or at meetings were tested against their social media output, which is mostly in the public domain –

the contemporary equivalent of analysing political speeches. If councillors stated that they only used social media for discussing local political issues, their social media output was checked for the veracity of that statement.

In terms of the strategic selection process, two councils were selected from the minority 'embracing' category described above, in order to examine more closely the smaller category of outlying councils which seemed to have already '*converted*' to social media as in Streek and Thelen's typology (2005:31). Two councils were also selected from the majority 'engaging' category. Consideration was also given to including councils in the avoiding category, but that choice was rejected on the basis that the research question indicated a study of councils engaged in some form of change, rather than simply resistance. Strategic sampling then took place against specific criteria (see Appendix H) including the incorporation of at least one mayoral authority, at least one early adopter authority and a spread of geographical location, population density, type and political control.

While initially the plan was to have one case study, this stretched to four, because it was considered that in the exploration of a new phenomenon it was important to get as rich and deep a data set as possible. Although four was ambitious in terms of travel and finding interviewees, that number helped to address the concern that any one of the councils selected would actually turn out to yield very little illustrative material. There are of course dangers in generalising from such a small number of cases and these are well-rehearsed in the methodological literature (Denscombe, 2003:36, 39). As Denscombe has pointed out, small numbers and soft qualitative data mean that doubt can be cast on the credibility of any emerging themes or theoretical generalisations. The research design sought to mitigate this by the selection of four varied cases, supported by the quantitative findings of the first phase.

Selection of interviewees

The selection of interviewees in the case study councils was structured through the use of liaison officers within each council, in either Democratic Services or Communications Departments. Each was asked to identify the first five interviewees from within this list of roles: one leader or cabinet member, one scrutiny councillor, one communications officer, one scrutiny officer, one member who was a regular user of social media and one member who did not use social media. The selection was designed provide an initial mix of officers and councillors to provide different perspectives on change, senior leaders and decision-makers

who were likely to exert some influence on organisational culture and, for contrast, a non-user. Further interviews were then ‘snowballed’ (Oppenheim, 1996:43) within each council as interviewees were recommended by participants. The problem of potential bias in the selection of interview subjects was also identified at an early stage, with liaison officers in councils putting forward people as potential interviewees on the basis of their enthusiasm for social media use, rather than their role as originally specified. This had to be tightly controlled and offers politely declined. Towards the later stage of the interview phase it became evident that men were over-represented in the sample and specific efforts were then made with the liaison officers to identify more female councillors. The bias in the initial sample can be related to the likelihood of male councillors occupying more senior positions (see Bochel and Bochel 2008 for a discussion of this issue). A full list of the interviewees’ jobs or roles is given at Appendix I in order to illustrate levels of seniority and political position. In total 39 people were interviewed and the interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 1 hour 45 minutes.

Other activities

A variety of methods were used to establish the organisational characteristics and norms within which councillors operated, including: 39 semi structured interviews²² of councillors and officers (see Appendix J for question sets), as well as document analysis of constitutions, standing orders and published data relating to each council and reports from external auditors. In addition 43 hours of observation of meetings took place, both in person and virtually with at least one full council, one cabinet and one scrutiny committee observed in each council. These observations enabled the development of further insight into the political cultures and the existing norms for levels of openness and informality. In addition a desk exercise of scanning social media content from councillors was carried out using a basic framework of questions including:²³

Table 5. Grid used to interrogate councillors’ social media content

Local with a strong sense of place	Nationally focused
Political	Apolitical
Reinforcing party line	Independent

²² Stockport Council acted as a pilot council for the purposes of testing of the semi-structured questionnaire.

²³ Hashtag analysis, web semantic analysis and other web metric tools were considered but rejected as too time consuming.

Conversational mode	Broadcasting mode
Mobilising and campaigning	No requests
Personal information shared	Only professional/political content

Source: developed for this thesis from findings of Welsh pilot study (see Appendix C).

Interviews were audio recorded (with two exceptions where notes were taken) and professionally transcribed. It was originally intended that the data would be coded using a software tool such as NVivo, but after the initial exploration of the data the coding frame became too rigid for the exploratory nature of the analysis. As the researcher became familiar with the material a simple exploratory thematic approach evolved and this allowed the dominant themes to emerge for exploration in the case study chapters.

Section Three: Ethical issues and supplementary survey

The research design also addressed the main ethical issues: how confidentiality for interviewees was considered in theory and dealt with in practice; how consent and confidentiality for non-participant contributors to the websites which were data-mined could be addressed; and finally how bias and the interviewer effect were taken into account.

The researcher's background in local government meant that councillors and officers were at ease in her presence and therefore more prepared to be open. That openness presented the potential danger that interviewees might tell the researcher about something that they later regretted and this gave particular pertinence to questions of confidentiality. Three practical steps were taken. The first was to ensure consent and a clear understanding of how material from the interviews would be used: the consent form is given at Appendix K. The second step was to remove names entirely and only use job titles or positions when attributing quotes: however this still posed problems because some of the respondents had either a unique job title or were very well known in local government. That problem was addressed by the third step taken, which was to mask the identity of the councils by using fictional names.

The next concern was to ensure suitable treatment of non-participant contributors to the websites which were data-mined from the public domain, for example from the comment pages of newspapers. The ethical issues involved in presumed consent because material is already in the public domain have already been identified in research (see Denscombe (2003:54) and they represent a particular problem for researchers mining social media feeds. The question is whether informed consent for other uses can be automatically presumed.

Guidance for researchers on this and whether consent for further use is implied has been issued by several organisations (see Jones, 2011 and Phillips *et al*, 2011) and the use of masking of identities is suggested. The decision was therefore taken to protect the identities of online contributors by the disguising of user names and by changing Twitter handles²⁴.

Consideration was given to getting the balance right between gaining accurate information and, at the same time, given the exploratory nature of the research, allowing a degree of freedom to explore different areas. This balance was partly addressed by the decision to use semi-structured questionnaires but in practice, through the first two interviews, it became apparent that more structure and formality was required. The problem lay in background knowledge of the researcher which had initially led to too much of a two-way process, as described by Oppenheim (1996:66). As Oppenheim (2000:95) has described, becoming too close and conversational with interview subjects can be risky and this was apparent after the very first interview when the stimulus of the questions led a councillor who had given up blogging to send an email to the researcher saying:

Enjoyed meeting [you] Jane – you inspired me to write a blog post about the impact Twitter is having on community networks and organisation and support which will change the terms of trade for councils. Will post it soon (Cabinet member, Lansbury council, 2012).

Although there was not a way of avoiding the potential stimulus of future interactions, the experience was an early warning that more attention should be given to avoiding the kind of bias which might stem from over-engagement with the interviewee. In this type of situation a guard must always be kept against seeking out only material which validates the researcher's own preconceptions (see Diamond, 1996, quoted in Flyvbjerg, 2006). There was also a choice to be made by the researcher in terms of her own online visibility during the research, i.e. whether to keep a low profile online or be very visible, discussing the findings as they evolved. The decision to reduce visibility online during the research period was made in the light of the need for the researcher to reduce interviewer bias, because interview subjects could have been influenced by viewing her online content in advance and adjusted their answers. In addition, given the conversational and interactive characteristics of social media the researcher would have been drawn into unwanted communications with interview subjects.

²⁴ A Twitter handle is unique identifier or name used after the @ symbol in a Twitter address, e.g. DMU@dmuleicester.

Supplementary monitoring officer survey

The review of the relevant literature in Chapters Two and Three did not uncover any studies which threw light on the role of council monitoring officers in regulating and constraining councillors' use of social media. Following the interviews there was still a need to gain further understanding of the institutional environment for councillors. Monitoring officers have an important role to play in regulating and disciplining councillors' standards of behaviour, particularly in relation to the public, see Macaulay and Lawton (2006:702). The decision was therefore taken to carry out a small supplementary survey of monitoring officers.

A questionnaire using an eight point Likert scale was designed (see Appendix L for questions) and then trialled by the monitoring officer of North Yorkshire County Council. Using SNAP software the online survey was sent by email to every monitoring officer in England whose details were given in the Municipal Year Book in early July 2014. A total of 106 monitoring officers responded, representing 30%. The questions sought to gain an understanding of whether characteristics such as gender, length of service (also used here as a proxy for age) or personal use of social media had an impact on resistance to change and consequently in shaping the institutional environment. Full results and details of the tests are contained in Appendix M.

Overall, as with the survey of councils, there were no discernible relationships between the type or political control of council in which the monitoring officer worked and the attitudes held. Interesting relationships emerged between negative attitudes to social media and personal characteristics such as gender, length of service and personal social media use. Monitoring officers with longer service who never or rarely used social media themselves were more likely to be resistant to change and to express punitive views about social media such as *'councils should be clipping politicians' wings on inappropriate social media use'*. Women were more likely to be confident social media users themselves, to be more relaxed about the use of social media by councillors and more likely to agree that constitutional rules should be changed to take account of new practices. These findings suggest that although social media was creating pressures on councils to become more open, transparent and participative, the lack of personal knowledge or personal experience of social media reported by the longer serving monitoring officers appeared to reinforcing a culture of institutional constraint and this theme is explored further in the case study chapters.

Conclusion: Reflections on the research process

The aim of the chapter was to set out how the task of exploring social media related change in the formal and informal institutions of local government might be tackled methodologically, a task which presented a particular challenge in the absence of similar studies. The chapter began by outlining the genesis of the research question as located in the researcher's own background as a local government manager and this was followed by a description of how the research question was eventually refined in order to be exploratory in the examination of a new, fast evolving phenomenon but also to encompass the two aspects of change: council institutions and councillors. Using a methodology which employed mixed methods the research design evolved into two distinct phases, moving from the macro (council) level to the micro (councillors).

As the account given above revealed, the approach involved the construction of a series of variables for substantial data collection covering 84 councils over a three year period. The findings of that quantitative exercise were used to develop an initial categorisation of councils' use of social media which formed a baseline and without which it would have been difficult to locate the thesis. Those categories were used to provide a 'big picture' of current practice, but also helped to establish some current norms of social media use such as adoption rates, levels of followership across the platforms and degrees of informality and interactivity. Tracking some of this data over three years led to an understanding of how these patterns were changing with identifiable trends towards informality and interactivity. The categorisations also revealed that some councils were avoiding the new channels and attempting to control the participatory features of social media.

That baseline established a foundation for the development of the second, qualitative phase. The rationale for the strategic selection of the four councils, the selection of potential interviewees and the process of defining questions was outlined. Interviewing councillors about their institutional context and how that shaped their own adoption of social media was considered to be the best approach, methodologically, for tracking and understanding social media practices at the local level. Taking the interview results alongside the observations and document analysis provides data that address the questions raised in the previous chapter: can the specific characteristics of social media increase the legitimacy and accountability of councillors and transform their daily enactments of their roles?

Added to the case studies was a supplementary survey which identified the potential role of the institutional regulators, monitoring officers, in disciplining and shaping councillors' use of the new media. If, as was argued in Chapter Three, social media use by citizens is exerting pressure on councillors to increase engagement with the public and to become more transparent and open in their representative roles, is it likely that monitoring officers will begin to flex and adapt the existing rules that constrain unmediated communication? What are the institutional arrangements in each council that seem to lend themselves in maximising the participatory and engagement features of social media? Addressing that question is central to each of the case studies that follow.

Two further reflections can be made from engaging with the research process overall. The first was that the process yielded a large amount of baseline material that may be useful to future researchers. The data will be deposited, appropriately coded and anonymised, with the ESRC and JISC funded UK Data Archive at Essex University, allowing it to be professionally curated and made accessible. The second reflection is a personal one about the challenges for the researcher in tackling original research with limited recent academic experience after twenty-five years as a local government practitioner. The weaknesses of that background are undoubtedly evident in the work, but it is argued that this is balanced by the strength of the depth of observation and the understanding of councils and councillors and it is hoped that this enhances the richness of the case studies.

It is to the first of those case studies that the next chapter turns, moving on to a more detailed examination of the ways in which councillors and other actors have changed their behaviour in response to the contentions of social media. Through the words of council officers and elected representatives we begin to see how the institutional mechanisms of regulation and constraint which mould and shape conduct in councils are beginning to change through interaction with the enabling characteristics of social media, starting with Lansbury Council, a London Borough.

Chapter Five: Lansbury, a connected and metropolitan council?

Introduction

The chapter sets out the first case study council: the London Borough of Lansbury²⁵. The case study is considered in the context of the pressures created by social media's contestation of the established rules, practices and narratives of councils (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:46). The chapter illuminates the dynamics of change in relation to social media over a period of time in a narrative form through the presentation of interviews. It also tracks the impact of those changes on the roles of councillors. The institutional change processes identified by Streek and Thelen (2005:31) which were introduced in Chapter Two, i.e. displacement, layering, drift and conversion, are used to highlight the changes taking place in Lansbury. The enabling and constraining features of social media use that were identified in Chapter Three are also harnessed to explain how the behaviour of both councillors' and officers' is being shaped. The analysis of those changed behaviours is firmly located within the new institutionalist perspective on organisational change provided by the work of Lowndes and Roberts (2013) which highlights how the unevenness of change processes can open up spaces within which local actors can use to adapt the rules of the game for their own advantage (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:126,127). The chapter demonstrates how the political opportunity structures opened up by social media are providing spaces for some entrepreneurial actors, i.e. digitally confident councillors, to gain political advantage as elected representatives. It is organised into four sections.

The first section commences with a brief '*organisational biography*' (Lowndes, 2008:47) which provides the particular history, culture and circumstances of Lansbury. The organisational biography is based upon document analysis, interviews and the researcher's observations of full council, executive and scrutiny meetings. That organisational biography is important because it provides the background against which changes in Lansbury can be tracked and because it also introduces a set of path dependent behaviours within this council. In providing an organisational biography, this thesis follows Rothstein (1998) in declaring that '*Path-dependency... is not only another word for saying that 'history matters'*' (1998:29). The organisational history is important here because it provides a partial explanation for the later behaviour of the individual actors within Lansbury (Thelen, 1999:384, Pierson, 2004:22,

²⁵ Pseudonyms have been used for the names of all four case study councils to mask identity.

Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:113). As Rothstein pointed out, '*small early changes in institutional arrangements...can have great implications at much later stages*' (ibid: 29). The way in which Lansbury council responded to the contentions of social media will be seen later in this chapter to have been shaped to a substantial extent by Lansbury's organisational history.

Having established an organisational biography of Lansbury, Section Two examines the existing control mechanisms, or constraining features, that are currently shaping the behaviour of councillors and officers as they try to make sense of the digital world. Evidence is provided which demonstrates the neglect of existing regulatory processes and also of a drift away from more formal ways of operating: social media use by councillors was seen to be leading to a gradual defection from former practices. By adopting new practices and ignoring existing rules (Hirsch's '*rule avoidance*', 2008:785) thereby demonstrating a degree of unintentional '*decoupling*' from the council's formal control mechanisms (Meyer and Rowan, 1977:357; Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008:78), councillors were informally shaping their roles through social media use. Taken for granted control mechanisms (Lowndes, 2008:55) such as signing-off protocols or reporting for breaches of the Standards Code were consequently seen to have been substantially weakened in importance.

Section Three focuses on council meetings as spaces for participation, both physical and virtual and considers the impact of online voices on the proceedings. Section Four examines the triggers or driving forces for change. In examining the impact of social media on councillor roles and accountability we are left wondering why the utility of social media for elected representatives might seem to outweigh the need to observe the council's formal requirements. Why does social media use tempt some councillors to risk the wrath of their party groups or senior council officials? The exploration of social media's utility to councillors is framed here around the enabling characteristics or affordances (Enjolras *et al*, 2012) of social media which were identified in Chapter Three: the privileging of openness and transparency, personalisation and authenticity, more direct communication and the lack of formal mediation, the increasing importance of responsiveness, the shrinking of distance between citizen and elected representative, velocity and scale in political mobilisation and, finally, social media's potential utility to councillors in terms of strengthening their roles as local place based political leaders (Hambleton *et al*, 2013:7). With this in mind this section expands on the

compelling reasons given by councillors themselves for the incorporation of social media into the everyday practice of local politics.

The chapter concludes by exploring and analysing the findings to provide insights into the unevenness of the terrain of change in Lansbury and to identify exactly how that unevenness is acting to create spaces for councillors to engage in '*agential incremental change*' (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:117). The first section begins by setting the background and context: what kind of council was Lansbury and why had it positioned itself as a trend-setter for the use of social media in local government?

Section One: Lansbury: An organisational biography

The densely populated London borough of Lansbury has a population of around 300,000. It is diverse in terms of ethnicity with 38 % of the population coming from ethnic minority backgrounds (the English average is 14 %²⁶). Although the Index of Multiple Deprivation (ONS 2011) placed Lansbury as the 14th most deprived borough in England, it also has wealthy residential pockets created by its proximity to Westminster. Lansbury Council has had a stormy political history in recent decades. Based in an area with a radical past, the council frequently found itself in conflict with central government, especially when that government was Conservative. It was one of eight English Labour controlled councils which rebelled against the 1985 Thatcher government's regulation of local government rate rises, a resistance which resulted in a capping of the rate and the surcharging and disqualification of the 32 councillors involved. That municipal defiance as well as support for black, lesbian and gay politics gained the borough the reputation as one of the so-called loony left English councils (Sweeting, 2002, Martin, 2011).

Lansbury's council tax remained the highest in London for some years and services were rated poorly, with its performance rated as one star, the lowest rating, by the Audit Commission in 2006. The administration of the council was also turbulent, with seven chief executives serving between 1990 and 2000. Improvement began 2006 when the administration began to stabilise with a new Chief Executive who stayed in post for ten years: by 2012 Lansbury's children's services department was rated outstanding by Ofsted and it had the sixth lowest council tax of the thirty three London boroughs. The history of recent years is important in understanding two strands in Lansbury council life: on the one hand that history can be shown

²⁶ Ethnic and National Identity in England and Wales, 2014, Office of National Statistics.

to play a part in stimulating a desire by the Labour administration to prove that the council was now stable and well run; and, on the other hand that councillors had a history of independent and oppositional thinking, particularly in relation to central government. The history has a bearing, it will be seen later in this chapter, on the both the organisational environment and on the behaviours of serving councillors.

In 2014-2015, when the fieldwork was conducted, Lansbury council had 59 Labour members, 3 Conservatives and a lone Green councillor: the small Liberal Democrat opposition lost all their seats in the May 2014 election. The council had a female leader which was unusual in both the national and the London contexts (see Rao, 2005:325). Bochel and Bochel (2008:9) found that London boroughs were the least likely type of council to have a female leader and the Centre for Women and Democracy survey (2009) carried out a year later found that only thirteen % of (non-mayoral) council leaders across the country were female. As well as a female leader, the council had an unusually high number of female councillors. At the time of the study forty-six % of the councillors were women (against 31 % nationally²⁷) and six out of ten of the Cabinet members were female.

Evidence of a culture of innovation and an openness to experimentation emerged from the research with the council. Lansbury had been pioneering the concept of 'co-operative councils' and had become part of the national 'Co-operative Councils Innovation Network'²⁸. The concept of a co-operative council involved increased interactions with the public through consultations and community asset transfers and had been adopted at this point by only a handful of councils in England. Indeed, Lansbury was seen as an innovator in this regard (APSE 2011, Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013). The council's publicity posters and website strongly promoted public engagement and participation.

Lansbury's relationship with central government also shaped its history. Lansbury had been for some years involved in a dispute with the Secretary of State for the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) following councillors' decision to withdraw council advertising from the local newspaper and produce their own fortnightly newspaper for residents. The then Secretary of State saw councils' magazines as depriving the commercial sector of revenue and as covertly providing a political platform while using public funds:

²⁷ National Census of Local Authority Councillors, 2010.

²⁸ <http://www.coopinnovation.co.uk/>

The rules around council publicity have been too weak for too long allowing public money to be spent on frivolous town hall propaganda papers that have left many local newspapers looking over the abyss - weakening our free press (DCLG, New rules for town hall papers, 29th September 2010:1).

Lansbury was one of the five councils in London singled out for particular criticism and its initial response to this censure was to reduce the frequency of its publication from fortnightly to monthly in 2011. The Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) complained to the District Auditor that Lansbury council posters about austerity cuts were breaching publicity rules (BBC website, 18th January, 2011). The Lansbury posters were again singled out for criticism in 2013 in a Public Bill Committee where they were mentioned seventeen times during a debate (Hansard, 19 November 2013). The focus on Lansbury's communications output continued into 2014: the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at DCLG wrote to the council leader threatening action over the borough's free monthly magazine on the basis that it broke the rules which limited such free papers to four per year (DCLG, 21st August 2014).

The ongoing criticism from central government about Lansbury's communications formed a backdrop to the research; the ways in which the council communicated had a heightened significance to councillors and officers (Interviews LO8, LO9, L12, L18 and L22) and the criticism from central government was cited as one of the triggers for Lansbury becoming one of the early adopters of social media. Lansbury joined Twitter and Facebook in 2009. By March 2013 the council had 9,792 followers on Twitter and 395 on Facebook. By September 2014 there were 14,200 followers on Twitter and 633 on Facebook and the council was webcasting full council meetings as well as tweeting from its cabinet, scrutiny and planning meetings. Some 44 out of Lansbury's 62 members (70 %) had current Twitter accounts in 2015 and links to these were formally publicised on the council's main website. The Director of Communications was a member of the senior management team, reporting directly to the leader of the council. Lansbury saw itself as in the vanguard of social media use: councillors and officers interviewed for this case study described Lansbury as a creative, innovative and confident council (Interviewees L22, L18, L12 and LO9).

Another feature of the organisational distinctiveness of Lansbury was the fact that social media use by employees was actively encouraged, with only light regulation. Indeed the Head of Communications had argued successfully against additional controls for employee use:

[We]...put a paper together, which went to our management board... around use of social media... We want to encourage advocates for the council and one of the ways that can be done is encouraging social media use. ... Well we have an IT acceptable use policy and we have a Code of Conduct, they apply...naming particular channels, even down to social media, it becomes impossible to manage, and that's what we had to try and get across (Communications officer, L22).

This can be identified as evidence, at senior officer level at least, of an appetite for risk and experimentation with social media as this interview revealed:

What I like about Lansbury is we are willing to take risks. [My boss] lets me get on with stuff. If I turned round and said to him, I'm building Pinterest for the over nineties, he'd go, yes, go on, go for it because he trusts me, fool. But we do have that licence here; we are a creative innovative council (Communications officer, L22).

The modern light touch approach in Lansbury was further evidenced by the fact that the whole council's social media feeds were managed day to day by two junior communications staff who took it in turns to cover the output. Given the youthfulness of the staff involved it was not surprising to find that the style and language was extremely informal. This was expressed through the use of first names, idiosyncratic punctuation and shortened text-speak, for example as used in an anonymised example of the opening and closing tweets taken from the council's main Twitter account:

@lansbury_council: Hi all, Jo here. I'll be looking after #Lansbury twitter til 5.30 this avo.

@lansbury_council: Bye all, I'm off to the circus @southbankcentre :) Have a great wkend, we'll be back Monday AM. See <http://t.co/aLLL1OXl6> for info. Maggie.

The informality and personalisation of the language used on the council's online Twitter feed is entirely in keeping with the 'vernacular' language of social media (Coleman and Wright, 2008:4) but can be seen to be in stark contrast to what Coleman (2005) describes as the 'gatekeeping effect' of the style of formal speech used in local councils.

Having set out some of the organisational context for Lansbury, as well establishing its claims to be an innovative council at the forefront of communication with citizens, the next section now turns to a more detailed investigation of whether those ideas had become fully diffused

and embedded across the institutions of the council (Soule, 2004:295). Did the existing mechanisms for controlling and regulating the behaviours of councillors and officers offer any constraints which inhibited change from taking place? Chapter Three identified the problem of 'over-claiming' in studies of the impact of social media on democracy systems: would this also prove to be true in the case of Lansbury council?

Section Two: Constraining features - analogue systems in a digital world

There were two main areas which were identified from the research material that shed light on the constraining features in the institutional environment of Lansbury: those relating to officers' concerns about social media and those relating to the formal and informal institutional mechanisms which regulated and shaped councillor behaviour.

Constraints: officers and social media

With regard to officers it was the digitally confident senior officers who were keen to extend the use of the new technologies into the democratic areas of local government life:

So I think what gets me is that I've got this population out there that is just charging a million miles ahead, and we are crawling along painfully slow (Director of Communications, L18).

Senior officers were encouraging councillors to post on community websites and to: '*listen to conversations before you start them, [to] go where the eyeballs are*'. The same officer was also pushing the council leader to switch modes from analogue to digital in their everyday role as a councillor:

I mean [the leader], for example, has got a face to face Q. and A. at a school in April. There will be a maximum of a couple of hundred people there. I said you've got 700 followers on Twitter, you'll reach more (Communications officer, L22).

However, the more junior the officer the more nervousness was expressed in interviews about managing the online interface with councillors, particularly junior officers in politically restricted roles, wary of social media's potential for transgressing the rules of political neutrality:

I think the wariness about what one can say, I think is because we are in a slightly different and difficult [position]...because we are now in an authority that is

*overwhelmingly Labour. And I am very conscious of when we are doing things that we at least have to make the offer to the other groups. And I think there's some level of the members not remembering that. And I'm always very anxious that we are **not** seeing to be doing something (Scrutiny Officer, L54, researcher's emphasis).²⁹*

The cautiousness of Lansbury's officers about the new media was also highlighted by Lansbury council's decision to hand over the tweeting of the council's main meetings to officers in Democratic Services. Conventionally Democratic Services officers are committee clerks who take the minutes of meetings, acting in a politically neutral manner in order to record only decisions and the key points of debate. One officer spoke of the difficulty of managing social media output in the 'voice' of the council:

Wayne's tweets were superb, in terms of walking that line of, you know, repeating what a councillor had said and then summarising and repeating it. And he's a Democratic Services Officer, that's what he does for a living, and it really came across well. I had a couple of Scrutiny meetings the next night and I was paralysed by fear of trying to do that. The issues were a little bit more sensitive but ultimately, ... the Chief Executive [was] there and we hadn't cleared it with him or really done a full debrief on how the call in one went (Head of Scrutiny, L12).

What is revealed in this quote is that one of ways of managing officer anxiety about social media (see Hepburn, 2012:363) in Lansbury was a form of reversion to path dependency, harnessing the old ways of operating in order to try to manage and constrain the more open forms of dialogue. The Democratic Services officers in Lansbury were seen to represent a 'safe pair of hands' and a link with the well-trodden paths of administrative procedure (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:113). This helped to contain the more discursive qualities of social media by transferring analogue paper based clerking practices such as writing out skeleton drafts of minutes over to the digital production of tweets before meetings. The stickiness of old local government habits remained, as one officer recalled in interview:

I think that's one thing that I learnt most from the Democratic Services people, you know, they write out most of their tweets before the meeting. So it's just a case of copying and pasting them (Head of Scrutiny, L12).

²⁹ It is worth marking here the question of whether the fact that this was a Labour dominated council might distort the overall findings and this concern is addressed in the subsequent case studies which feature both Conservative and Liberal Democrat controlled councils.

Pratchett *et al* (2006) uncovered similar patterns of path dependency in their study of the development of council websites; their analysis showed that councils at that time were merely transferring paper-based systems online. Translated into the idiom of the new technologies this path dependency displayed itself in the continuing use of analogue systems in a digital world. Eltantawy and Wiest (2011:1217), in their study of the Arab Spring uprisings, illustrated the idea of analogue, or old systems, by using a journalist's description of the hand-written placards of the protesters as the: *'the analogue equivalent of Twitter: handheld signs held aloft at demonstrations saying where and when people should gather the next day'* (Beaumont, *Guardian*: 2011).

The other constraining feature for officers which emerged from the interviews related to personalisation, which, as will be seen later, could also act as a powerful enabling feature for councillors. The interviews revealed that for junior officers in Lansbury the blurring of the boundaries between personal and professional online identities (Dutton *et al*, 2013:21) felt risky. Sensitivity to this was particularly keen in Lansbury after the sacking of a press officer in 2012 following his tweet (on a personal account) that a rundown area of the borough should be bombed made the national media (Telegraph, 7th June 2012). The importance of political neutrality for officers and the need to continue the traditional separation of roles between politicians and officers (Wilson and Game, 2002:111) seemed likely to continue and this was illustrated by the comment of one officer:

When it comes to social media, we will tweet, we have to be very careful about what we write, but I have given a line, that we do not re-tweet any political or politician's tweets (Communications Officer, L22).

Although some officers, especially at a senior level, were actively endorsing social media in Lansbury and pushing the pace of change, the absence of clear rules for more junior officers as well as a concern about political neutrality was leading to caution in day to day practice, particularly around the interface with councillors.

Constraints: councillors and social media

The first dimension of constraint identified in the research related to the existing system of regulation of the behaviour of councillors in Lansbury. As identified in Chapter Two, the national Standards Code, with its potential for sanctions, applied to Lansbury councillors and in

addition both formal (constitutional) and informal (party group) conventions about signing off communications and press releases were in place.

In terms of standards issues, social media, it appeared, had opened up new and potentially dangerous ground for councillors through their online public utterances. In 2011 the Lansbury Monitoring Officer wrote to all councillors in terms which spoke of the level of concern about the risk of the blurring of personal and political opinions online:

I have attached for your information a copy of the guidance from Standards for England and would advise that you seek to maintain a clear distinction between your private capacity and that of your official capacity when using social media. It is also worth drawing to your attention that even the use of a disclaimer in a private blog, which states that any comments are not made in an official capacity, will not necessarily prevent breaches of the code being found.

All of the councillors in the study were asked in interview about impact of the Monitoring Officer guidance but there was no evidence that councillors had substantially modified their use of social media as a result. One councillor, who had been reported to the Monitoring Officer three times by members of the public for comments he had made on Twitter, was still an avid user of social media, but had adapted his practice slightly as a result of the complaints:

So I have interacted less, which I think, you know, that was my point at the time, was you're expected, well lots of people say they want politicians to talk the language, not that I swore, but like talk like an ordinary person and engage with people. And you do that and you get reported or threatened with reporting to the Standards Board for England (Scrutiny Chair, L09).

The modification of practice most often reported in the interviews was the elimination of swearing and extra care about the language used online. Regulation of online output appeared to have moved from external formal controls towards more internal controls, a form of self-censorship, as one Cabinet member commented:

I mean you do politically sense check yourself. And you sometimes think about re-tweeting stuff, so [for example] personally and off the record, I think the legalisation of drugs is an obvious step, I mean it's ridiculous, but would I ever say that politically, Christ...I'd be finished (Cabinet member, L08).

The second institutional feature which might have acted as a constraint on social media use was the convention or practice of 'signing off' public utterances of local politicians through the council's press office or the party office. The interviews revealed that councillors were using the political opportunity structures (McAdam, 1982) opened up by social media to flow around the existing bureaucracy rather than allowing themselves to be impeded by the existing institutional controls (Lawrence, 2008:173). When questioned about getting statements made online 'signed off' the councillors interviewed were unambiguous about its irrelevance:

I don't remember that ever happening. We are supposed to relate to officers there if we're ever asked for media comment; we're meant to direct them to the media office. But with social media ... it's all kind of collapsed hasn't it (Scrutiny Chair, L09).

The third dimension of constraint concerned the negative features of the new media: privacy and trolling. Concerns expressed by councillors echoed those expressed by the officers earlier in this chapter: nervousness about managing within the new medium. This nervousness related to two dimensions of social media, firstly the problems of personalisation, particularly the maintenance of authenticity and secondly the management of unmediated communication, particularly trolling. With regard to the difficulty of managing online 'voice', i.e. wanting to appear human but also as a politician, this quote illustrates the tensions:

Yes, so...whether it's a political or personal tweet, then I'm really careful about what I say, which is one of the reasons that it takes me so long to generate them I suppose. Because I'm frightened of saying the wrong thing (Backbench member, L53).

Another councillor had engaged with trolls³⁰ and bore the scars:

I kind of, when I was first elected I sort of got burnt, in that I had a big fight with our most famous blogger...And then he reported me to the Standards Board for England. So it's like, people like him want their cake and eat it, you know. You're supposed to be accessible and enter a dialogue with them, on their level. And then you do it and then they report you. So that was an instructive experience (Scrutiny Chair, L09).

There was evidence, particularly from the female councillors interviewed, that some councillors tried to reduce their exposure to intrusive trolling through a very strict separation

³⁰ Trolls: a term coined to describe individuals who use the Internet to malign or harass users and deliberately provoke arguments, made easier by online anonymity.

of the personal and political online (in contrast to the usual approach to social media, see Enli and Skogerbø, 2013:758 and Rogstad, 2013:687). The need for separation was identified by two female councillors:

All personal Facebook, yes, with blocked access, so I can't be found. It's friends and family rather than the campaigning...I have a Twitter account set up, probably about a year ago now...but I only use it for council related and ward related activities. So I don't do any personal tweeting or any tweeting relating to my other work. Everything is out there, I am very conscious of this (Female opposition, Liberal Democrat councillor L23).

...you do tend to get a lot of abuse when you tweet about yourself...but people are always abusing me online, which is understandable. And really, it may be a reluctance to show myself as who I am [not to adopt a personal style], but it's a deliberate decision, that I want people to focus on the policies rather than where I go to eat and what I do (Female Labour back-bencher, L52).

The larger than usual proportion of women councillors in Lansbury and on the council's cabinet did not seem to translate automatically into confident and authoritative use of social media by the female councillors. Other studies such as Dutton *et al's* (2011) work for the Oxford Internet Institute and that from the influential US based Pew Foundation (August 2015) have not found any significant gender differences in the use of new technologies and social media; the approach of female councillors has not yet been the subject of any academic research. Explanations may lie partly in the work of Bochel and Bochel (2008) on the confidence of female councillors which was explored in Chapter Two. The picture of female councillors finding themselves more exposed and less comfortable online than their male counterparts appears again in the later case studies, but it has not been possible to explore the questions of gender more deeply within the confines of this thesis. The findings indicate that there are wider questions about female politicians' responses to social media, with its risk of trolling and male online aggression, that deserve further investigation.

The other constraining feature mentioned in this context that emerged in interviews was the openness of the new medium. The reach of social media meant more diverse audiences (Gibson, 2010:16; and Loader and Mercea, 2011:12) as well as the possibility of more reflexive feedback from citizens not previously engaged in politics (Coleman *et al*, 2008:182). Within the

set-piece arenas of council meetings councillors could control identity and language: the direct and transparent nature of social media made that task less easy. The focus of this chapter next turns to those formal meetings and the impact of social media on the '*set-piece council meetings that rubber-stamp committee decisions*' Lowndes (2001:1966).

Section Three: Council meetings and spaces for participation

Observation of Lansbury's full council meeting revealed analogue practices sitting alongside the new digital modes of operating. Full council meetings were live streamed and also live tweeted to the public. Analysis of the formal council Twitter feed content showed a sober 'broadcast' mode (Coleman and Wright, 2008:4) rather than one which was rather more informal, conversational and fluid. That this was the case might be explained by the pre-meeting preparation of the tweets referred to above.

Newman (2005), in her work on participative governance, described how local government has traditionally framed public engagement by:

...controlling the places, norms and rules of participation – for example by setting agendas, defining membership and delineating the interests and identities that can legitimately be expressed (Newman, 2005:133).

In Lansbury the time allocated for the formal question and answer session known as public question time was thirty minutes in total. Questions were expected to be submitted formally in advance and only one representative of any group of petitioners was allowed to speak for five minutes at the beginning of the meeting. Contemporaneous tracking of senior councillors' Twitter accounts and a nearby hyperlocal blogging site³¹ during meetings showed that councillors were engaged in conversations online with members of the public, local bloggers and campaigners as the meeting progressed. While those citizens who were attending the formal meeting were allowed only one question and a supplementary, the voices of citizens operating online were privileged by being able to ignore these formal constraints and carry on dialogue with individual councillors using digital tools. There was some recognition of this clash of analogue and digital systems and there was evidence of an attempt to regulate the use of devices, as one councillor commented:

³¹ Hyperlocal websites provide '*online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community*' Radcliffe, D (2012). "Here and Now: UK hyperlocal media today". London: NESTA.

I get irritated by that actually. In fact, I did have words with the Chief Whip about it and he did say well not to be so obvious about having their phones out. Because people were making speeches and everyone's got their phones out and tweeting, and I find it rude (Labour back-bencher, L52).

The use of the characteristics of social media to enable dialogue to go beyond the set-piece open theatre of the formal council meeting (Copus, 2004:193) and to create a new terrain for dialogue marks an extension of the communicative spaces for interactions between citizens and representative, requiring new behaviours from councillors. Coleman (2005) argued that politicians who want to be in touch with citizens must *'inhabit mutual communicative spaces with the public'* (2005:195). These unmediated interactive online spaces represent a new type of political arena within which local politicians have to operate because communications are direct, not mediated, cutting through the constitutionally determined rules which frame public participation in meetings. In Lansbury the new media was democratising *'representation by making it a more direct relationship'* (Coleman, 2005:178).

Within Lansbury it was observed that the council's efforts to frame precisely how participation took place at the full council meeting were being subverted or bypassed by the direct entry of other participants acting outside the existing mechanisms of control. Digital behaviours can be seen to be replacing analogue behaviours, corresponding to Streek and Thelen's category of *'displacement'* (2005:31) in their typology of institutional change.

The constraining features identified above and the tensions between analogue and digital modes of operation can be seen to be having an impact on the institutional dynamics of Lansbury. There were tensions for officers around political neutrality as well as a strong pull towards path dependency. There were tensions around the rules for online and offline public participation. There was evidence of attempts to constrain councillors' social media use through formal mechanisms and sanctions. Finally, it was clear that individual councillors were struggling with the new media: managing personalisation and transparency, dealing with multiple audiences and responding to negative feedback such as trolling. Given these constraining features, what were the compelling drivers which made councillors ignore or resist the existing institutional conventions? The next section begins to answer that question through an examination of the political and representational utility of the new technologies for councillors operating at the local level, looking at how they were able to combine old and new practices in their roles as councillors and create change.

Section Four: The utility of social media

Interviews with Lansbury officers and councillors revealed a number of emerging narratives about the utility of social media: specifically cited were the enabling features of speed and networking capacity to mobilise and build volume for campaigns, such as petitioning the mayor of London for more police officers or protesting about the closure of services at the local hospital. Social media are enabling councillors to build attendance at events and to get a degree of 'virality' for campaign messages (Römmele, 2012:104) and the use of social media for these purposes seemed to represent a new norm which was already taken for granted.

Beyond those enabling features three particular dimensions emerged from the research which spoke of the particular utility of social media for councillors in their roles as elected representatives and those were: the enabling of increased personalisation; the enabling of place based leadership and the enabling of transparency and responsiveness.

Enabling increased personalisation of local politics

That politics is becoming more personalised is not a new claim and there have always been opportunities for politicians to put personal information in the public domain and to meet with voters (see Haus and Sweeting, 2006:273 and Denters and Klok, 2013:675 for a discussion of personalisation at the local level). The enabling characteristics of social media, as was identified in Chapter Three, can be seen to be accelerating the creation of a more personalised form of identity for politicians (Apter, 2006:251; Enli and Skogerbø, 2014:759). As Enli and Skogerbø commented:

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter fit well into this setting. They represent semi-public, semi-private spaces for self-representation where borders between offline personal and online mediated relations are blurred (Enli and Skogerbø, (2014:759).

In Lansbury, the main mechanism for the creation of a more personalised identity was the placing of some personal and informal information in the public domain online. A councillor, talking about Twitter, summed up the idea that it was a different way of representing yourself to voters:

I suppose it's the new bookshelf, you know, for when people come round to your house and look at your books and go, oh OK, this is what this person is, you know. And as much as books are useful... they're also a kind of status symbol, what art you have in

your house, the stuff that you like and the stuff that reflects you back. So I suppose it's as much about reflecting yourself back to the community (Cabinet member, L08).

There was a consciousness that political postings had to be leavened by other material such as comments on football or family and that is consistent with Apter's (2006) view that politicians must place more personal information in the public domain to gain electoral advantage (see the discussion about the construction of an online identity in Chapter Three). This new approach as was not always easy, as a councillor commented (summing up the views of many of the interviewees):

Well it's a really difficult line to tread, you know, I'm a real person, I smoke cigarettes, I drink beer, I watch football, I dance, I make cakes, I do all of these sorts of things. I also go out to community groups and I do community garden clean ups and I do children's parties and, you know, blah, blah, blah, all the rest of it. It's really difficult to get that balance across everything (Cabinet member, L08).

Using social media enabled councillors to construct a descriptive (Pitkin 1967:61), or even microcosmic (Judge, 1999:21), story of themselves as representatives, reducing public perception of them as distant elites and emphasising the 'home style' qualities identified by Fenno (1975:51) as necessary to secure constituent support. Social media afforded new opportunities to create that sense of intimacy, of the 'person' rather than the 'politician', but identifying as local was not the only way in which councillors were constructing themselves as authentic representatives. A strong sense of territorial identity was a central element to online personalisation of politics in Lansbury and it is to further consideration of the importance of place to the roles of local councillors that this chapter now turns.

Enabling place based leadership

The debate about of gaining political legitimacy through place based leadership, as discussed in Chapter Two, intensified in the UK as part of the debate about mayoral systems (Sweeting, 1999; Hambleton and Sweeting, 2004; Haus and Sweeting, 2006). Using the currency of social media allowed Lansbury councillors to appear informed about local issues and to use that knowledge to frame themselves online as legitimate and authoritative leaders within the local landscape. Contemplating the role of the elected representative one long serving councillor reflected on the way in which social media had increased her capacity to be at the centre of

information flows in the locality. For her that was a key part of community leadership and having a passion for the place:

Well what is a role of a councillor? It's about; it is about being a broker, an animateur. And to do that, we have to be at the centre of lots of information flows. And that's quite legitimate (Cabinet member, L50).

An opposition Lansbury councillor reinforced this idea of using the flows of information on social media to gain place-based legitimacy and profile:

It's a very easy way of telling and informing people what's happening in an area we think they care about. We think they care about it because they're following us.' Probably twenty % of my Twitter followers are local businesses (Liberal Democrat backbencher, L23).

Online opportunities for providing evidence of community involvement were frequently used to remind voters that they, the councillors, were local, with posts endorsing local businesses and even visits to the dentist (Interviewees L50, L23, L08, L09, L53, and L54). A Lansbury councillor with four thousand Twitter followers tweeted:

'Congratulations tooth dental on being a finalist in #Lansbury @LBSBusiness Awards! #Lansbury's rooting for you'. <http://bit.ly/1koLLL4fTx>' (Cabinet member, L08).

Howard *et al* (2006:142) argued that this kind of interaction and exposure to local concerns was part of strengthening democratic legitimacy for local politicians and Coleman (2005) argued that creating an authentic online identity is one effective response to 'citizens' sense of not being recognized, respected or understood by their representatives' (Coleman, 2005:194).

That sense of place and local leadership was also provided by their online role in developing and incubating social networks with local councillors firmly at the centre. Building these information-rich networks online, these 'hubs' (Frohmann, 2007:65) or 'networked publics' (Tierney, 2013:31) built upon the advantage that came from already being formally elected as their existing status and legitimacy added value to online content: as was noted in Chapter Three, legitimacy can be added to social media posts when they came from a small number of accredited sources (Benkler, 2006:183). In addition, councillors were also shaping the political agenda by selecting which issues they amplified by retweeting support. The choices they made could be seen as 'agenda-setting' (Kingdon, 1995:3), 'context shaping' Lowndes and Roberts,

(2013:79) or even preference shaping (Stubager, 2003). Here is one example where the councillor used social media to try to re-shape a particular policy favoured by his party:

So there are some things...where I've created policy or put myself in a political position on a hoof because I think it needs to be said... because I know it's not quite in line with the policy... [paying for the tube extension]. And so I went on Twitter and said, we will definitely not be paying for it, this funding gap that is not Lansbury's responsibility. And, you know, it got tweeted a dozen times by various different community groups and some of my Labour colleagues, that's fine, I've not had any ramifications back from it' (Cabinet member, L08).

Councillors have always dissented from their party's policy positions within the private realm of the party group (see Copus, 2004:105) but the difference created by social media is the creation of a more visible arena within which the political debate happens. That increased visibility is important: as Copus (2004:186) has argued, incorporating more participative and deliberative elements in local democracy can challenge the closed arenas of private deliberation within which councillors can safely disagree. The visibility and virality of social media enabled comment has the potential to change the game of managing political differences in private.

It was also evident from the research that councillors considered one of the key components of creating a successful online local place based identity to be the conscious avoidance of national party political messages (outside elections) as evidenced by these two contributions:

Yes, well they tell me, 'I follow that blog, yes it was good, yes, and I'll have a look at that'. Yes, I get quite a lot, because it's a news site. It's not a, slag off [of] the Lib Dem site, which is what my colleagues do. And I think people are mildly interested near an election but they don't want to hear anything about that in between elections. So what I really like, my dream would be, I think this is a great role for councillors, because we know our community and know what they're interested in (Cabinet member, L50).

I don't try to be political with my tweeting. I try to be sort of positive about things that are happening in my ward or the surrounding area (Liberal Democrat back bencher, L23).

This local issues focus was not the whole story; politics were also seen to re-emerge. Lansbury councillors were also seen to use consciously political modes and occasionally their online activity would have an overtly political dimension:

I had really nice feedback from somebody, when I did a post about a planning application, because the Government has just brought out some planning regs. So I just said...oh it's a shame the Government's been unhelpful. And this person, who is a Lib Dem supporter [said] it's a shame about that, it was a very good post except that you're making it a bit political. Can't it be a bit less political? No, it's a political website actually mate. But it's very subtle, it's good that it's subtle, it's quite clever actually. People are seduced into reading it and signing up for it (Cabinet member, L50).

The dominant mode in Lansbury however was very consciously hyper-local. National or local party messages were amended to fit into the local conversational space, as one councillor described:

I very rarely do a blog because it's actually not, it's never localised enough...Let's say, oh Labour... wants to offer children free school meals. Well how do I localise that then... [Party messages]...they're very, they're kind of haranguing things, they aren't what people are interested in, in this part of the borough (Cabinet member, L50).

The emphasis on local needs and interests very much echoes the work done by Young and Rao (1995) and Rao (1998) on interpretations of representation at the local level, as well as the more recent findings of the LGA's Census of Local Authority Councillors (2013). These sources reinforce the point that that councillors continue to identify representing the views of local residents as their most important role and social media can be seen to be assisting councillors to carry out that role. The interviewees identified the usefulness of social media in enabling them to listen to, amplify and represent the views of citizens as well as pick up issues, as one councillor noted: *'...you can listen to residents and local groups and see issues bubbling under' (Cabinet member LO8)*. However claims by councillors that they were using social media to listen and engage in dialogue with citizens should be treated with caution. Those claims were further tested through an analysis of the content of councillors' Twitter feeds which was carried out contemporaneously with the interviews. That analysis revealed that councillors' social media output was still largely framed in a broadcast mode, described by Landsbergen as

'providing a stream of information mode' (2010:140). The role perception (Klok and Denters, 2013:63) was that two-way dialogue with citizens was important, but the role behaviour showed continued reluctance to engage with more participative modes, consistent with the patterns identified by Sweeting and Copus (2013:135). One example of that role behaviour showed analogue practices had simply been transferred to a digital mode: as a councillor illustrated:

I'm using it to get messages out, rather than messages in. I use it, because there are things that people are interested in, [for that it's] very, very good. A leaflet, it's the same thing as a leaflet, to be honest. Leaflets are very [time consuming], then you've got to design the thing, you've got to DTP [desktop publish] it, print it, then you've got to walk miles and miles delivering it all (Cabinet member, L50).

Place based social media posts also provided opportunities to signal the work being done by the local representative between elections, as a councillor observed:

There's a bit about being seen to be busy you know. So there's certainly a bit about making sure that people see that you're active and that you're approachable (Cabinet member, L08)

However it also emerged that the signalling went beyond creating visibility with local voters: in Lansbury there were examples of councillors harnessing social media to build a personal profile for individual political advancement. One councillor spoke of the need to be retweeted widely to get on in his party:

No, but maybe my ambitions lie slightly beyond representing [his ward] forever, god bless them....there's a vacancy for Cabinet.... So if my colleagues, who are all my Facebook friends, tweet "oh look he's got in the Voice [a national Black newspaper]"...; it hopefully wouldn't do me any harm as being someone who is busy and active and all the rest of it (Scrutiny Chair, L09)

Another councillor indicated that some gaming of Twitter went on in creating visibility within the party group:

And, of course, and interestingly, there's one in the Labour Party, hashtag Labour Doorstep. So now whenever you go out on the doorstep knocking there's a hashtag

Labour Doorstep. Now I know people who have put that Twitter, that hashtag on the bottom of a [tweet] and they've been sat in the pub (Cabinet member, L08).

Klok and Denters identified the political party as 'an important fourth type of actor in local government' (2013:63) and this idea is supported by activities in Lansbury. Using social media to create visibility and profile within the party may well be a successful strategy: Rallings *et al* (2010:369), in their study of the recruitment of local councillors, found that visibility in community participation and social engagement increased the likelihood of selection for office.

Enabling transparency and responsiveness

An analysis of the themes emerging across the data also revealed the utility of the social media to the public as a channel for the articulation of their demands of politicians (Haus and Sweeting 2006:280). Social media enabled transparency made the responsiveness of councillors very visible. As a councillor commented, the immediacy of the medium had a very direct effect:

Well I suppose Twitter's more immediate and you know it's directed at you because they'll have copied you in, if you've found it. So it is literally like putting it through your door but it's directed to your phone, saying there you go, have a look at that. A letter in the paper, it's not personal in the same way. I probably also think more people are more aware of Twitter than read the South [Lansbury] Press these day (Cabinet member, L08).

Social media platforms in Lansbury appeared to be affording better visibility, responsiveness and 'information-rich signalling' for politicians (Kölln and Aarts, 2013:155). The virality and transparency of social media proved a powerful driver:

Twitter...can be brilliant. But the people are so scared that five million people are seeing it in two minutes that they actually respond to it. We had a man...a bit upset about the planning...and he tweeted this and he had, within twenty four hours, he had a visit from the MP and the Cabinet Member (Cabinet member, L50).

Earlier, in Chapter Two, responsiveness was identified as important to modern interpretations of both political legitimacy (Howard and Sweeting, 2007:644) and public accountability (Eulau and Karps, 1977; Mulgan, 2000; Howard and Sweeting, 2007:636; and Denters and Klok,

2013:663) and this was supported by the findings in Lansbury. Councillors described how they had used social media to shorten the lines of hierarchy and bureaucracy in getting things done for residents. Social media use had not completely replaced picking up service requests or complaints at ward surgeries or through email, but was seen to be layered on top of those practices, enhancing what Pitkin (1967:57) described as representative responsiveness or simply looking after constituents. As an officer pointed out:

What's interesting is, which is what these guys have found, is that when they're following the Twitter feed and if they get a message that comes in, if they [councillors] respond personally to it [the public] love it;...wow, you've actually connected me on Twitter in a personal way (Director of Communications, L18).

The service responsiveness was amplifying what Kölln and Arts have described as the 'to and fro' (2013:152) or 'signalling' between elected representatives and citizens as a way of gaining authority and legitimacy outside the ballot box.

The overall utility of social media to councillors in Lansbury, as the quotes above reveal, outweighed the problems represented by the constraint of formal rules, the potential for sanctions and the risk of damaging gaffes. Asked why, councillors struggled to articulate their reasons. The absence of an agreed narrative or clearly defined rules about social media use meant that councillors were using their own legitimating logics for their changed practices. In the absence of formal guidance and existing conventions about social media councillors were trying, in response to the challenge of social media by citizens, to make sense of their own roles through experimentation. If citizens are challenging the status quo externally by using social media to engage with their councillors and the council rather than the previously defined forms then councillors can also be seen to be contesting the status quo internally by acting in response rather than waiting for institutional legitimation or permission to act.

The final part of this chapter now probes the case study material, asks whether the evidence supports the claims that Lansbury was in the forefront of social media use in English councils that was made in the very first paragraph and discusses what this means for the council.

Conclusion: Embracing social media

The chapter has set out a description of a council that was undergoing an uneven and multi-layered process of change in response to the pressures of social media. Lansbury's early claims

to be in the vanguard of social media related change were, on closer inspection, more modestly incremental than dramatically transformative. Indeed the account of the process of change in Lansbury which emerged from the interviews overall can be judged to be closer to the position described by Lowndes (2005), i.e.:

...the reality lies somewhere between the two poles of immovability and transformation (Lowndes 2005:291).

In the particular context of Lansbury, councillors and officers can be seen to be layering the new rules, practices and narratives on top of the old, over a period of time, against a background of continued institutional path dependency. The research revealed that institutional constraints were being bypassed or weakened by councillors' use of social media, which gave them political advantage and political room for manoeuvre. The seizing of the political opportunities afforded by social media by councillors was in stark contrast to the reluctance of junior officers, concerned about straying into political territory and threatening their political neutrality. It is suggested that the relative dissonance between the adoption and use of social media by officers as opposed to councillors goes part of the way to explaining why the changes in Lansbury were asynchronous and the pace of change uneven. Lowndes (2005) explains the unevenness of change processes as partly due to the way in which '*different rule sets change at different rates and in different directions*' and it can be seen in Lansbury that the practices of councillors were changing at a faster rate than that of officers (2005:292).

In terms of councillors, the written attempt by the Monitoring Officer to constrain the use of social media by expressing legal concerns (see Chapter Four for survey findings on the role of Monitoring Officers in constraining innovation) appeared initially to suggest a powerful check on councillors' use of social media. As no other action was taken however, such a constraint was not fully realised. The lack of follow through provided evidence that the council was in a period of what Streek and Thelen have described as '*drift*' (2005:31), where the institutional maintenance of formal rules is neglected in the face of sustained contestation and revision of practices. Specifically asked about formal documented changes which had arisen as a result of social media, officers in Lansbury could identify only two: the amendment of a sign on the wall of the public gallery of the council chamber about allowing filming and tweeting by the public and very minor changes to the Constitution, both in 2012. None of the councillors interviewed could remember any formal training relating to social media from the council or their party and all claimed that they had only learned how to use social media through their peers. Peer to

peer diffusion was the main mechanism for the development of social media skills, unmediated by, and decoupled from, the formal institutional processes of council or party (Meyer and Rowan, 1977:357).

The lack of traction for the council's control mechanisms can be partly explained by the regulatory officers' lack of understanding of social media by regulatory officers, as was demonstrated in Chapter Four's discussion of the role of the Monitoring Officer, and perhaps partly by a degree of pragmatism on their part, accepting that *'...that there are limits to the extent to which they 'can prevent or correct unintentional or subversive deviation' from institutional constraint'* (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:80). More effective than the council's own institutions in shaping and constraining behaviour, it eventually emerged in the fieldwork in Lansbury, was the influence of party, particularly for the council's Labour councillors after the 2014 elections. The Labour Whip was described as informally monitoring online content, as a new councillor discovered after resisting party suggestions for particular posts:

Then we get told to tweet things, successes, like a scheme in [Boxtown] just won an award. So the tweet's all set up and we just re-tweet it, which is quite nice. So I do a mixture of what I'm told to do and what I want to do. I don't always tweet what they send round...but when you meet them in the corridor they say 'I saw you tweeted so and so', so they're obviously monitoring it (Labour back-bencher, L54).

Actors were not entirely free to exercise individual choice: as Lowndes and Roberts (2013) commented new institutional theory assumes that the freedom of actors at a time of change will ultimately be constrained, partly through positive or negative feedback and partly because the *'probability of remaining on that path increases over time'* (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:113). One new councillor described the pressure to convert to the new practices:

But I sort of feel as though I should probably develop the blog a bit more. We were told to do that. We were told to make a blog by the party, so I made one (Labour back-bencher, L53).

That there was evidence that the local Labour Party was beginning to take social media into its repertoires of regulation and control after the 2014 elections is not surprising: the organisational biography at the beginning of this chapter highlighted the history of Labour Party dominance and that would be consistent with the development of a strongly party-

centred approach to social media, as Copus has established, the Labour Party is more likely to have a '*rigid interpretation of the rules*' than the other main parties (2004:73).

What emerged from the research as particularly important was the impact of social media on the traditional representative roles of the local councillors. Those roles have never been static: Sweeting, writing in 1999, observed that councillor roles were already changing in response to network governance and the pressure to increase public participation. By 2002 Wilson and Game indicated that in spite of the confusing lexicon of role labels offered by local government scholars such as Hecllo (1969), Jones (1973) and Gyford (1984), the main roles fell under four main headings: representative, policy maker, scrutineer and community leader (Wilson and Game, 2002:245). As was noted in Chapter Two, there has also been pressure in recent decades for councillors to move from more traditional input-based roles where legitimacy is associated with representation and participation towards more output-based roles where legitimacy is drawn from performance and responsiveness (Klausen *et al*, 2006:204; Klok and Denters, 2013:64; Vabo and Aars, 2013:703).

Within Lansbury patterns of councillors using social media to enhance legitimacy through positioning themselves as local leaders were identified (e.g. tweeting local businesses, providing local information). In addition there was evidence of social media being used to enhance output legitimation, for example through increased responsiveness (e.g. visibility of response to residents issues raised online). These digital social media practices were seen to be overlapping with the former analogue practices such as holding surgeries, meeting with residents or writing to newspapers. Whether online practices would eventually replace the current mix of traditional and more participatory practices and how that might shape the orientation of councillors in the future was not yet clear in Lansbury.

What was much clearer in Lansbury was that there were sufficient early adopter councillors (70%) to create a critical mass of active councillors who could help to create an environment in which social media enabled conversation and interactions with the public was not only a possibility but also becoming a new norm. Councillors were seen to be taking advantage of the '*political opportunity structures*' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007:189) afforded by social media. They were able to exploit the spaces, the '*imperfect fit*' (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:80), between the dominant rules, practices and narratives in Lansbury and the claims of social media to gain collaborative advantage (Huxham, 1996) by sharing knowledge online to solve local problems,

to gain party and position advantage (by gaining profile that they would otherwise not have) and to gain the advantages of personalisation (maximising potential votes).

Lansbury also provided evidence of the relationship between community leadership and the affordances of social media and these elements are further explored in the next two case study chapters. Although social media, as outlined in Chapter Three, appeared to some commentators as an ungovernable Tower of Babel (Brants and Voltmer, 2011:1), the research so far presented shows that there was evidence of the emergence of new informal rules, or at least of conscious control by digitally able and entrepreneurial councillors. The relative absence of formal institutional rules and historical conventions about how to operate within the new environment did not necessarily mean that there were no rules about using social media in Lansbury, but rather that they were more diffuse, less formal and not yet codified. The case study showed for example that councillors censored themselves; that they were aware of how they should behave on social media (e.g. no swearing); and that they were also clear that there were some ways to maximise the utility of the media which were more successful than others. Councillors who had developed routines of frequent postings, locally focused, who had successfully curated an authentic version of their identity online, and used an informal, almost conversational style were modelling clear paths for the development of future institutional rules. One of the main informal rules emerging from the interviews was about not bringing the council or the party into disrepute. As was noted in Chapter Two reputational accountability was thought likely to increase in importance in situations where there is an absence of *'institutionalized accountability systems'* (Keohane, 2003:139) and this was the case in Lansbury. One councillor used the language of marketing to describe the rules that she followed for managing her online output:

So the rules, yes the rules are, you protect your brand. That's the first rule, protect your brand. So my brand, as a cabinet member, is 'I am a serious person, I just do my job (Cabinet member, L50).

The research also showed that self-regulation did not mean an absence of rules, but rather that councillors were beginning to act in a creative and entrepreneurial way to adapt and modify their own rules or modes of operating fit the new environment. This adaptation can be described as *'many small acts of adjustment by strategic actors on the ground'* (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:171). The case study of Lansbury has revealed many such small acts which, taken together, suggest that informal institutional change is already well underway.

Councillors are seen to be seizing the political opportunities opened up by social media and the formal institutions are running to catch up. That description of a disjuncture between institutional control and the acts of individual agents is uneven is one that is explored in much more detail in the final chapter.

For the moment the focus turns to the next case study council, a council with a very different organisational biography from urban, metropolitan Lansbury. Cadwallar council is a large rural council in the South West of England: would it present a very different picture of the contestations of social media and where would it sit on the continuum of change?

Chapter Six: Cadwaller, a journey from opposition to incumbency

Introduction

The chapter is the second of the case study chapters and it explores a council which was actively embracing the utilities of social media. The term '*embracing*' was previously (Chapter Four) to describe a council which has moved beyond initial engagement with the new media into relatively comfortable modes of operation in which the use of social media in its different forms for democratic purposes is normalised (see Chapter Four for the full typology from which the term '*embracing*' is drawn). Cadwaller council has a very different organisational biography from that of the urban metropolitan council described in the previous chapter: it is a large, rural council in an area which is dominated by tourism and agriculture. The case study aims to describe and understand how the new phenomenon of social media was experienced by councillors and officers and it does this by tracking how the council was changing in response to the challenge of social media through the narrative accounts given in the interviews. The chapter examines the core enabling and constraining mechanisms at play in the council and offers a case study which describes '*agential incremental change*' (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:125) where actors, in this case a group of opposition councillors, were able to overcome the constraining mechanisms prevailing in the council in order to normalise the use of social media.

Cadwaller council changed control during the period of the research which enabled the study of how the opposition councillors, *the poachers*, most of whom were keen users of social media, became *the gamekeepers* and what the consequences of that shift were for the council. Social media use emerges in this account as a mobilisation tool through which the incumbent administration was challenged. In addition, new narratives about transparency were seen to lead to new processes of legitimation for the challengers. The chapter sets out the reasons why the seemingly '*marginal practices*' (Lounsbury *et al*, 2003:71) of blogging, tweeting and posting online gradually increased in significance and turned into mainstream practices in Cadwaller. The utilities or enabling characteristics of social media introduced in Chapter Three are further examined in the context of this particular council, i.e. the '*framing*' (Entman, 1993), or shaping, of the policy agenda online, the importance of increased personalisation, the '*blurring of the traditional public/private divide*' (Howard and Sweeting, 2004:4) in the presentation of elected representatives to the voting public, the anchoring of online practices

in new narratives about community leadership and the search for legitimacy through responsiveness, Rosanvallon's 'politics of presence' (2011:186).

The chapter begins by providing an organisational biography of the Council, tracing the history and '*long-held traditions*' (Lowndes, 2008:47) which shaped its particular organisational culture. Cadwaller's reputation of being in the vanguard of social media use among councils is then introduced in order to provide context to the later discussion of how social media was used to challenge the incumbent administration. The chapter is then divided into three further sections. The second section explores the organisational responses to the challenges created by opposition politicians' sustained use of social media, the constraints, while the third section explores the enabling features or drivers for the sustained use of social media by elected representatives.

The fourth section reflects on the move from opposition to political control and on how social media use in Cadwaller matured and developed over the period of the study. The chapter concludes by highlighting the uneven processes by which the existing rules, practices and narratives began to change through a set of '*contentious transactions*' (Schneiberg, 2013:654) over a period of time. Koopmans (2007:21) described such gradual change over time as '*waves of contention*': in this conceptualisation, the new ways of working initially appear marginal, emerging out of nowhere, but rapidly and organically move across different groups or sectors (in the case of Cadwaller, through citizens, digitally confident councillors and young officers, in that order), challenging or disrupting the existing systems of normal local political life. But first the chapter turns to the setting out of a descriptive organisational biography which describes the precipitating circumstances for these waves of contention of the status quo.

Section One: An organisational biography of Cadwaller.

At first sight it might be expected that Cadwaller's trajectories of change, especially in relation to social media and accountability, would be markedly different from those of Lansbury council. Cadwaller is a new unitary council in the south west of England with a population of over half a million and an economy which is dependent upon agriculture and tourism. The geography and landscape are different and the population is scattered across a sparsely populated area. It is a large council: there are over one hundred councillors, 37 Liberal Democrats, 36 Independents and 26 Conservatives with the remainder of the seats being taken by Labour and a number of minority parties (2015 election). Cadwaller became a unitary

council in 2009, one of five counties which were restructured at that time. Political control was initially Conservative and Independent, but passed to a coalition of Independents and Liberal Democrats mid-term in 2014, after the defeat of the Conservative budget and some defections.

Its former status as a county council (until 2009 when it became a unitary council) is important in shaping its '*organisational biography*', as Lowndes (2008) noted, '*locality effects*' all structure the repertoire of responses to change' (Lowndes, 2008:47). In England county councils are mostly large, Conservative controlled and affluent (Hastings *et al*, 2012:11) and the spatial distance means that they are sometimes considered to be remote from their citizens. That geographical distance matters: county councils and county councillors have been identified as less likely to be interested in participation and engagement with citizens (see Sweeting and Copus, 2012:26), a pattern also identified by Sullivan *et al* (2006:505) in their work on community leadership in county areas. Attitudes to community participation in local politics emerge later in this chapter as important in driving and shaping the use of social media to communicate with citizens.

In addition to significance of the 'county' background two further specific features were identified in the research that had the potential to shape the nature of social media usage: firstly Cadwallar is a very large and mainly rural council; and, secondly that it is geographically on the periphery of the country. The first issue is important in understanding that the council's size and history can be seen to give it a self-perception that it is almost a region in its own right, with its own strong self-identity. Size also had an impact: the large number of councillors overall, allied with relatively weak political parties, had resulted in somewhat fluid political groupings and coalitions alongside regular defections. Copus (2004) identifies the pressures and forces for division within large party groups and quotes one respondent saying '*no one in local politics hates someone in the opposing party more than they hate someone in their own party*' (Copus, 2004:106) and it will be seen through councillors' own accounts that this was the case in Cadwallar. Another contribution to intra and inter-party dissent might well be attributed to the fact that with only ten posts in the decision-making Cadwallar Cabinet, roles had to be found for the large number of remaining councillors in the new unitary set up. One officer commented on the situation that the size of the council had created:

...what they've got is piecemeal and was never enough to keep them happy and content. So...scrutinies, five scrutiny committees and god knows how many single issue

panels and task and finish groups, they've become the means of trying to keep 113 members managed. But that clearly hasn't worked that effectively and, obviously, politically, we've paid the price (Assistant Head of Service for Strategy and Localism, C31).

At the time of the study Cadwaller was also struggling with the controversial finalisation of a large outsourcing contract with British Telecom which was, after only two years of operation, challenged in court and wound up. The outsourcing issue was divisive between and across parties and contributed to the vote of no confidence that ousted the leader of the council in 2012. Overall, the new unitary displayed a history of volatility since its creation which led, even in its short existence, to a state of *'both internal and intra-group political hostility detracting from political leadership'* (Turner and Whiteman, 2005:635).

The issue of being peripheral to the rest of England was also important in understanding the council environment because Cadwaller council suffered from some of the consequences of that geography, becoming *'distant, different and dependent'* (Rokkan, quoted in Elcock, 2014:323). Unlike Norway where there has been a tradition of central government commitment to the autonomy and growth of its peripheral regions (see Baldersheim and Fimreite, 2005), successive UK governments have had little interest in this kind of devolution within England (Goldsmith, 2002:102, Hambleton, 2015:10). The research showed that the impact of that peripheral position enhanced a sense of local territorial identity in Cadwaller which was available for the council and councillors to capitalise upon for electoral advantage: Rose (2005:2) has argued that local identity is a *'touchstone for local self-government'* and local identity emerges from the case study as a dominant feature which drives councillor behaviour. The sense of isolation from central government and the potential for the expression of strong territorial identity combine to create an environment in which Cadwaller has to find its own local solutions to problems, as a councillor interviewee illustrated:

My feelings are that those in London don't see [Cadwaller] as a priority, our road, rail links are poor and our funding per head of population is less than the city. We get European funding because of the inequality we have with the average European living standards, why does our own government not care about us? (Conservative Deputy Leader, C20).

Understanding the strong local identity of Cadwaller, combined with the sense of distance from central government, is crucial in providing a background and context for the widespread adoption of social media that took place in the council.

Social media in Cadwaller Council

Cadwaller Council became known in local government as an early adopter of social media with five of its councillors named in the top thirty list of local government bloggers in the UK in 2011 (Total Politics website 2011). The council began webcasting its full council meetings in 2010 and was successful at attracting an audience right from the beginning: one webcast council meeting in 2012 attracted 4466 viewers and the council averaged 345 viewers (council's own web metrics). One of the Cadwaller councillors proudly described the journey:

Last year we had over a hundred and twenty thousand views, archived and live; tell me at the last council meeting where you had a hundred and twenty thousand people taking an interest, never, never, you know (Independent backbench opposition councillor, C29).

In terms of local government social media use Twitter became a particularly important platform for Cadwaller. Officers recounted how the council joined Twitter in 2009 with the young and enthusiastic communications team controlling the output stream. By 2014 the Cadwaller Twitter site had racked up 7681 tweets, at a time when some local authorities were only just adopting Twitter (see Chapter Four). In addition, some individual Cadwaller councillors, mainly opposition members, were also early adopters and by 2011 Cadwaller was firmly on the local government map as a pioneer in the use of Twitter. The social media reputation stemmed primarily from the emergence of a small group of Liberal Democrat and Independent councillors who were early adopters of social media, primarily online blogging and use of Twitter. Dubbed as the Twitter Gang or the 'Twitterati' by the local print media (BBC website, 2010), their online critiques of the ruling group, often made when meetings were actually in progress, were reported in the national and regional news media, including the BBC news website in 2010 and 2012), following attempts to ban or discourage the use of social media in council meetings. Banning attempts were made again in 2010 and 2012 but each time the council issued a statement denying a Twitter ban on councillors. A parody site claiming to represent key figures in the council, including two successive leaders and a chief executive, added to the frustration experienced by some at the use of social media as a

political tool. The research revealed how the challenge of parody sites was viewed by the political leadership and the communications team: should parody sites be taken down, leading to potentially unwelcome publicity, or simply allowed to fade away? An officer in interview illustrated the difficulty for councils in regulating social media:

I think one of the really difficult ones for us to handle was the parody accounts. [One] was so obviously a parody that we just let it go, it was quite funny.... With [the Leader's] account, I really struggled with that one and we, I don't know we always played it that well... And so we did sort of tweet a couple of times just to say, [the Leader] doesn't have a Twitter account, the account is fake. And that actually got a bit of a kind of backlash from a few people on Twitter that we were doing that. And should [Cadwaller] council be policing that? ...In the end we grew up, it was the first kind of big difficult thing we had to deal with and we just ignored it...The only time [we said it was fake] was when we saw a genuine interaction from a member of the public, even one of the chief police people down here interacted with it thinking it was real. So we did step in there (Communications officer, C25).

The parody example is important: the interviewee was also reinforcing the idea that Twitter was important: local politicians' tweets were at least important enough to be parodied. As well as some digitally confident councillors, the interviews also revealed that there were also some innovative and enthusiastic young officers in the press and communications department who played a substantial role in creating Cadwaller's reputation as an innovative council, in the vanguard, as one officer described in her account of how they got started through a process of imitation or mimesis (Lounsbury, 2001:38):

So I sort of came back fired up, like you can do from a conference, and said, I think we could do more with this, I think [there] could be a real appetite for it. We actually had about three thousand followers on our Twitter account at the time. Facebook we literally had about twenty, people don't like their council. So we looked at models of really good Facebook and Twitter and just tried to echo those. So Coventry was a really good model for Facebook. And Twitter, we just took the basics that you learn about reciprocal following, retweeting, you know, engaging. Again, it was about authentic tone of voice, we created a tone of voice between us, and all of that (Communications Office, C25).

Learning from other councils and creating an authentic, conversational tone was clearly a successful strategy for Cadwaller: three years later the council had over twenty-one thousand Twitter followers. The same young officer described her own social media use in the terms of a 'next generation user' or an 'e-Mersive: a group defined by Dutton *et al* (2013:3, 4) as (mainly young) users who are very comfortable with multiple platforms as well as multiple devices:

Yes, I use Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and I blog as well. And I'm just, actually I've just started using Rebel Mouse, which is kind of, it's in beta at the moment but it's a way of amalgamating all of your social media presences into one place (Communications Officer, C25).

Having established that Cadwaller council appeared to be confident and open about its approach to social media use it might therefore be expected that the rest of this chapter would set out precisely how the existing rules, practices and narratives had been converted wholesale into new paths. That was not found to be the case. The evidence from the fieldwork, particularly from the interviews, indicated that there was institutional resistance to change in Cadwaller and that the paths of adoption were uneven. In addition, as will be seen below, some of the innovations were contentious. Although a minority group of councillors mobilised for change, using social media, this move was not immediately successful. The rest of the chapter therefore provides a more nuanced evaluation of the processes of change and this begins below with an account of the patterns of contention (Koopmans, 2004:25) and institutional constraints faced by those councillors who were using the new technologies to challenge the incumbent administration.

Section Two: Incumbency, resistance and constraints

Understanding the institutional constraints at work in Cadwaller starts with an examination of the dissonance between the representation of the council as digitally confident to the external world as was noted earlier in this chapter and the evidence that emerged from the interviews with other officers. Although the actions and the advocacy of a small number of councillors and keen young officers had given Cadwaller the profile of being in the front line of social media adoption, the interviews revealed a disjuncture between the narrative of the digital council and the actual practice within the council. In 2012 social media use by staff was blocked for the majority of employees and used primarily an external communications tool by the communications department. That department retained strict control of access to social

media through a system of permissions called the 'Social Media Passport'. An Internet and Email Monitoring Panel met once a month to give permissions for departments or individual employees to use social media. Cadwaller's officers were contesting these institutional constraints by pressurising for access to social media, for example those in the economic development department were pressing for inclusion in the list of those trusted to use social media in 2012 as this communication officer related:

... what they were saying was, yes, but so much stuff that happens, some of these bodies that we deal with only have Facebook presence now or Tweet something, some massive piece of news [emerges] first on Twitter and we don't know about it because we can't see it. (Communications Officer, C25).

Cadwaller's Social Media Policy was the main regulatory mechanism for managing access to social media. The thirteen page document provided evidence of concern about social media and a desire for organisational control: starting with a series of warnings about viruses, confidentiality, safeguarding issues, reputational damage and the risk of civil and criminal action it then went on to provide cautionary advice about the risk of 'social engineering attacks' where staff or councillors might be manipulated into disclosing confidential material by individuals fraudulently claiming to be a business or client. Having set the scene with these alarming warnings officers were then reminded that even in their personal use of social media, outside of their council employment (personal Twitter and Facebook, for example) they must have cognisance of their responsibilities to the council.

By 2014 the Social Media Policy had been updated to remove some of these warnings and controls: contemporaneous online scanning of council related content showed that several officers were now using social media and actively following councillors' online output, but the relaxation of the rules, or rather the deliberate neglect of the existing rules (Streek and Thelen, 2005:31) was not unproblematic for some of the staff. The absence of new rules, either formal or informal, around the interface between councillors and officers proved difficult as one officer commented:

I personally got quite upset by some of the comments that some of the members were making on Twitter, given the way that they'd voted and the ramifications on the authority. But because I'm in a politically sensitive post, I bite my tongue and just keep an eye on it... So, I know that there are some staff in the organisation that have had to

be spoken to, in terms of, you shouldn't be getting into these sorts of conversations with councillors on Twitter. Just because you're not at work, doesn't mean, you know, you are still responding to them as an officer of the council. It's a difficult, it can be a difficult rope, sort of tightrope to walk along (Head of Democratic Services and Scrutiny, C30).

The advocacy of social media by the younger and more digitally confident officers was not necessarily echoed at more senior levels by officers who were nervous about being allied to a particular grouping, compromising their political neutrality and potentially their employment:

So it's very much, let's just do our job and leave the politicians to do it. Because there's an awful lot of tweeting going on about the people crossing the floor and there's the state of the council, you don't necessarily want to be affiliated with that when you're also in the firing line for job cuts (Head of Democratic Services and Scrutiny, C30).

The Cadwallar Council Social Media Policy mentioned above made no specific reference to councillors; indeed it disregarded the political role of the councillor, reminding them that they must:

Show consideration for others' privacy and for topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory – such as politics or religion.

The lack of formal rules was mentioned by interviewees in relation to the use of social media during council meetings. Twitter use by the opposition in council meetings, telling citizens about decisions being taken, had been seen as a challenge to the incumbent administration in 2010 and again in January 2012. A local newspaper reported in 2012 that the Leader of the council had '*instructed the members to stop tweeting*' on the grounds that some members were '*tweeting inappropriate comments*'³². As a result of that report a statement was issued by the council on the same day which clarified that the council had not in fact banned Twitter, but rather that the Leader had used his powers on this occasion only to '*protect the reputation of the council*'. A retreat or retraction of this kind signalled a post-hoc recognition that the reputational accountability damage created by a public ban on social media would be greater than the alternative of allowing tweeting to continue.

³² Western Morning News 26/1/2012

The role of the Monitoring Officer and the Standards Committee in regulating social media was cited by councillors as an important, if not always very effective, part of the institutional constraints and accountability mechanisms of the council. Indeed, an opposition councillor had appeared before the formal Standards Committee three times in 2011 and 2012 for online postings which were deemed to have breached the Code of Conduct and he commented that:

... [It] was ridiculous, and in the end it was just a waste of money. Everyone said I said something that I shouldn't have said, and I said, no. I had an interesting conversation many times: my standard rule on my blog, [is]if it's not true I won't write it, I won't use political interpretation because I'm not political, I'll say it how it is. And sometimes it can be hard hitting, sometimes the staff here will go, oh my god. And other times they'll say, thank you very much... but I get fifty thousand views a month (Independent opposition backbencher, C29)

None of the accusations of having breached the Code of Conduct was upheld and the councillor continued to be a frequent user. The same councillor also reported that he had been informally reprimanded by the Monitoring Officer about online behaviours, such as blogging about cabinet documents, but these informal discussions did not proceed to the formal Standards Committee stage.

The incumbent institutional cultures of Cadwaller presented above did not at first sight appear to be welcoming or embracing change. The tactical repertoires of institutional resistance found through the fieldwork in Cadwaller included attempts at control, such as the putative Twitter ban and the ban on staff usage of social media, the desire to regulate using written policies and the potentially coercive use of the power of the Monitoring Officer and considering the threat of the Standards Committee. The cultural norm, the default position for Cadwaller council, was closer to defensiveness and resistance than adoption and acceptance. Given a picture of institutional resistance how did the innovators and early adopters push on through those barriers to shift the council, over a period of time, towards a position where social media had both credibility and legitimacy?

Schneiberg (2013:675) pointed out that social movements can provide challenges to incumbent institutional narratives and practices and that those challenges can ultimately lead to new practices being adopted. External movements and pressures, he argued, can interact with institutions at a particular period in time to create political conditions for the

development and diffusion of new forms and practices. Soule (2004:302) also highlighted many of the factors that might lead to the adoption of innovation, such as its relative advantage over former practices, its ease of use, its mobilisation qualities, its resonance and its mode of diffusion. It is argued that each of those factors can be seen in the Cadwaller setting. The next section uses the evidence from the interviews and council documents to demonstrate how the enabling characteristics of social media, initially only adopted by a small number of confident councillors and younger officers began to be gradually integrated into everyday practice in Cadwaller Council.

Section Three: Enabling characteristics of social media.

In the previous section the constraints on the use of social media by elected members were outlined and those included: resistance to the use of the new technologies from *elites*, in this case the Cabinet; attempts at deterring or banning use in council meetings; and admonishment (or shaming) of councillors via the formal mechanism of Standards Committee and the informal mechanism of Monitoring Officer intervention. In spite of these attempts at discouraging or constraining social media use, it is clear from the introduction to this chapter that social media were still used by councillors: what then were the drivers that outweighed the constraints? The interviews threw up several explanations for this continued use, all of which were related to social media's utilities (or in the words of Enjolras *et al*, 2012, '*affordances*') for their roles as elected representatives. Those utilities emerged through the interviews as weighty enough to outweigh the mechanisms aimed at constraining politicians' online behaviours.

The first of these utilities was the use of social media for the purposes of framing new policy ideas or shaping local debate. As was seen above, the opposition councillors were tweeting in real time during meetings, commenting on the incumbent administration's decisions. Entman (1993) defined framing as involving '*selection*' and '*salience*' (1993:52) in order to highlight particular issues. In Cadwaller framing was described by the opposition councillors in the interviews as a way of allowing them to increase their efficacy at selecting and setting the agenda online and then through that route influencing the traditional media, as one councillor commented:

It's instant; you become a news setter, not a newsreader. I think it's, trying to get the best word for it, but you set the news now. So what I've got in my blog sets the news,

it's a story or it isn't a story. And what anyone says on Twitter, it sets the news, you know, and not just minor things but, you know, campaigns, local campaigns, you know. If you get high enough [followers on] social media (Backbench opposition member, C29)

It was particularly opposition councillors who saw social media as a way of shaping the political agenda by using social media to interact with journalists in the traditional print media and by framing issues almost as if they were external actors, outside the council. This practice was layered on top of existing practices such as putting out press releases, as can be shown in these comments from two different political group leaders:

I recently put a motion to a council about domestic violence, some things that I wanted changing. I did do a press release on that. And the morning of full council I got a tweet from one of the journalists saying, could you do an interview? So I do find that they're checking their Twitter all the time and as stories come up, it's much more responsive. So yes, I do, do press releases but I don't find that they get picked up quite as much as they do when I tweet about something (Liberal Democrat Group Leader, C26).

And the other people who follow me are journalists. And so quite often I'll tweet something from a full council meeting and then in my lunch break a journalist will call me and want a quote. I think that that, as a small opposition group, that's quite a good way of getting our voice heard. Because if you've got something to say and the journalists can see that you've got something to say, then they'll pick it up. They might not necessarily, as not the official opposition, come to us otherwise (Labour Group Leader, C39).

The dynamics driving the diffusion of issues and agendas seen here are qualitatively and quantitatively different, partly due to temporality – issues can be picked up in real time – and partly due to the size and scale effect created by the friends lists (one of the affordances identified by Enjolras *et al* (2012) which extend the available connections and multiply the power of communications that are at the heart of social media platforms). The friends lists, if there are enough followers, can result in a very large snowball effect that then spills over into traditional media (see Chadwick's (2013) excellent work on the interdependence and hybridity of modern media for further exploration of this in relation to politics). Kingdon (1995:161), writing before the development of social media, examined how both good and bad policy

ideas can develop '*explosive growth*' as potential adherents are enticed to join the bandwagon and it can be seen how social media might exponentially enhance that effect. The research revealed that the bandwagon effect in Cadwaller was intensified by councillors' use of social media. A councillor blogger reported on the average traffic to his site:

On my personal blog, on my sorry, council blog, just three hundred is my busiest day, which was when we had a Conservative councillor defect to our group. Normally if I put something out, a post out and flag it up on Twitter or Facebook, I'll expect to have about a hundred to a hundred and fifty hits. On the days that I don't write anything, you get tick over traffic. So those are my figures (Liberal Democrat Group Leader, C26).

The same councillor also had 2028 followers on his Twitter site by early 2016 but this was surpassed by an independent councillor who had 2981 Twitter followers and a 'reach'³³ of 21 thousand (numerically more than some councils, see Appendix O). With the decline in local newspapers that was documented in Chapter Three and the concomitant reduction in the reporting of council meetings, the online contributions of councillors appeared to be providing an easy way for local print, radio and television journalists to pick up and disseminate stories, amplifying both their reach and their influence beyond the original source. At the same time, although online interaction is not, following Goodin (2008), '*formally empowered as part of a decision making process*' (2008:19), the wide distribution of policy ideas (and critiques of policy ideas) can be seen to help in agenda setting, in legitimating particular ideas, and in building confidence in a particular course of action (Goodin, 2008:31).

Personalisation emerged as a major element that energised the use of social media in Cadwaller enabling, as it does, councillors to present themselves as individuals and to overcome the anonymity that might attach to them and their office. Chapter Three outlined some of the debate about symbolic representation and the trend towards personalisation in politics (Enli and Skogerbø, (2014) and social media platforms, with their culture of blurring the distinction between the personal and the political (Dahlgren, 2013:141), enables the intensification of this trend. Personalisation online was widely observed in the fieldwork in Cadwaller with some councillors claiming to make no distinction at all between their personal and political online personas, for them social media allowed '*democratic reach into private spaces*' (Loader and Mercea (2011:763). Among councillors there was also a conscious

³³ 'Reach' is used to describe a social media metric which is used to quantify not only your own direct followers, but also their followers, as well as shares and retweets.

harnessing of the ideas expressed by Fenno (1975:51) in that personal qualities were employed to appeal to voters, with posts about children, surfing and baking sitting alongside discussions about local government devolution. A councillor in interview summed up the view of 'personalisation' displayed in the research, thus:

No, because I just be [online] 'who I am'. I don't really, I don't have a political persona and I don't have a personal persona, I have one persona and that's me. Yes, it's me. Originally when I set up Twitter, I did have a [John Smith] Twitter, but I just thought, what's the point? I'm not two different people, I'm one person. People vote for you sometimes because, not on what political stance you're on, actually if they like you as a person. And actually, I think that's one of the first, it's quite cheery, people put an x, do I like him, yes, that's alright. What party is he? Oh yes (Independent Backbencher, C29).

Others were more cautious about what they chose to reveal, but still realised that some personal disclosures were a necessary part of operating successfully online, as one newly elected female councillor reported:

So in a very limited sense that's enough to sort of show that I'm a human being and not a, you know, a political machine, if you like. So I don't talk about them in great detail but people will know that I've got grown up children. They'll know that my dad lives with me. They'll know that I've got two dogs and sheep; do you know what I mean? So at that level they know a bit about me. They'll know a little bit about how I've found becoming a councillor (Liberal Democrat backbencher, C38).

Although Cadwallar councillors described the use of personal information as a way of humanising themselves in the eyes of residents, these actions can be read as a tool or mechanism for enabling the reduction of distance between the elected representative and voter. The reduction of political distance then leading to what Rosanvallon (2011) described as a new, more participative form of politics in which the importance of formal mandates is diminished (2011:199) and is replaced by 'empathetic power' and 'quotidian familiarity in a space without hierarchical gradations' (2011:191). When there are expectations that politicians should become more open and transparent (Pratchett 2006:3), or in the words of Rosanvallon (2011:191) 'take a piece of [their] life and make of it a narrative with which many other people can identify', social media can be seen to enable that to happen.

Engaging in a more participatory form of politics, by councillors, was evident from the research with social media being employed to forge interaction with residents and, as a consequence, strengthening accountability. Councillors consciously identified the utility of social media in becoming more trusted as a local politician through increased interactivity with residents online, and it can be argued that this is in direct contrast to the suspicion of participation cited by Copus (2003) and others. Copus speaks of the weight given by councillors to 'safe methods' (2003:41) of participation such as letter writing or submitting a petition. Social media inverts those safe methods: it involves individuals, not groups, it is direct rather than indirect and it is informal. Goodin (2008:155) described such public conversations as a kind of 'discursive accountability' which could include both voters and non-voters. In Cadwallar councillors could be seen to be searching for indirect and more discursive engagement which went beyond the conventional boundaries of the direct electorate: this can be illustrated by the fact that several councillors with over 2000 followers on Twitter were elected with less than 710 votes in the 2013 elections. Interactivity with citizens was identified by interviewees as an important part of their accountability, although it also led to concerns about authenticity, as one female councillor commented:

I guess it gives them another chance to hear what you're saying and hear your views and actually respond to you, it's sort of an instant response. And it makes you very careful about: it makes you think about the things you stand up for. Because if you said something in the past on Twitter that's, suggests one viewpoint and then you change your mind, then you're instantly being, someone's going to point it out to you, that you've changed your mind. And I'm not saying that you shouldn't be able to change your mind but you need to be able to explain that. So I guess there is a sense of more accountability or more instant accountability maybe (Leader of Labour Group, C39).

The informal diffusion routes by which social media use grew within the council were also initially important: asked before the 2013 elections about how they had learned to use and deploy the key features of social media councillors were unanimous that it had been peer-to-peer learning and experimentation, with this response from a group leader being a typical example:

By mistake, trial and error, blundering through it. No, no training at all actually. I don't think anybody's sat down and done social media with me. And, therefore, whenever

anybody talked about social media, they would call it in and ask us, rather than tell us we needed to sit down and be taught. And I think that led us to make some mistakes on that (Liberal Democrat Group Leader, C26).

The research showed that councillors, in this rural area, also found social media to be useful to them in their roles as community leaders. The digitally confident councillors expressed through social media a range of roles: they wanted to be information providers, they wanted to be responsive to service requests, but they also wanted to be seen as modern local leaders, in conversation with their residents. This is illustrated in the three quotes from councillors given below:

So yes, I get a lot of Facebook and, you know, the lights are out in the street, can you fix it? Yes, no worries. We've got a pothole in this place, yes. I get text messages, especially with the younger generation, where I have conversations with some residents purely by text. I've tried ringing them and they say, oh I'm busy at the moment, and I just text them and that's fine. It's understanding how society changes and how it communicates. Not everyone wants to speak to you on the phone. Not everyone can afford to speak to you on the phone (Independent Backbencher, C29).

Yes, yes, I mean I get, yes I get feedback. And it's the same with, I mean I'm quite amazed... And I mean I was staggered that last month five hundred and fifty people went on my website. Now I know a lot of that is about the library campaign at the moment but, and when I'm out and about, I will talk to people and people say, oh yes, I saw that on your website (Liberal Democrat Backbencher, C38).

But with my councillor page, what I'm trying to do is get more people, more of my constituents to follow me on that, so that I can give information out and people do use it to contact me to tell me about problems that they've got. So it's started to be a sort of online surgery I guess (Leader of Labour Group, C39).

The rural nature of the council area, the connectedness of the local councillor (many had grown up in the area) and the very local nature of much of the online discourse was illustrated

by a 2014 tweet from one councillor trying to crowdsource³⁴ immediate local support for a farming family:

@janefarris: Friend's dad has been taken into hospital meaning his mum urgently needs a relief milker in North Barnbrook (Backbench councillor, C40).

While there was a clear consensus among councillors from the interviews about the utility of social media in relation to developing local identity, managing interactions and showing approachability, views were more mixed about the utility and appropriateness of tweeting live in more formal settings such as council meetings. Some interviewees saw tweeting in meetings as part of more open democratic engagement with the public, (Carr-West and Dale, 2011:33; Loader and Mercea, 2011:763), as one councillor commented in interview:

And I know that there are conversations being [held] in the council about whether they want to ban tweeting from meetings. I think it would be very sad if they did because I think politics is at a stage where people don't trust it, and being as open and as transparent as possible has to be a priority (Leader of Labour Group, C39).

The former ruling group had dismissed tweeting in meetings as inappropriate or distracting, hence the employment of the traditional tactical repertoires of organisational resistance by attempting regulatory action or banning. Officers tasked with bringing this about found a lack of support for this course of action from the politicians when it came to formal decisions, as one officer revealed:

... it was just, the view was taken that if there wasn't the political will in the groups, that there should be some protocols about how you should operate it and enforcement and how you deal with inappropriate use, that we were banging our heads against a bit of a brick wall (Head of Democratic Services and Scrutiny, C30).

In spite of the political embarrassment created for the incumbent administration by real time tweeting it was clear from the accounts given by officers that there was an acceptance in the end that the damage done to the council's reputation by banning would be greater than that caused by the online comments of the opposition known as the 'Twitterati'. That was the situation in Cadwaller until after the elections in May 2013 when a new administration,

³⁴ Crowdsourcing is a term used to describe requests for information, money or other forms of support by appealing to networks and individuals online.

involving most of the councillors involved in the initial Twitterati storm, won control of the council and formed the new administration. Given the successful use of social media in opposition to draw attention to the deficiencies of the previous administration it might have been reasonable to expect that the initial enthusiasm for social media was not likely to extend into the transfer into administration. In fact, the interviews revealed that the opposite was the case. Using the material collected from interviews, the council's online documents and meetings observations, the next section shows how the gradual change process continued into the new regime and engagement with social media became more established as an accepted institutional practice. The next section details how social media practices followed those councillors from opposition into administration.

Section Four: Transfer and conversion

Lowndes and Roberts (2013:165), in their work on institutional change, discuss how actors can move between different institutional arrangements, bringing values and ideas in from other experiences and in the case of Cadwaller it can be seen that the new administration brought with them from opposition an understanding of the value of social media. It is appropriate here to re-iterate that the political change in 2013 was considerable: the Cadwaller Conservatives lost eighteen seats and were no longer the largest group on the council. A Liberal Democrat/Independent Coalition was formed and five out of the ten members of the new cabinet were already bloggers or keen users of Twitter. As one former member of the so-called Twitterati commented on his blog at the time:

For those who think I will be suddenly changed from poacher to gamekeeper fear not. I will still be tweeting and blogging. I hope using both these platforms I will bring a greater understanding as to how the council works and my new role. If needs be, I will be there to highlight concerns I have publicly (C29, now Cabinet Portfolio Holder, Children and Families).

Using Streek and Thelen's (2005:31) categorisation to assess change processes which took place in Cadwaller after the 2013 election allows the identification and highlighting of three important dimensions. Councillors were 'layering' the habits and practices formed in opposition on top of their new formal roles as Cabinet decision-makers; the institutional rules within the council were subject to neglect or 'drift' allowing new practices to develop; and

thirdly the signs of '*conversion*', i.e. the repurposing of old institutions to new ends had begun to appear.

When in opposition, the new controlling group had stressed their commitment to the use of social media as tools for transparency and accountability and had sustained that position over several years in the face of widely reported criticism (see BBC news websites 2010 and 2012). It could be posited therefore that it was unlikely that previous online practices would be entirely abandoned when councillors shifted from opposition to power. What might more confidently have been predicted was the emergence of a substantial shift in the style of online contributions, such as more use of formal language, less personal content and a marked reduction in the frequency of postings, as councillors became absorbed into the dominant traditional organisational norms of being in administration. Those expectations were not substantiated by the findings.

A detailed analysis of the blog posts and tweets of the main 'Twitterati' councillors in the Cadwaller sample who moved into Cabinet positions revealed that they continued to use the online platforms in very similar ways in terms of style and frequency. Personal information was regularly disclosed and it is possible to read the use of personal information, humanising the politician, as one of the most notable utilities of social media for local politicians. That blurring of the distinction between personal and political was described in Chapter Three as one way of '*shrinking the distance*' between councillor and resident (Coleman and Wright, 2008:2), and of enacting the '*politics of presence*' (Philips, 1995:5) and it was clear in Cadwaller that the utility of personalisation transcended the change in roles and remained firmly in the representatives' repertoire of how they 'did politics'. Postings remained determinedly local (as opposed to national), were aimed at positioning the councillors at the centre of a hub or network of local information and the habit of retweeting or praising local businesses was retained. The only discernible difference was in tone: humour was still used and there were still pictures of food and silly socks, but the overall effect was of a more responsible and measured tone. The essence of this shift could be summarised as involving more information giving, less posting of opinion and, perhaps, more cognisance of the rules of online behaviour than previously, as one Cabinet member remarked:

I think that once you take public office then you have to be really careful what you put on any Facebook page. And so I tend to have a rule with any social media, that if I wouldn't say it chatting to someone on the doorstep, that I probably don't put it on.

And sometimes on my personal account I'll go, might take that down actually (Cabinet Localism Portfolio holder, C26).

His Cabinet colleague was also aware that social media platforms were followed by officers and that he had new responsibilities towards them:

I walk into the staff meeting and they say, thanks for keeping us informed, well what have I done now? And they say, no I read your blog, I follow you on Twitter, you know (Cabinet Portfolio holder Children and Families, C29).

It was evident that social media practices developed in opposition followed the digitally aware councillors into office with only minor adjustments because their utility was judged to outweigh any institutional constraints. Absent from post-election interviews or the council's documents was any change to the council's formal rules and there was no evidence of formal rule changes to the constitution relating to social media use during the period of the research contradicting Streek and Thelen's (2005:31) category of 'conversion', where rules and practices are redeployed for new ends. One interviewee who did come close to 'conversion' was the young communications officer, who spoke of the importance of not mixing the old with the new, instead favouring committing to the new media culture of informality and interactivity entirely and keeping the old practices entirely separate for fear of tainting the culture of informality of the new technologies:

Yes, I mean I personally have a view about press releases but that's not in my gift. So they sit, I found them offensive in the Twitter feed eventually, because we would be doing really nice engaging, human language stuff. And then suddenly, news, council raises car park charging in Newtown. And you're like, oh, I just didn't like it. When we saw the newsroom approach from other councils, I managed to persuade the media relations team that they had their own feed, which all that stuff goes in to (Communications Officer, C25).

A young digitally confident councillor, who had posted her contribution to the national Liberal Democrat website when she was only 17, appeared at first sight to provide an extreme example of Streek and Thelen's (2005:31) categorisation of 'conversion' (Interviewee C40). Part of the new ruling group, but not a Cabinet member, she no longer held ward surgeries, claiming her online presence meant that 'people knew where to find her'. Later in the interview it emerged that although she had a very strong local online presence, she was also very

territorially based, assiduously attending the meetings of the local Town Council and other organisations and setting up an informal office by being in a centrally located coffee shop for part of each day. Those small everyday acts, working online and offline, combining the new and the old, provide an example of a councillor who was using both the traditional physical spaces as well as virtual spaces to redesign the way she worked as a councillor. Online and offline behaviour were woven together, in a form of *'institutional bricolage'* (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:203).

Although there was no evidence of formal constitutional changes in Cadwaller, there were some emerging rules and conventions. Reflecting on their social media experiences, councillors revealed that they were conscious that there were some informal rules relating to social media use and it is argued that some of these lessons contained the potential for eventual codification and incorporation into Cadwaller's rules and procedures. A group leader commented on how there was learning from when things went wrong:

I don't know really, it's just sort of something that I put together and talked to my friends about, talked to political colleagues about where the line is. And then I suppose I sit on the regional board for the Labour party and recently I had to do a disciplinary hearing, where someone had badly mismanaged their social media. And when things go wrong you hear about it. And I think it just makes everyone step back a bit and think about what they're tweeting and what they're putting on Facebook (Leader of Labour Group, C39)

Post-election the narrative from the interviews began to change. Evidence of the formal validation and promotion of social media began to emerge from two sources: council officers and political parties. Cadwaller council officers began to promote social media in the induction sessions for the newly elected councillors after the 2013 election, which indicated a degree of confidence that social media would be an important, ongoing, tool in the work of a local councillor. Some of the new councillors were initially resistant, as an interviewee commented:

My view to social media probably is summed up, when we first got elected and part of our induction, officers were looking at social media with us and they were sort of asking us to put our hands up if we used and if we didn't, and probably the majority of us didn't. And so the officers threw it back to us and said, why don't you use social media? And there was absolute silence and you could feel these officers thinking, well

no one's responding. So I put my hand up and said, because I want a life (Liberal Democrat Backbencher, C38).

The normalisation of social media use in Cadwaller can be seen through the evidence from the post 2013 interviews. As well as officers pushing social media at induction time, political parties were also putting pressure on members as was seen in an interview with the same new councillor:

OK, when I got elected, as I said to you, I'm part of the Lib Dem Group, and our constituency organiser was sort of chipping away and chipping away. He wanted me to get into social media, I didn't want to. And so the compromise was, he said, 'well how about I set you up a website?' I then, I suppose I began to sort of see its merits... And so I decided I would try to take a bit more responsibility for it and I suppose I've just gradually got into preferring to put out my own messages. I know it doesn't communicate with everybody but it's quicker than going round and putting things in two thousand odd letterboxes. (Liberal Democrat Backbencher, C38).

The quotes above illustrate that perceptions of social media had begun to shift, from a bottom-up, member driven movement, into part of the everyday political repertoire of the political parties as well as the council.

Conclusion: Turning social media to advantage

The chapter identified the incremental processes of change at work in a large rural council and set out the way the characteristics and norms of social media, such as informality, personalisation and virality, provided political advantage and acted as a challenge to the incumbent administration. Councillors displayed a weakening of the formal systems of accountability (such as sanctions) alongside, but also a strengthening of the importance of the local, territorial aspects of accountability. The importance of reputational ability, identified in Chapter Two, was once again made prominent because of the transparency of social media.

The change processes in Cadwaller had two important dimensions. The first dimension was political opposition: councillors were able to use the temporal qualities of social media to expose the alleged deficiencies of the incumbent administration. The speed, volume and virality of social media meant that the opposition councillors could use the spaces created to dictate the agenda, sometimes creating a 'Twitter storm' by escalating particular issues.

Goodin (2008:101) described such escalation an '*unwelcome cascade*', where one small action or comment might result in exaggerated unintended consequences.

The second dimension can be seen to relate to community leadership, particularly important in the rural context: digitally confident local councillors, those described as early adopters or digital entrepreneurs, could be seen to be using the opportunities or affordances of social media to reclaim their roles as distinctive, informed and authoritative representatives at the centre of governing networks. Hambleton and Sweeting (2004:482) identified developing a '*distinctive local response*' as a key aspect of legitimacy for politicians seeking to generate trust from followers and the wider population. Copus (2014) has written powerfully about the gradual etiolation of this community leadership role that has been created by the shift of orientation towards consumerism and service delivery issues: social media use in Cadwaller appeared to be re-balancing that orientation towards policy and issues relating to place. Using Getimis and Grigoriadou's (2005) analysis of different leadership styles and orientations, Cadwaller councillors were using the participatory nature of social media to strengthen their own positions proactively, by '*developing a clear personal agenda*', and by '*generating capacity and problem solving*' (Getimis and Grigoriadou 2005:182). Part of that creation of a sense of place and local leadership related to the self-conscious use of concepts of personalisation and authenticity, '*blurring the traditional public/private divide*' (Howard and Sweeting 2004:4) and demonstrating the '*politics of presence*' (Philips, 1995:5). Borrowing the words of Copus (2010), in Cadwaller social media have become '*a weapon for councillors to employ, rather than a problem for them to overcome*' (2010:571).

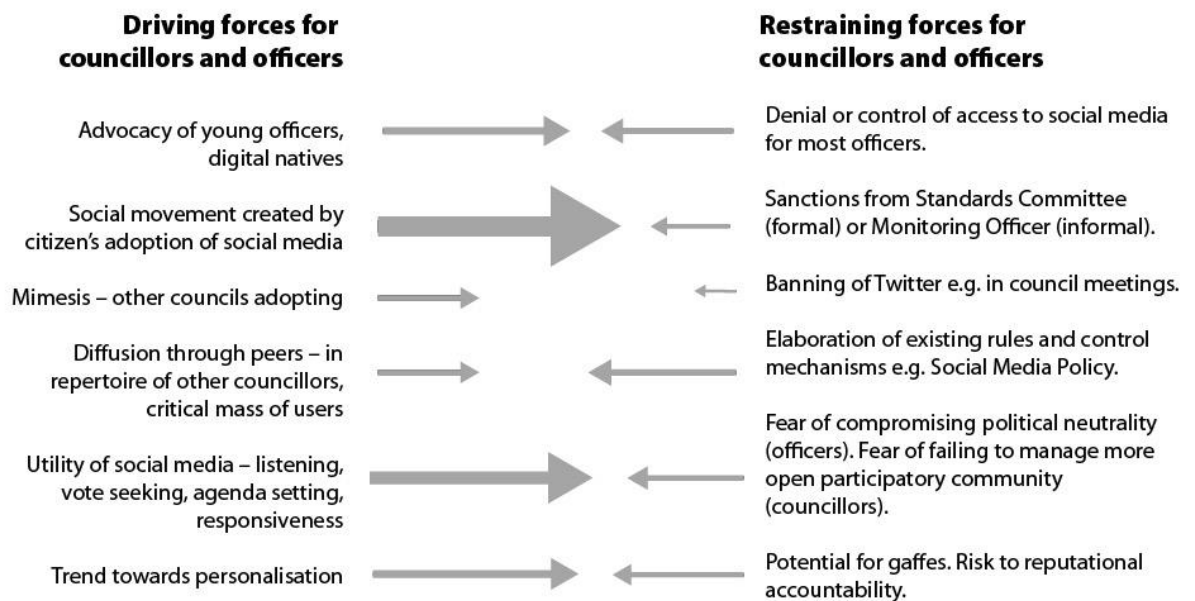
The chapter also emphasised that councillors in Cadwaller were not only layering the new interpretations of their roles on top of existing interpretations, but also '*recombining*' elements of old and new (Crouch, 2005:154, Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:109) to create new iterations of the representative role. These new iterations were not yet embedded fully in the institutional norms of the organisation, and the interviews with officers revealed some lack of flex by the council with officers still trying at times to apply old rules to new technologies. Councillors were observed to be experimenting with the new technologies, learning how to use them peer-to-peer, engaging in direct conversations with citizens and pushing the adoption of social media practices from the bottom up.

That experimentation was seen to be largely decoupled from the formal institutional mechanisms that governed councillor's interaction with citizens. That decoupling, it is argued,

can be seen as part of the change process. Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2008:86) argued that decoupling could be seen as one of the ways of resolving contradictory demands or ambiguities in organisations when responding to new pressures, in this case social media use by citizens. The experiences of officers, such as the difficulty of regulating the parody accounts, illustrate the tensions which were created by the interface between the distributed and decentralised phenomenon of social media (Kersting, 2012:27) and the centralised, *long-embedded political institutions*' (John, 2009:14) of local authority governance. Cadwaller officers did retreat from applying the council's rules and this allowed councillors some space in which to experiment with social media and therefore enable the maturing of practices gained in opposition which could then transfer when the council control changed. In addition the findings from Cadwaller also displayed the importance of a critical mass of digitally confident councillors, which allied to the small but important number of enthusiastic officers, converged to create a pool of knowledge and experience about using social media for democratic purposes.

The exploration and analysis of Cadwaller is summarised diagrammatically below which utilises and reworks Lewin's (1951) model of organisational change (Figure 2 below). The model of organisational change, showing the driving and restraining forces illustrates the relative strengths of the enabling and constraining features in play in Cadwaller Council.

Figure 2. Forces acting on social media change in Cadwaller Council, based on Lewin (1951)



Source: Developed for this thesis.

Figure Two offers, in summary form, some sense of the relative strengths and weaknesses that social media, described in Chapter Three as a social movement created by citizens use of social media (see Barnes *et al*, 2007:43), are exerting pressures on the daily practices of elected representatives. Here in Cadwaller, there was evidence that the pressures to adopt social media, the driving forces, outweighed the constraining forces and allowed councillors to take the new ways of working with them as they moved from opposition to control of the council.

The case study chapter and the preceding chapter, which gave an account of a London borough, described councils which were embracing the new technologies and could be considered to be in the vanguard of social media adoption, but the next chapter explores another two councils which were at very different stages in their relationship with social media. By examining the experience of these two councils, using a case study approach, the next chapter aims to gain an understanding of whether the common patterns in the use of social media that were identified in Chapters Five and Six could transcend particular geographies and organisational histories and also be found in councils which were only just coming to terms with the new technologies.

Chapter Seven: Repertoires of resistance in two councils

Introduction

The chapter presents the last of the case studies in this thesis. The findings from field work which took place in two councils are presented: a northern metropolitan council, Shawborough Metropolitan Council, and a mayoral district, Wallingsworth District Council³⁵.

As with the case studies in the two previous chapters this chapter is exploratory and descriptive of the way that social media can enable political opportunities for councillors to increase engagement with citizens (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013:764), but it also offers a different perspective, drawn from new institutionalism, which highlights how institutional arrangements can act to constrain change and prevent councillors from seizing those political opportunities (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:113). The previous case studies explored the normative models of the small vanguard category of '*embracing*' councils, which were described in Chapter Four as effective in managing online participative communications with citizens. This case study moves on to explore two councils from the largest category, that of the '*engaging*' councils, where adaptation to the new norms of social media was seen to be both contested and uneven. What were the specific organisational characteristics and institutional configurations which meant that the '*engaging*' councils were less likely to commit to more participatory modes of communication? Lowndes' (1997) explanation for resistance to change in organisations sets the scene for the exploration of these councils:

The persistence of 'old' practices alongside 'new' approaches, or the reinterpretation of innovations to secure a 'fit' with existing ways of doing things, may arise out of overt resistance of conscious 'hijacking' by organisational actors. However, it may simply reflect the durability of organisational practices and 'mind sets' (Lowndes, 1997:51).

While examples of the key enabling characteristics of social media, such as participation, transparency and responsiveness, can be found in this account, the constraining features emerge much more strongly overall and in addition the failure of *elites* to drive change also appears as a key institutional feature. The councils and councillors are depicted overall as resisting the transition from the traditional forms of government to the more modern and participative forms of governance (Hambleton and Sweeting, 2004:474).

³⁵ Identities masked.

The two councils chosen for this case study of the *'engaging'* councils, Shawborough and Wallingsworth, emerged from the selection exercise (see Chapter Four) because they offered variety, e.g. mayoral, non-mayoral, southern and northern, district and metropolitan, but also because they had a number of features in common which made them interesting to explore in the light of social media related change: both councils had a presence on Twitter and Facebook; a very small number of councillors who were identified as active users of social media; and they both had entrepreneurial leaders who were very prominent and visible advocates of social media. The study of Wallingsworth's directly elected mayor and Shawborough's young and charismatic leader also provided the opportunity to explore whether strong leadership was enough to drive organisational change in relation to social media. Elite theory would suggest that the *'power to'* and the *'power over'* (Haus and Heinelt, (2006:32) held by those individual leaders, as well as their roles as exemplars, could drive change and this theory is tested against the evidence from the fieldwork later in the chapter.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section begins with brief organisational biographies of the two councils, introduces the features of social media use in each council and identifies the concerns about negative effects or possible sanctions around that use. The role of the democratically elected mayor of Wallingsworth is also considered and contrasted with that of the Shawborough leader in order to detect differences in social media use related to the different organisational models. As Sweeting (2017) has outlined, in the current governance environment the opportunity exists for the new democratically elected mayors to gain profile and legitimacy through more individualised leadership (Sweeting, 2017:269) and it might be expected that social media would provide the ideal arena for the exercising of that leadership. Whether that potential was fully realised is further explored in this section.

The second section uses the accounts of officers and councillors to focus on the institutional processes that have shaped the organisational *'rules-in-use'* (Ostrom, 1999:38) in the two councils. How was the agency of councillors allowing them to experiment with the new media in their dealings with citizens? What were the specific institutional constraints that were holding councillors back from embracing social media? These questions were addressed through systematic interviews with the actors themselves in order to test their perceptions of constraining factors and in order to understand why the exogenous pressures created by citizens' social media use and the endogenous pressures of *elite* sponsorship had not resulted in a change to norms and practices.

Following that descriptive account the chapter concludes by using the framework of new institutionalism to offer some explanations for the continued resistance to change in two councils, explanations which propose that underlying concerns about institutional and political instability have led to a lack of confidence that has made it harder for the councils to embrace innovation. The approach to change is seen in these councils to be more tentative, *'engaging'* rather than *'embracing'*. Several features emerged as important in shaping the institutional environments of the *'engaging councils'*. Concerns about the challenge to the existing forms of representative democracy created by informal networked social media practices emerged as important: as Newman (2001:133) has asked, in a more participative system whose views can be legitimately expressed?

As Goodin (2008:155) has indicated, more network-based and discursive forms of democracy bring with them new challenges and these councils face the particular challenge of the new online voices can be accommodated within the existing institutional mechanisms for public involvement. Concerns about the negative impacts of online personal attacks (Dahlgren, 2013:46) and reputational damage (Keohane, 2003) are also highlighted as key constraining features for councillors in this account. Overall, despite the fact that the leaders of these two organisations had identified the advantages of social media and the concomitant political opportunities (Tarrow, 1998:88), the constraining factors meant that the non-elite actors, both councillors and officers, had come to the conclusion that the returns from change did not outweigh its disadvantages. The new digital features were therefore seen to be bolted-on to current practices, or to use Streek and Thelen's (2005:31) term, *'layered'* on top of existing institutional arrangements, rather than to be changing the *'rules of the game'* in a more fundamental way, as described by Lowndes (1996:183).

Section One: Shawborough and Wallingsworth

Shawborough

Shawborough is a northern metropolitan council with a population of over 200,000 represented by sixty councillors. The main town is industrial, but the local textile industries have declined and unemployment in the area is greater than both the regional and national average. Over 20% of the population are from ethnic minorities, many of them third generation descendants of those who came to work in the textile industry in the 1960³⁶s. In

³⁶ 2011 census, Office of National Statistics (ONS)

terms of setting Shawborough within its national context, its health indicators are poorer than the national average, as are its levels of educational qualifications³⁷. Politically, since its formation as a metropolitan council in 1974, political control has been changeable, with Labour, Conservative and the Liberal Democrats taking turns to form the administration. More recently, after three years of Liberal Democrat control (2008-11) the council reverted to Labour control and by 2015 Labour had 45 of the 60 seats³⁸. The leader was active in social media, having adopted Facebook and Twitter in 2010, as well as regular blogger, but less than ten of the 60 councillors were active social media users at the time of the study. In spite of the absence of a large cohort of digitally confident councillors, Shawborough's leader In 2012 he took the decision to webcast the proceedings of full council meetings to the public as part of making the council more accountable and open. The council's constitution was changed to facilitate the webcasting, attracting the attention of the national media (Guardian 13/2/12). The leader described the change in an interview:

Yes, so the idea is, it's a two-way communication. So we have what we call, open council, and that's about the public tweeting, Facebook, emailing questions or they can turn up to a meeting if they want to, and that's why the screens are up. But then throughout the meeting they can continue to tweet and we pick up comments that are being made throughout the meeting (Shawborough Leader, S44).

In practice, two large screens (referred to by officers as 'the wall'), installed in Shawborough's council chamber, showed a scrolling live feed of public questions via Tweets, emails and Facebook posts. The use of live streaming of questions on large screens in the council chamber is the only example of this practice in council meetings that the researcher could find in England. During the first hour of the meeting councillors answered questions from the public online as well as the small number of members of the public who were present in the chamber. Officers indicated in interview that physical public attendance at meetings varied between zero and eight, often the same people. Observation of the March 2016 full council meeting showed no questions from the small number of attendees in the chamber, 6 questions via Twitter and 2 via email. Analysis of public questions from 2012 to 2014 showed that the online questions submitted through Facebook and Twitter exactly mirrored questions which had been submitted in writing at a typical council meeting; for example, fly tipping,

³⁷ Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA, 2012)

³⁸ All figures for political composition are from: <http://www.gwydir.demon.co.uk/byelections/>

transport, markets and council tax increases. Although the questions submitted online by the public observed the informal conventions of social media in terms of language, the answers given by councillors to online questions followed exactly the same conventions as the responses to written questions submitted in advance. I.e. questioners were mainly offered written answers to follow after the meeting. That the same style of responses emerged from a very different approach, i.e. online, not submitted in advance and unmediated by officers, points to one constraining factor as strongly present in the council: path dependency through maintenance of existing administrative systems.

Observation of the use of the online discussion screens showed that comments from the public continued to be displayed even after the public question time period had closed. The local newspaper reporter attended the meeting and tweeted live comments on the proceedings and these appeared on the screens in real time. The practice of live screening comments, including the comments of councillors participating in the meetings, was controversial, as evidenced by reports in the local newspapers about whether tweeting in meetings should be banned. At one meeting, observed in December 2013, councillors began to quote and discuss the reporter's comments, creating a contemporaneous debate, online and offline, which was only halted by the intervention of the mayor. Subsequently the mayor asked councillors not to tweet during council meetings: the view was taken that the virtual online debate between councillors had threatened to distort the physical debate taking place in the chamber. This description indicates that there was a dissonance between the spaces for participation available to those citizens who were physically present and those who were contributing online, privileging those in the virtual sphere and this is further discussed later in this chapter.

Wallingsworth

Wallingsworth is a district council situated north of London with good transport links for commuters into central London and its economic prosperity depends on its office, business and retailing sectors. The area is densely populated with a population of over 95,000 people represented by thirty-seven councillors. Over 20 % of the population are from a variety of ethnic minorities³⁹. In a national context Wallingsworth's, unemployment is low and health outcomes are generally above the national average⁴⁰. The council was Labour controlled until 2003, but since the advent of the directly elected mayor, it has been controlled by the Liberal

³⁹ 2011 census, Office of National Statistics (ONS).

⁴⁰ Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) 2014.

Democrats. In 2015 the Liberal Democrats had 24 of the 37 seats. The directly elected female mayor was an early adopter of social media (2009), using Facebook and Twitter extensively. Analysis of her online content on both platforms showed that her focus was almost exclusively on local issues and her style was relatively informal. Hambleton and Sweeting (2004), in their work on the introduction of mayoral governance, highlighted the political opportunities for directly elected mayors to show visible leadership and an analysis of the content of the mayor's social media output and the mayor had certainly used social media to develop her own distinctive public profile as a leader of place, committed to every aspect of the borough, from its football team to its local businesses. As she commented:

It's funny because in a way it [social media] suits my style as a politician because one thing I'm kind of known for is I'm not I'm not very sound bitey and I do speak normally (Mayor of Wallingworth, W14a).

The mayor's adoption of digital media was not however, emulated by her fellow councillors, with only a handful of the councillors using social media during the data collection period. The possible reasons for lack of adoption are discussed in the second section below. In term of the wider context, the majority of council employees were not allowed to access social media at work. The council meetings were not webcast and an officer indicated that public attendance at meetings was sparse except for particular campaigns. Three of the four meetings observed had no members of the public present and access to the building by the public in the evenings for any other than full council meetings was difficult with the need for a security guard to escort any potential attendees through corridors to the meeting rooms. In addition, there was evidence of continued mediation and control of communications: the Wallingworth communications department moderated Facebook posts, in their own words, '*quite heavily*' (Interviewee W34), allowing only about one in ten of critical messages to be left up on the council site. Overall, the mayor who, as a high status individual, might have been expected to influence a culture of digital participation and openness appeared to have failed to bring about change. The factors that were exerting counter forces towards analogue modes of operation in Wallingworth are discussed in more detail below.

In spite of the differences that are apparent from these two biographies, one initial institutional feature which stood out as common to both was the presence of highly visible and energetic leaders, committed to the use of digital technologies for communication with the public. Both leaders could be categorised as politically ambitious for their areas and successful

in relation to their own careers. The mayor of Wallingsworth was the first directly elected female mayor in England, was subsequently re-elected three times and was made a Baroness in 2015. The leader of Shawborough became the leader of the council at 31, making him at the time one of the youngest council leaders in the country and in 2015 he became Shawborough's MP. The influence of those two leaders as *elites* and exemplars with the potential to influence and shape organisational change is further discussed in the next section.

Section Two: Path dependency in Shawborough and Wallingsworth

The organisational biographies presented above show that these councils were positioned to become innovative councils in the use of social media. There was evidence of commitment to social media by both leaders and there was evidence of some innovation, such as the use of the live streaming of public questions initiated by the leader of the Shawborough and the extensive social media output from the mayor of Wallingsworth. It might therefore have been expected that the innovation at the top would have been followed by substantive change throughout the organisation. In spite of the leadership moving towards social media enabled modes of operation the interviews revealed that councillors and staff were slow and reluctant to follow them in that direction. Overall the dominant narratives around social media surfaced by the interviews were about caution and control. The need to maintain path dependency and current institutional practices seemed to outweigh any appetite for experimentation and change. What organisational characteristics might explain that reluctance?

Lowndes and Wilson (2003:47) have identified a number of characteristics as important in structuring the form and pace of institutional change, including the particular political and institutional dynamics in each council, its organisational history and its locality and the characteristics which emerged from the interviews as exercising particular constraints on change in Shawborough and Wallingsworth are outlined below.

Constraining features

The first limiting factor was the lack of a critical mass of social media users: the percentage of councillors actively using social media in each of the two case study councils at the beginning of the research period was low (in addition to the leaders there were 5 in Shawborough and 3 in Wallingsworth). The Mayor of Wallingsworth commented that in spite of her own adoption and advocacy of the new technologies her fellow councillors had not followed her example (only five councillors were active users in 2013) saying:

I feel it's wrong that the other councillors, especially cabinet members, aren't present on Facebook..., I think they're missing a trick by not doing it and that some people will be expecting them to weigh in on ward level issues and they're not because they're not engaged with it at that level. And that wherever there's an issue in your ward or your town, whether it's on Facebook, whether it's at a meeting, you should be present to give your views on it, as a councillor (Mayor of Wallingsworth, W14a).

The second constraining feature concerned negative perceptions of the new media in relation to both its impact on personal privacy and safety and its impact upon local political discourse. In other words, councillors perceived that increased engagement with citizens had brought new problems. The difficulties were those created by the culture of immediacy, transparency, intimacy and shrinkage of social space and the '*collapse of traditional constraints of distance*' that was described by Coleman and Blumler (2009:27) as inherent in the new platforms.

The shrinking of distance enabled by social media was particularly evident in the accounts of negative attacks and trolling given by interviewees, representing the converse of the positive '*affordances*' or enabling features (Enjolras *et al*, 2012) of social media for politicians that were outlined in Chapter Three. As Coleman (2005:178) commented, political representations have previously tended to be vertically mediated through newspaper editors or institutional barriers: social media enables political preferences and messages to reach the ears of politicians directly, often anonymously and unmediated, and that opens up the possibility of online abuse (Howe, 2013; Hepburn, 2014; Graham and Wright, 2015).

The interviews revealed that any politician could be affected by online abuse, but the impact of online attacks appeared to have a particular emotional effect on female politicians by damaging their confidence. This finding echoes the findings of Rao (2005:327) and Bochel and Bochel (2000:41) who found that having strong political self-esteem and self-confidence was important for women in confirming their sense of themselves as capable elected representatives on a par with their male colleagues. Accounts of how personal attacks on social media had dented that confidence were given by female councillors in both authorities. Female councillors from Wallingsworth had experienced direct personal abuse and trolling and this experience had made them more cautious in their engagement as one councillor admitted:

It's hurtful, well it would be hurtful at the best of times, but I think it's the pain that it gives you. I don't want anything to really knock my confidence, because I do get nervous about things and I don't like upsetting people. But to actually see it on the computer or on your phone, I find it very intrusive and you feel like you can't defend yourself (Wallingsworth, Liberal Democrat backbench member, W16a).

Concern about negative comments online was not just confined to female councillors, even senior figures such as Shawborough's leader expressed caution about online discussions with residents:

And, to be honest, they're usually quite aggressive with it...There has been occasions where I've tried to get to the bottom of what the issue is and they've continued to be very abusive...I've just said, look I've tried, I'm sorry but you're blocked. And I've blocked them and stopped the conversation...So it does make you withdraw slightly (Leader Shawborough, S44).

One brave Shawborough Councillor had taken a different approach to anonymous abuse by issuing a challenge on his Facebook page:

Mr or Mrs LLR2. You have posted some pretty bad things about Councillors in Shawborough. That's your right and no problem with that. I challenge you to a debate and discussion face to face. Are you up to it? (Backbench member, Shawborough, S24).

The challenge was never taken up. Taking critical debate offline in order to diminish its visibility and therefore its impact was a tactic also employed by the mayor of Wallingsworth and others, including an opposition group leader in Shawborough who commented:

I'll migrate off it, you know, because people, it never ceases to amaze me, conduct what I consider to be a private conversation with half the world looking (Shawborough Liberal Democrat Leader, S42).

Politicians have of course always suffered from criticism from the public (see Hay and Stoker, 2009), but the qualitative differences afforded by social media are worthy of attention in two ways: firstly the new platforms enable a direct conveyance of abusive comments which are also visible to a wide audience via the multiplying effect of friends and followers lists, (Enjolras *et al*, 2012:900) and secondly because the anonymity of social media provides tends to 'foster abusive and aggressive posting behavior (flaming)' (Graham and Wright, 2015:326) in a way

that was not possible in mediated spheres such as local newspapers. Reasons cited by councillors for not engaging with the new media included an awareness of some of the particular difficulties experienced by the leaders of Shawborough and the mayor of Wallingsworth.

The cautiousness expressed in the interviews was also related to concerns about physical safety, with one BME councillor in Wallingsworth voicing particular concerns about trolls (Interviewee W16b) and one senior officer in Shawborough recounted an occasion when social media had led to concerns about physical safety:

...the other kind of aspect for councillors is on the personal safety side. But our Leader...he had an experience where he tweeted from home saying, I'm not feeling so well today, I haven't been able to go to whatever event. And somebody turned up on his doorstep inquiring about his welfare (Shawborough Borough Solicitor and Monitoring Officer, S48).

The third constraining factor to feature in the institutional environments of the two councils in this chapter concerned what Copus (2012:7) has described as the '*majoritarian and adversarial politics of English council chambers*'. Interviewees in both councils described a negative perception of the potential for social media to provide new participatory spaces for public debate. In summary the views expressed were that in the absence of mediation or filters as described by Benkler (2006:78) social media could be captured by the opposition for political advantage and used by citizens in ways that were difficult to control and manage while in public view. These negative perceptions can be illustrated by observation in Shawborough where the live unmediated social media streaming during the full council meeting, intended to improve citizen participation in the democratic process, was easily be diverted into the what Ewbank (2010:4) described as the typical adversarial politics of local government (Ewbank, 2010:4). Shawborough's senior legal officer commented about the problems of the Twitter feeds in the Chamber during the full council meeting:

And effectively the mayor wasn't happy about that because he could obviously see the screen and he could see Councillor X had said this about Councillor Y's speech...he was very unhappy and he didn't want councillors' responses to be on the screen...it was impeding the flow of the meeting and if the councillors had something to say, then it

should come through the mayor and it should be done in a formal setting (Shawborough Borough Solicitor and Monitoring Officer, S48).

Far from being normalised as part of democratic practice, outside the leadership social media were seen by the backbench interviewees to have acquired an overtly political dimension within a cautious organisational environment where social media were viewed as potentially dangerous. Another illustration of the politicised climate within which social media were being used in Shawborough came from the only digitally confident female councillor:

The deal was that none of the councillors would tweet, right. But what happened, the leader of the council started tweeting. And he was tweeting not nice stuff about what we were saying in council. So [my group leader] was like, you need to be tweeting. And I was like, I'm not tweeting, I'm not just going to have a go... because I think it's unproductive, for residents. And I kept saying...I thought we weren't supposed to be tweeting. And he said, listen, if they're doing it, you start doing it. And then it got to the stage where they were just pounding Twitter...And that sounds really childish but they did, they spoilt it (Shawborough Liberal Democrat backbencher, S47).

Experience was similar in Wallingsworth as the mayor commented:

Yes, you see we've definitely got, and I can tell from my tweets, that there is a clutch of Labour Party people, who are designed to attack me whenever I make any comment. And that's what will be happening in the council meeting, I would imagine... I'm talking about the fact that if you've got five Rottweilers ready to say, didn't she look a prat (Mayor of Wallingsworth, W14b).

The interviews revealed a degree of discomfort about social media use in meetings and this was framed in terms of concern about its appropriateness for council purposes and about the exclusive nature of the online debate during meetings. An officer interviewed summed this up:

[It is] a tweeted dialogue, which undermines the kind of debate in the Council Chambers that not everyone can see or access (Shawborough, Assistant Chief Executive, S37).

Adoption was rejected by those who perceived that the new media was not appropriate for use in the public arenas of political debate, as one Shawborough councillor remarked:

...the trouble with council meeting, a traditional full council meeting isn't a debating arena. It's more a rubber stamping exercise for decisions that have been taken...Of course, there's debate, but it isn't debate, it's posturing. And it never leads to any constructive conclusion because the incumbent political party will say their piece, the opposition will say theirs, and never the twain shall meet (Shawborough, Labour backbencher, S24).

These concerns can be seen to be contributing towards a reduction of the appetite for risk and experimentation and therefore creating reluctance by both councillors and officers to embrace the 'opportunity structures' (Campbell, 2005:44) that had been created by social media. In addition the interviews indicated that insecurity about political stability or concerns about attacks from the opposition meant that a miss-step on Twitter or an ill-judged Facebook post were seen as providing an opportunity for oppositional actors to gain political advantage. Social media feedback was therefore seen as potentially dangerous for councillors who ventured online and this shaped their usage (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013:764). As Koopmans (2004) has commented:

Political change...is driven by the constant attempts of various contenders to improve their relative positions of power (Koopmans, 2004:41).

Another constraining factor on the adoption and development of the new media in the two councils related to the banning or control of access for staff: there was evidence in both councils that a tight control was kept over employees' use of social media. In Wallingsworth the communications officers indicated that most employees, with some small exceptions, were banned from using Facebook and Twitter at work or identifying themselves as council employees in their personal postings. One Wallingsworth communications officer linked the desire to control employee access to concerns about reputational damage following an incident in 2011 in which some photographs of hung-over council leisure staff such as lifeguards were posted on Facebook under the heading 'Hung-over Wallingsworth Council Staff'. The site was quickly taken down and the employees warned about online behaviour. Although Shawborough employees were allowed to use social media at work, the sanctions for transgressing unwritten conventions about not criticising the council were tightly enforced:

But we take quite a strong approach to it... so what we will do is we'd normally ring their manager and just say, can you have a quiet word? We don't take massively kindly

to people putting such negative things on [social media] when they work here (Shawborough, Head of Communications, S46).

As well as constraining employees' use of social media, another common feature of the two councils was the lack of engagement in, and knowledge of, social media by senior managers. Regulators didn't understand what they were regulating, as was seen in the case of Monitoring Officers in Chapter Four. There was also no social media protocol in either Shawborough or Wallingsworth at the time of study. Although the Chief Executive of Shawborough used Twitter, the sole content of her output was the provision of information directed at the council's own staff. Shawborough's Monitoring Officer, Head of Staff and Assistant Chief Executive all claimed never to have used social media and in Wallingsworth the Communications Manager had very little experience of social media. Indeed the other communications staff described how they had set up the council's Facebook site initially as a personal page⁴¹ because there was no appetite from managers and no mandate from the politicians to engage with the new media.

Lack of knowledge about social media was not just confined to the officers: the interviews with councillors in both councils showed that there were limited formal and informal routes for the diffusion of learning about social media. The take up of help by Shawborough councillors was poor, with only five councillors having taken up training, and one to one sessions had met with mixed success according to one officer:

I mean we went to do training with one councillor and he had never opened his emails. And the training consisted of, 'how do you read an email', in the end. So he'd come in as social media training, [but it] ended up being I can't possibly log in and get an account when I don't use my emails (Shawborough, Head of Communications, S46).

In Shawborough the leader had suggested that the Labour Group should try sharing knowledge about communicating with citizens using Facebook and Twitter, but the collective lack of experience in using the new media meant that the youngest councillor had to be (reluctantly) drafted into service as a coach:

⁴¹ Facebook now requires the official page of an organisation to be administered by an authorised individual representing that organisation, but in 2009 it was still possible to set up a personal page and claim that it was an official council site. https://www.facebook.com/page_guidelines.php

And Twitter and social media was one element of that but I was handed an iPad during that and asked to show other people how to use it because I was known to already be on it (Shawborough, Labour backbencher, S45).

Councillors' and officers' limited pool of knowledge about social media across the two councils can also be read as contributing to an organisational culture in which social media struggled to be recognised as legitimate. Observation of meetings in both revealed a traditional culture which manifested itself partly through formality: for example in Shawborough the culture of the full council meeting was old-fashioned, with the mayor beginning meetings with the practice of giving gentlemen permission to remove their jackets if they so wished. Analogue and digital practices were observed to sit somewhat uncomfortably together: at a council meeting observed in 2013 the mix of traditional and new was illustrated by councillors having to attend to the live Twitter and Facebook feeds displayed on screen next to the mayor's dais at the same time as attending to the lengthy paper based agendas on the desks in front of them. The mix of analogue and digital practices that emerge from both organisations points towards change that is bolted-on or '*layered*', to use Streek and Thelen's categorisation (2005:31), on top of existing practices.

The theme of resistance to changing current practices in more fundamental ways also emerged from interviews with councillors who were quite simply convinced that participation, immediacy and responsiveness were good things. Councillors also expressed concerns about the demands of a more participatory style of operating, mainly in relation to having control over their own allocation of time. That resistance was expressed by two interviewees:

I can't be checking my Facebook, checking tweets all the time; I'd never have a life. There has to be a line drawn I think sometimes, you know, because you can be overwhelmed. I mean once you get involved in tweeting and saying this, you know, people are going to want you to respond again (Wallingsworth, Scrutiny Chair, W16a).

You can probably get information overload if you're doing stuff like that. And things are bleeping up every two minutes...I've switched that off, I've switched them off now, because I don't want the thing to be bleeping and bleeping every couple of minutes (Shawborough, Backbench councillor, S24).

The dissonance between the expressed commitment of the two council leaders to the participatory qualities of social media and the views which are expressed above deserves further exploration and this is considered further below.

The failure of elite sponsorship

Having set out the constraining features which were strengthening resistance and institutional path dependency the focus turns to a more detailed examination of the dissonance between the *elite* sponsorship of social media related change and the observed and documented resistance to change in both councils. As was previously noted in the organisational biographies of the two councils, there was strong *elite* sponsorship of social media: the mayor Wallingsworth was an early adopter and keen advocate of social media and the leader of Shawborough was seen to be pushing the council to adopt social media as a participatory mechanism. In spite of this, the fieldwork showed clearly that the two leaders had failed to create sufficient mobilisation for change.

Studies have argued that often '*elite perspectives*' are successfully resistant to participatory initiatives (Boaden *et al*, 1982:179, quoted in Sweeting, 1999:4). In Shawborough and Wallingsworth, a new institutionalist conceptualisation would conclude the agency of the leaders was not strong enough to drive more participatory online ways of working towards adoption and eventual institutional normalisation. Lowndes and Roberts (2013:176), in their work on institutional change, have commented on the fallibility of intentional institutional design processes and argued that whatever the original design intentions and opportunities, non-elite actors will, through an iterative process, formulate their own strategies in response and this proved to be the case in Shawborough and Wallingsworth. There were clearly limits, as Lowndes and Roberts (2013) have suggested, as to what individual leaders of councils could achieve from the top-down, constrained as they were by:

...the institutional configurations at [their] disposal, and by the positive and negative influences of institutional actors in the wider political environment (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:131).

Davis *et al* (2005:251) have identified *elite* sponsorship as important in driving organisational change, either through top-down pressure of what they described as '*orchestrated social movements*', where *elites* set new practices in motion which others then emulated. In Shawborough and Wallingsworth *elite* sponsorship was not found to have stimulated adoption

rates: the top down endorsement of social media use was insufficient to create new norms. Why was it that the elites were not able to drive social media related change? The explanation lies partly in the organisational biographies outlined above which indicated the absence of a critical mass of digitally confident councillors and officers, and partly in the existing adversarial political environment in the two councils. In addition, given what Bruns (2008:75) has described as the decentralised nature of social media where effective diffusion is often peer-to-peer, it can be postulated that the top-down imposition of the obligatory use of Facebook and Twitter on local politicians was never very likely to gain traction. As Zald *et al* (2005:273) observed in their study of the impact of social movements on organisations, even if the dominant elites are committed to moving in a particular direction, other parts of the organisation may, for a variety of reasons, resist the new practices.

It can also be reported here that the initial hypothesis outlined at the beginning of the chapter, that there would be a marked difference between an elected mayor and a council leader in their social media use, e.g. type of content, number of followers or degree of informality, was simply not supported by the evidence. Analysis of samples of the content (for local versus national postings), frequency and informality of style of the social media output of the two leaders over the three years of the research revealed very few differences. Explanation for is likely to lie in the identification by both leaders of the importance of a place-based identity (Hambleton, 2015:83) for their online utterances. The content of the social media output of both leaders was firmly rooted in the locality, very rarely straying into national politics. The mayor described herself as Wallingsworth-centric in her social media practice and the leader of Shawborough commented:

I tend to [post] mainly about the place. I like to know what's going around the town and kind of share it and kind of support people. I suppose it took me a while to learn how significant, not that I am, but the job is. And it means a lot to some community groups, for the leader of the council to be seen to be supporting the community event that they're organising (Shawborough, Leader, S44).

Section Three: Gradual adoption

There were some signs of change, in spite of the constraints of the institutional environments in Shawborough and Wellingford: those signs included the gradual increase in the number of councillors adopting social media over the period of the study, digitally active councillors

increased in Shawborough from 5 to 12 and in Wallingsworth from 3 to 8, representing 20% and 23% of the total number of councillors respectively. In fact, although the adoption of social media norms and practices was proceeding at a slow and uneven pace and resistance was the dominant mode of operation in both councils, evidence from the interviews still found that nonetheless individual actors had already begun to identify the political opportunities that might be made possible online.

Enabling features for councillors

The first enabling feature identified was the immediacy of social media which created a different temporality, as two councillors commented in interview:

And with the local paper it usually takes, from sending it in by email, it's usually within three days of you posting it. And then you wait another three days for the replies to come in. So the difference with Facebook, the advantage with Facebook is that you can get an instant answer and an instant counter answer (Shawborough, Labour backbencher, S24).

But I think there is an expectancy that social media have raised, and email, that you are available 24/7 and that people are entitled to a fast response. I mean I'm amazed how quickly people rebuke you on email that you haven't replied, and it's less than forty eight hours... But certainly, it's all instant and quick and getting more so (Mayor of Wallingsworth, W14b).

In addition councillors from both councils also reported that social media assisted in the creation of a local personalised identity, with the effect of humanising them as politicians (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Apter, 2006). This finding supports Heclo's 1969 description, as councillors were using social media to construct a local identity in which:

The local representative is not just a piece of the local government 'machinery', but a human being living and gaining sustenance in a network of human relationships (Heclo, 1969:192).

That humanising effect can also be seen to relate to Scharf's 'input-oriented' legitimation (1999:7) where politicians seek legitimation through participation and consensus. The use of social media for personalisation and responsiveness is illustrated here by the everyday domestic or personal nature of the output of a couple of Shawborough councillors:

So I suppose I use it just to show that I might be a councillor, but I'm a human being as well, just like them you know...I have to do the washing up and I put my bins out, you know (Shawborough, Liberal Democrat backbencher, S47).

I think the people who know me, know who I am and what I do; they know what political party I represent. But there becomes a blurring of, there isn't really a distinction between people, when I put something online, I might be going out, a lot of my friends, we're members of CAMRA, so we like to go to sample real ales. And I'll put on Facebook where I am and people send me witty remarks back saying, get one for me and all this... but tomorrow I could be arguing a political point with them [online], and I think that's really good. I think that's great (Shawborough, Labour backbencher, S24).

Councillors had also used social media for ward work as well as the provision of local information aimed at solving service delivery problems, with their online actions again corresponding to Scharpf's categorisation of 'output-oriented legitimation' (1999:11) as one councillor commented:

But if you ever go and track back, because there's a monitoring function, so you can see, that isn't the stuff that folk look at [national politics]. Folk look at the stuff that I put on yesterday that says, temporary traffic lights for two days at this junction because they're fixing a pot hole. That's by far the most (Shawborough, Leader of Liberal Democrat Group, S42).

There were also examples of usefulness of social media to councillors in relation to accountability, in the simple sense of politicians being required to give an account to voters (Bovens, 2014:5) and this was re-enabled by social media, as one councillor suggested:

It's probably to show that I am actually about and do things. You know, a lot of people don't know what the councillor does, unless they call you... to assist them. I think Twitter is a very good tool in being able to say, you know, aside from being at the end of the phone when you want to tell me about the potholes, I'm also out and about all day, you know, chaperoning the carnival or voting on a budget matter and things like that (Shawborough, Labour backbencher, S45).

In addition to the enabling features identified there was also evidence of dynamism around the social media debate in these two councils, not least through the agency of their leaders. The scanning of local newspaper comment forums in Shawborough during the study showed that citizens were discussing the council's experimentation with online debate. One example was the '*below the line*'⁴² discussion (Graham and Wright, 2015), of the Shawborough leader's robust defence of tweeting in meetings in spite of attempts by the mayor of Shawborough to ban the practice. The two comments below are taken from the twenty-five responses and give a flavour of the debate⁴³:

I totally agree with him [the mayor]. If we are democratising, and a lot of people are using social media to get a better idea of how politics works in Shawborough, then we should be professional and business like about it. That's exactly how things should be run. Not like a bunch of kids using twitter to post abuse to other councillors - maybe [Councillor Brown] should take note. Keep off twitter till the matters at hand have been debated - then throw it open to the wider world. Not rocket science.

[The mayor] is a dinosaur. Get with the times. As much as I dislike [the leader of the council] at least I can find out what he's up to and what he's proposing via his twitter feed. Banning him will not change a single thing. It will merely make it look more secretive (Source: Twitter Ye Not! Evening Chronicle, 1/3/2013).

Outside the inward looking focus of the traditional bureaucratic world of local government, the public were, even in 2013, identifying the advantages of social media use within the democratic processes of scrutiny and oversight: colloquially expressed, the comments quoted above showed that residents already had an understanding of the utility of social media in the opening up of local democracy and accountability.

Conclusion: Reluctant advances

It is clear from the case study set out above that social media, as a set of legitimate practices in local democracy, was not normalised as the '*proper course of action*' (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008) in Shawborough and Wallingsworth. What explanations can be found for the continued path dependency and resistance to the contentions of social media that have been described

⁴² 'Below the line' is a term used to describe online comments by the public which appear beneath a newspaper article.

⁴³ Twitter handles have been removed to mask identities and spelling has been corrected.

in this account of two councils? In Chapter Three the argument was made that social media and Web 2.0 practices do not automatically lead to changes in democracy at the national or the local level (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Dutton *et al*, 2009; Margolis and Moreno-Riaño, 2009) and the findings from this fieldwork support that case. The overall numbers using social media in Shawborough and Wallingsworth were low, elite sponsorship could be said to have failed and the experimentation with the use of social media in the full council meeting had been captured by the adversarial political culture.

The negative perceptions of social media within the prevailing culture of Shawborough and Wallingsworth are an important factor in reducing the likelihood of adopting social media. What can be said, therefore, about the future of social media use in these two councils? Are the actors in those councils, to borrow Weber's vivid metaphor (1930:181), locked in an '*iron cage*' of institutions which they cannot change? Answering this question and predicting the future trajectory of change in the two councils lies in an understanding of the new institutionalist concepts of change as a slow and uneven process of '*adaptation, recombination and reinforcement*' (Quack and Djelic, 2005:255) or as set of constantly changing interactions '*between institutions, actors and environments*' (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:143). The agency of the individual actors in the two councils, in spite of the constraining features that were evident indicates that councillors were likely to continue to utilise social media. Crouch (2005) has also commented that in spite of the constraining effects of an institutional iron cage where the bars are constructed of rules and conventions, '*institutional innovation does take place*' (2005:3) and he introduces the idea of the institutional entrepreneur who looks for:

...elements of institutions that they could recombine in unusual ways at opportune moments in order to produce change (Crouch, 2005:3).

That phrase '*opportune moments*' is particularly apt in the case of Shawborough and Wallingsworth, because it can be deduced that the time horizons for change in the '*engaging*' group of councils are greater than for the innovative, confident '*embracing*' group of councils and the difference can be explained by concerns about political stability. The pace of change in these two councils is therefore contingent upon the existence of spaces within which councillors can experiment safely with social media, i.e. without threat of political insecurity. Councillors in both councils could be seen to lack confidence in exploring the political opportunities of the new media while there was an environment of political uncertainty or

instability, and they therefore defaulted back to tried and tested path dependent modes of operation.

Negative feedback also contributed towards resistance to change in the two councils: as Pierson (2004:151) has observed, '*learning from past events may lead actors to act differently in launching new initiatives*'. The negative feedback from the experiences of the two leaders can be seen to have had a reinforcing effect on negative ideas about greater engagement with the public. Those negative experiences may also have acted to reinforce attitudes about participation that were already held by councillors: Copus's study (2003:40) described councillors as largely hostile to the idea of any extension of decision-making to the public. Social media makes it less likely that this hostility can be sustained in the longer-term. Institutional inertia and embedded views about the undesirability of further engagement with the public are likely to be further tested by the challenges of the more network-based and discursive forms of democracy described by Goodin (2008:155) which are enabled by social media.

Negative attitudes towards participation were constraining experimentation by councillors, but there were other factors that reduced the likelihood of councillors going outside the existing institutional norms. The interviews revealed that the control mechanisms in Shawborough and Wallingsworth councils reinforced existing institutional norms and by almost suggesting that social media was not only undesirable but dangerous. There were the concerns about giving the opposition some advantage through online gaffes, there was the limiting of employee access to social media (and the sanctions for stepping out of line), and there was also the fear about negative responses from citizens: all of these were acting together to constrain any appetite for experimentation in the two councils. That the external pressures created by social media were met with a more muted response in both Shawborough and Wallingsworth indicates that these two councils were at an earlier stage of the shift from analogue to digital. Using Streek and Thelen's (2005:31) categorisation of gradual transformative change, which identified five stages of change, it can be concluded that Shawborough and Wallingsworth were still very much at the first stage, that of '*displacement*'. In these councils there were only small pockets of activity where the salience of the new ways of working had already had some impact on councillors, although this did include the leaders in each case. Nonetheless, even at this early stage of the change processes there were some useful conclusions that can be drawn from this account that add to understanding of the process at work and point towards future

trajectories of change. The first conclusion to draw is that there are limitations to the powers of council leaders to change institutional practices, even when those leaders are charismatic (Vabo and Aars, 2013:707) and even when they have the additional influence that is perceived to come from being a directly elected mayor (Egner, 2017:173). It was clear in this chapter that institutional top-down persuasion had simply failed to convert backbench members into engaging with social media. The signals given by the leaders in their endorsements of social media were not translated into mobilisation because backbenchers had their own shared narratives or understandings about what happened online relating to trolling and privacy and this constrained experimentation (see Lowndes and Roberts, 2013:67).

The second conclusion to be drawn from this case study chapter is that existing attitudes towards participatory democracy have a part to play in shaping councillors' views of opening dialogue with citizens through social media. In spite of the efforts of the leaders, the participatory ideal of activating online discourse with citizens (Haus and Sweeting, 2006:279) was largely resisted by officers and councillors. What do these two conclusions mean for the future development of social media practices in these two councils and others like them? In spite of the evidence of path dependency and resistance to change that emerged in both councils, there was also some evidence that the notion that social media had utility for the role of the councillors was gradually gaining hold. There were accounts of backbench councillors, across political groups, that councillors were quietly adopting social media, learning how to use it from peers and making sense of the new digital environment (interviewees S42, S47, S45, and W16b). Even in the inimical environments of Shawborough and Wallingsworth councillors were beginning to develop their repertoires beyond the traditional confines of the representative sphere into new, more participatory domains and this raises the question of what is it that is driving the continued adoption of social media by councillors in spite of the difficulties that have been experienced. These findings also raise the question of whether the adoption of social media into the daily repertoires of councillors simply a fashion or phase which will soon be over? Can the genie of social media now be put back into the bottle?

The next chapter brings the findings from all of the case studies together with the findings from the quantitative study as well as the review of the literature together in order to address those questions and to draw some conclusions about what the research really means for the institutions of local government and the traditional representative practices of councillors.

Chapter Eight: Web 2.0 democracy for a Web.2.0 world?

Introduction

The thesis was an exploratory study of how social media has affected the institutions of local government and the traditional representative practices of councillors. The focus of this research was not simply theoretical: the exploration here is very much rooted in the strong, but now almost forgotten, history of rich descriptive case studies of English local government life, such as Jones's study of Wolverhampton (1969), Hampton's (1970) study of the city of Sheffield or Green's study of Newcastle (1981). In these types of studies a substantial length of time is spent on gaining insights deep inside organisations (see Bryman, 1988 for other accounts of this type of research) and the researchers often had access to a deeper level of material because of some prior experience as a councillor or manager. Indeed, the thesis drew on the author's twenty-five years' experience as a senior manager in local government as well as the broader research conducted. Rather than offering an account of a single council, the thesis continues the English descriptive tradition in order to offer rich case studies of the impact of the social media on different councils across different geographical areas.

The qualitative case studies are, additionally, underpinned by the quantitative analysis of a data set to track trends in social media use over three years from 2012 to 2015. The analysis of that data set showed that the responses of councils to social media were uneven and it also failed to find any link between factors such as size, urbanity, rurality or political control and the adoption of social media. The absence of strong correlations in the data around these factors suggested that explanations of the unevenness of social media related change lay elsewhere, in the constraining and enabling features that were present in individual councils and in the actions of the key agents, the councillors. There were therefore two main strands to the exploration of local government life here: what effect were social media having on the formal institutions of local government and what was the effect of social media on the everyday practice of councillors? The chapter reports the findings from the research and is organised around four sections which discuss the following questions:

- Why are social media an important issue for local government?
- What are the implications for local government?
- What are the structural and cultural challenges for councils?
- What do the case studies reveal?

The next section starts that discussion by considering what the findings tell us about the importance of social media in the context of local government and local democracy.

Why are social media an important issue for local government?

Answering this question comes back to the expectation that was outlined in the first chapter. If there are over 31 million British people using Facebook (60 per cent of the population)⁴⁴ and over 15 million people using Twitter⁴⁵ (2016 figures) in their everyday lives then it might be reasonably expected that this digital behaviour would also have permeated political life (Xenos and Moy, 2007:715). The thesis shows that social media are contributing to local democracy in ways that are already visible: councillors have begun to determine their online roles in relation to citizens. It also shows that the potential is still not yet fully realised because there is a clash between the norms of social media - informal, interactive and conversational (Coleman, 2005) and the norms of local government - formal, traditional and embedded in routine (Hay, 2002; Orr and Vince, 2009).

Very little was known about how the development of social media was affecting local government and the representative role of the councillor, even ten years after the development of what has been described as the participative architectures of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2010). Previous studies of the new technologies in local government, as outlined in Chapter Three, have focused on the service improvement aspects of local government, e.g. moving transactions online from paper based systems, rather than on its impact on local democracy (Ferguson, 2005; Pratchett *et al*, 2006; Yildiz, 2007). Evaluating whether councils were ensuring that citizens could apply for planning permission online or log complaints about missing bin collections was undoubtedly important, but left hanging the question of whether councils and councillors were also using the new media to reconnect with citizens. Durose (2009:214) speculated that there was a real disjuncture between the ways that citizens were using social media and the ways that councils and councillors were using social media and Hepburn (2012:371), while accepting the potential for local democracy, has previously argued that councils' use of social media was under-researched, particularly at '*the level of local governance*'. The thesis, by focussing on issues of local governance and how elected representatives enact their daily governance repertoires as in a digitally rich and noisy

⁴⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271349/facebook-users-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271350/twitter-users-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>

environment has shown that social media have become an important part of how councillors engage with citizens.

The findings in this thesis relating to how councillors were using social media to connect with citizens complements and supports the debates about the shift from government to governance (Newman, 2007:57). As outlined in Chapter Two, the development of the Web 2.0 interactive technologies took place against the background of demands from successive central governments for democratic renewal in local government. The programme of democratic renewal, which can be said to have been kick-started by Prime Minister Blair's 1998 pamphlet entitled, *'Leading the Way: a new vision for local government'*, was intended to address the continued decline in voter turn-out. Blair's pamphlet was based on the perception that local government was somehow failing to engage citizens and that its decision-making processes were opaque, leading to a democratic deficit (Pratchett, 2006; Howard and Sweeting, 2007; Sullivan, 2010; Copus, 2016). Behind this pressure for democratic renewal was also the idea that councillors were somehow disconnected from those that they governed (Copus, 2016:2). In response to these centralised pressures for democratic renewal English local authorities were required to develop new mechanisms in order to increase engagement with citizens and become more transparent, open and participatory (Blair, 1998; Newman, 2001; Lowndes *et al*, 2001; Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001; Hambleton and Sweeting, 2004; Newman *et al*, 2004; and Durose *et al*, 2009; Heinelt, 2013).

The thesis showed that the trends towards transparency were further intensified by councillors and citizens use of social media to engage with each other on local policy issues, but that this was happening outside the formal arenas imagined by central government. The research showed that the advent of social media had opened up new opportunities for councils to become more transparent, for example through tweeting from meetings (Lansbury) and more open, for example through webcasting (Cadwaller, Shawborough). As well as evidence that social media were helping to open up meetings, the thesis provided evidence that the informal, demotic and messy qualities of social media meant that citizens made their own demands of the transparency agenda which went beyond the former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government vision of an army of armchair auditors poring over councils' finances (DCLG, 1 October 2010). The research showed that social media were contributing to changes in democratic processes in different ways, but particularly in relation to increasing citizen participation.

What are the implications for local government?

Citizen participation in emerged as a key theme in the research and social media use was identified in the thesis as a pressure which acted to increase the intensification of participatory pressures on councillors. The thesis demonstrated that citizens' use of social media had the effect of intensifying the trend for local politics to become more personalised, more informal and generally more participatory in nature.

The research showed that there were new and different groups engaged in local democratic processes online, for example the businesses actively following councillors in Lansbury, the substantial number of viewers for Cadwaller's webcasts, the number of hits on the blog pages of councillors who were active bloggers and the number of followers for digitally active councillors (often much greater than the actual number of voters and sometimes greater than even the number of potential voters in that councillors' ward). The findings also showed that the councils which had embraced social media scored more highly on the indicators of interactivity that were developed for this study. The time series data indicated that this trend towards more interaction with the public was no longer confined to a very small number of early-adopting councils but was beginning to spread as councils became more confident in operating within the new digital environment, in spite of the small number of councils which continued to resist online engagement and interactivity.

The thesis demonstrated that participatory and online pressures have had a considerable effect on councillors, pushing them more towards the role of the elected representative as a *'delegate'* rather than as a Burkean *'trustee'* (Pitkin, 1967:171), although there was evidence from the interviews that councillors were in fact operating more in the more flexible *'politico'* mode where, as Copus (2010:271) suggested, they could *'employ both approaches as circumstances demanded'*. In addition, the pressures from social media on councillors to present themselves as authentic, human and very local could also be seen to be pushing them more towards what Judge has described as *'microcosmic representation'* (1999:21). In this conceptualisation (Judge, 1999:22) there is a dual concern with both composition (how much like me is my representative?) and action (what do they do for me?). The research demonstrated that both of these facets of representation were strengthened by social media as digitally confident councillors seized the political opportunities presented by the new platforms to make themselves *'present'* in the political sphere to diverse virtual audiences. As Judge (1999) commented:

If a representative democracy is to function 'democratically', it has to make present 'the people' who are not, and cannot literally be, present in decision-making (Judge, 1999:22).

The enabling features of social media which increased both the raw numbers of people engaging with their councillors (even if only to click 'like') and the diversity of audiences (Enjolras *et al*, 2012:896) were seen in the accounts of the digitally confident councillors to be helping to '*make present the people*', within the systems of local government.

The research showed that social media, somewhat unexpectedly had the effect of emphasising the local nature of representation. The interviews indicated that there was a strengthening of a territorial sense of place through the online activities of councillors and a perception from them that social media had reinforced their roles as local leaders: leaders of place (Hambleton, 2017). It was an unexpected finding, because initial predictions about social media in the literature appeared to suggest that the new media were global rather than local, facilitating connections across geographical boundaries and weakening local identities (Enjolras *et al*, 2012:893). The interviews indicated that the reverse was the case: social media appeared to be strengthening local identities.

The sense of place or the importance of proximity that emerged from the research was illustrated by the way that councillors were seen to be consciously using residents' attachments to their neighbourhoods to augment their own local identities, endorsing businesses, retweeting local organisations and name-checking everything from restaurants to local activists. The substance of these activities may not be new (see Copus, 2016:45), but here the research adds to existing understandings of how the very local dimensions of the representative role are made visible and intensified in scale through the affordances of social media.

Another implication for local government is the way in which social media intensifies existing pressures for the personalisation of politics. The trend towards personalisation in modern governance has already been identified (Haus and Sweeting, 2006; Denters and Klok, 2013, Enli and Skogerbø, 2013), but it takes a new turn here with the advent of Facebook and Twitter where the blurring of personal and political identities has been normalised (see Chapter Three). The research showed that councillors responded to these pressures in different ways: some councillors had one unified and coherent online identity (e.g. Cadwaller interviewee,

C29); others actively sought to control private and public identities through the strict management of separate sites (e.g. Lansbury interviewee, L53); and, yet others simply refused to engage with the new platforms (Cadwallar interviewee, C33). Examples of those categories were seen across the case study geographies and across all political parties. Interestingly, the findings showed that female politicians were most likely to find difficulty in managing the increased personalisation of politics online (see Chapter Seven).

Two additional features relating to the use of social media also emerged from the research as features which particularly defined those councillors who were effectively navigating the new media to construct their identities online (Enli and Thumin, 2012), these features being visual signifiers and linguistic signifiers. The adoption of an increased and deliberate use of photographs (including re-postings) acted to locate the councillor within a particular cultural or political setting: these included snaps of family, neighbourhood, food, hobbies and pets. Such use of visual signals is familiar in political life, situated as it is within the long tradition of political campaigning aimed at displaying the authenticity of candidates. What did emerge from the research into the social media activities of councils and councillors was evidence of the use of new verbal signifiers within the political discourse which differed from previous political activity.

As was noted in Chapter Three, there was evidence of a disjuncture between the traditional formality of language used in local government and the increased use of demotic, informal, language used in social media by citizens. One of the implications of the latter was the creation of a pressure on councillors (and councils) to adopt these less formal modes of speech. The shift to less formal language registers was particularly evident in Chapter Five, where the young communications officers charged with looking after Lansbury council's social media feed took informality to new levels. Lowndes (2008:49) has previously commented on the importance of shifts in language as a signifier of change and in this thesis informal language emerges as one of the tools employed online by councillors to create links with citizens, '*shrinking the distance*' between them (Coleman and Blumler, 2009:83).

The research shows the importance of social media in opening up new online virtual spaces for the enactment of representation, spaces which Copus (1999) has previously conceptualised as '*theatres of representation*' (Copus, 1999, 313-15). The new online theatre of representation emerged as a space where councillors could deploy new tools, such as Twitter and Facebook, in order to interact less formally and more conversationally with both citizens and peers.

Benkler (2000), in his work on networks, described how the new spaces enabled the possibility of participation:

The Internet allows individuals to abandon the idea of the public sphere as primarily constructed of finished statements, altered by a small set of actors...and to move towards a set of social practices that see individuals participating in a debate. (Benkler, 2000:180).

Social media have extended the public sphere at the local level beyond the council chambers into the virtual theatres of the cybersphere, increasing and legitimising the public's participation in political processes that were previously closed to them. Having identified the main implications for local government of the trends in citizens' use of social media the next question to be addressed is how councils responded to those trends. The thesis revealed that although many councils were resistant to change, digitally aware councils were beginning to understand the need to incorporate new ways of working into their existing institutional arrangements.

What are the structural and cultural challenges for councils?

With councils under pressure from central government to become more participatory, open, and transparent, social media creates an additional participatory and discursive pressure which requires a response from councillors. The first chapter introduced the idea of social media as already having permeated everyday life and created conversational spaces for citizens (Chadwick, 2012:38; Ellison and Hardey, 2014:37) and also the reasonable expectation that this research would show that social media would have already had substantial effects on local political life (Xenos and Moy, 2007:715). The findings showed that although there was evidence of councillors responding to the new challenges, this was not entirely the case for councils: the quantitative research outlined in Chapter Four indicated that there was still a real disjuncture between the ways that citizens were adopting and deploying the new media and the practices of councils. This finding echoes the early work of Polat and Pratchett (2007) who commented that:

While citizens are using Facebook, YouTube and MySpace to reassert their political interests and develop campaigns on behalf of their communities, most local authorities are largely ignorant of their existence. (Polat and Pratchett, 2007:204).

Some ten years later the time series data collected for this research showed that although councils were now certainly aware of the existence of social media, in that 100% of councils had signed up for Twitter and 71% also had a presence on Facebook, there was still a reluctance to engage with the participatory opportunities offered by the new platforms. The findings provided examples of very token engagement with the new platforms, described in Chapter Four as *'placekeeping'*, where councils had set up sites but didn't post any content. The typology of councils that was developed in that chapter described the overall picture: some councils were beginning to embrace the opportunities offered by the new technologies to develop more conversational, more participatory modes of interaction with citizens, some, by far the largest group, were engaging with the new media more tentatively and the smallest group of councils were seen to be avoiding active engagement by transferring analogue practices, e.g. press releases, to the digital channels. Indeed, those councils avoiding two-way communication, failing to facilitate *'interactive engagement or exchange of information with the public, but simply [providing] information for public consumption'* (Hepburn, 2012:376).

The findings across all of the case studies revealed instances of path dependency and continued institutional resistance to change. In Cadwallar and Wallingsworth the usual institutional repertoires of resistance such as bans and sanctions had been deployed to control councillors' behaviour online. That finding adds to our existing understanding of path dependency in local government and supports the work of Barnes *et al* (2007) and Durose *et al* (2009) which suggested that much of local government's response to participatory pressures thus far had been about managing and disciplining engagement with the public rather than about enhancing participatory opportunities. The research showed how institutional practices were very uneven, indicating that councils' approaches to managing social media were still not secure: for example in Shawborough members of the public who were speaking at meetings were time limited while those online were not. That unevenness illustrates the difficulty for councils in disciplining the unmediated interactivity offered by social media.

There was also evidence from the case study councils of the institutional neglect of regulatory arrangements (Streek and Thelen's *'drift'* 2005:31), but later in the fieldwork there are the first signs of a re-emergence of control of councillors' use of social media. The latter came from at first an unlikely direction, that of the political parties. In the absence of appropriate council rules about how councillors should use social media the influence of the political party, particularly the whip, was seen to re-emerge. That political party groups were seen to be

acting to restrain public debate by their councillors is not unexpected given the continued resilience and dominance of the party political system in English local government (see Copus, 2004 and 2016). Although Denters and Klok (2013:765) have argued that the influence of the party system is, in modern governance, likely to give way to more individualised conceptions *'that emphasise the personal responsiveness of representatives'* the findings here show that party discipline, after an initial absence, was beginning to regain control. In Lansbury, for example, the whip was already monitoring the online postings of members and expecting centrally produced tweets to be retweeted.

In Cadwaller regional Liberal Democrat party officials were requiring councillors to set up blogs and to have a presence on social media. The findings add a new social media related dimension to the requirements of party discipline: as Karlsson (2013:98) has said, party discipline means that the councillor does not have the last word. As Sweeting (1999) speculated, in his early work on the introduction of scrutiny, it is quite possible to imagine that parties will continue to try to reassert themselves. Sweeting commented that there were always:

...democratic monopolists, guarding the decision-making territory in local authorities, preventing proper scrutiny of executive decisions, and cutting out the community from decision-making processes (Sweeting, 1999:13).

The emergence of these disciplining practices once again highlights the tensions between the claims of user-led or more participatory forms of local democracy (see Haus and Sweeting, 2006:278) and the claims of party politics (see Copus, 2004:22).

Council officers, such as senior communications staff (see Chapters Five and Six), were in some cases encouraging councillors towards making greater use of the new media, but there was no evidence that these practices were actually embedded in the councils' institutional norms. The research also showed that there was resistance from the officer cadre and this came from two main sources: from the more junior officers who were concerned about navigating political neutrality in the new more visible digital environment and the regulatory monitoring officers who were shown to be unfamiliar with the new media (see the survey findings in Chapter Four). The dissonance between the traditional practices of officers and the always on, 24/7, responsive, open and transparent requirements of the social media cultures was evident in the discomfort reported in interviews.

That councils' efforts to manage and discipline councillors' experimentation with social media and more unmediated online discourse with citizens were not entirely successful is further illustrated by the example of councillors ignoring the Lansbury monitoring officer's advice to treat social media with caution. That was enhanced by similar experiences in Lansbury and Cadwallar, of councillors continuing to use social media extensively, although perhaps more carefully, in spite of having been sanctioned for breaching the standards code. The pressures created by citizens' use of social media and its clear utility to those councillors were seen to outweigh these difficulties and the institutional constraints.

These findings emphasise the need for institutional design in councils to match the new and emerging pressures from social media to which councillors are exposed and for councils and parties to prepare and manage the structural and cultural challenges presented by social media. The phrase '*analogue systems in a digital world*' was used in Chapter Three to describe the failure of the existing institutional control mechanisms and there was certainly strong evidence for this failure across all the councils.

The main response to the need to redesign existing institutional systems or mechanisms of control was the production of lengthy, and often little regarded, guidance documents. There was no evidence found of changes to political group standing orders in relation to social media. Constitutional change was confined to adoption of the DCLG directive (2013) which required councils to allow filming, blogging and tweeting in council meetings. Why was there so little evidence of formal institutional change? Explanations lie in three particular qualities of social media: speed, visibility and lack of mediation. The immediacy of social media made it particularly difficult for councils (and political parties) to manage and discipline political communication and that difficulty was vividly illustrated by a quote from one Lansbury councillor that is worth repeating here:

A tweet has to be done then and there. Tweeting about something you did yesterday is of no real consequence to anyone I don't think. With writing letters you do have time to think about it, re-read it, get somebody else to have a look. I don't think anyone would ever suggest, oh can you check my tweet for me before I send it out, that would be a very weird conversation (Liberal Democrat backbencher, London Borough, L23).

What is suggested from these findings is that the use of social media can be seen to be developing in a way that is decoupled from the existing regulatory systems. That decoupling,

as Meyer and Rowan (1977: 354) have previously suggested, can be useful in allowing both the emergence of new myths (i.e. the way we do things in this council) and the development of new practices that can eventually either be rejected or codified into rules. There were, the interviews showed, already some emerging conventions, some '*rules in use*' (Ostrom, 1999:38) such as: '*don't bring the council (or the party) into disrepute*', '*don't feed trolls*' and '*don't tweet anything that you wouldn't be happy to see on the front page of the local newspaper*'. The findings show that at this early stage of development the production of new formal rules would either be ineffective or counter-productive and this supports Goodin's (1996) work which rejected the idea of intentional design and contended that:

There are just lots of localised attempts at partial design cutting across each other, and any sensible scheme for institutional design has to take account of that fact (Goodin, 1996:28).

Campbell (1997), in his work on the trajectory of social movements, argued that those charged with institutional design were best advised to stand back and observe patterns of interactions over a period of time. Observing how new practices were developing allowed some innovations to become embedded while others fell by the wayside before being codified into constitutions. The need to stand back and allow experimentation can be illustrated in the case of the Cadwaller, where council officers dealing with parody sites realised that banning quickly became counter-productive. Likewise, the examples of reputational damage caused by councils' attempts to discipline the use of social media by citizens that were recounted in Chapter Three indicated that early efforts to manage the new media often led to unintended consequences.

Future rules, on the basis of this research, therefore seem more likely to be built up from the experience of digitally confident councillors revising their political repertoires and combining new and former practices and from the requirements of the parties rather than through the imposition of rules from above.

Social media and local government: cacophony constrained

The case studies showed that social media were making politics noisier, more plural and diffuse and therefore harder to manage for both councils and councillors. Coleman and Blumler's (2012) work on the Internet and democracy has already suggested that in a digitally rich society politics is:

... noisy: brimming with pluralistic sources of information competing to tell their stories; with parties, campaigns and advocates filling the public sphere with their calls for attention; with diverse values and preferences exposed to public reason in an inclusive sphere of deliberative debate; and with a new generation of future citizens setting out their stalls and practising new ways of making a difference (Coleman and Blumler, 2012:141).

Across the case study councils there were examples of councillors extending their repertoires to manage the increased demands of social media, sometimes entirely displacing former practices, such as writing to newspapers, and sometimes layering the new practices on top of the old, as in both Shawborough and Wallingsworth where discussions with persistent or difficult residents were both held online, but also taken offline. Press releases had given way in some cases to conscious use of social media to shape the news through the interaction of the traditional press with their own online content (see Chapters Five and Six). However there was also resistance from councillors as illustrated by this memorable comment from a Cadwaller councillor:

My view to social media probably is summed up, when we first got elected and [as] part of our induction, officers were looking at social media with us and they were sort of asking us to put our hands up if we used and if we didn't, and probably the majority of us didn't. And so the officers threw it back to us and said, why don't you use social media? And there was absolute silence and you could feel these officers thinking, well no one's responding. So I put my hand up and said, because I want a life (Liberal Democrat Backbencher, C38).

In spite of those examples of resistance the case studies showed that across the very different councils the digitally confident councillors were using social media to position themselves as trusted providers of information, at the heart of local networks and 'a web of [local] relationships' (Klijn and Skelcher, 2007). The research showed how the aspirations of some councillors to use social media to develop an outward community focus rather than just a town hall focus, meant they were continually searching for a form of 'place based' leadership (Hambleton, 2015:109). The need for councillors to keep online content determinedly, local speaks to the permanent importance of place to the role of the councillor. Councillors also identified in the interviews that the social media affordances of friending and followership on Facebook and Twitter had helped them to create more 'loose connections' (Dryzek, 2000:61)

and this had facilitated new ways of collecting public opinions on local issues. By lurking online (Hochheiser and Shneiderman, 2010:65) and ‘listening’ to conversations, councillors were seen to have gained the advantage of local knowledge without the traditional time investment of actually meeting the public.

Digitally confident councillors have discovered real utility in the use of social media platforms when carrying out their roles as elected representatives. Councillors recognise that social media provides opportunity to extend and develop the legitimacy of their roles in a number of ways, particularly through growing their informal authority outside election time. Howard and Sweeting (2004:4), drawing on the work of Scharpf (1999), have defined the legitimacy of leaders between elections as threefold: input legitimacy through participation, throughput-legitimacy through transparency and output-legitimacy through effectiveness. That categorisation is harnessed in the table below in order to illustrate and summarise the effects of social media that emerged from the case study councils.

Table 6. Online roles for councillors and legitimacy

Role	Social media affordance	Related behaviours
<p>Input-legitimacy.</p> <p>Local leadership and governance.</p>	<p>Provision of new online arenas or spaces for expressions of local leadership.</p> <p>Interactivity, re-posting, sharing and retweeting, increasing participation.</p> <p>Building volume of audiences and thereby extending influence.</p> <p>Capacity for multiple conversations with different groups.</p>	<p>Listening online to local preferences from citizens and groups.</p> <p>Monitoring issues in social media spaces in addition to newspapers.</p> <p>Interactive tweeting from meetings in real time on issues under discussion.</p> <p>Intensification of local identity e.g. by retweeting or ‘liking’ local businesses.</p> <p>Amplifying the voices of citizens and groups in the locality by retweeting or sharing.</p> <p>Demonstrating popular consent through followership.</p>
<p>Throughput-legitimacy.</p> <p>Being accountable to citizens between the elections.</p>	<p>Visibility, openness and transparency of online discourse.</p> <p>Easy provision of local information.</p> <p>Increased interactivity in</p>	<p>Seeking visible accountability online: e.g. giving accounts of time spent on council business, listing achievements, framing policy lines.</p> <p>Justifying policy choices.</p> <p>Explaining and defending council</p>

	<p>real time.</p> <p>Enablement of direct and usually unmediated discourse between the representative and the citizen.</p>	<p>processes.</p> <p>Responding to citizens' comments.</p> <p>Using online surveys to ask questions of the public.</p>
<p>Output-legitimacy.</p> <p>Being seen as effective and trusted decision-makers promoting the common good.</p>	<p>Responsiveness to citizens in real time due to velocity of social media and expectations of fast response times.</p> <p>Information giving (e.g. winter gritting routes). Easy direct access to councillors for citizens.</p> <p>Volume (via followers and friends).</p> <p>Reducing the distance between councillor and citizen and creating a sense of intimacy or proximity.</p> <p>Reducing perception of politicians as elites.</p>	<p>Increased responsiveness.</p> <p>Providing online information outside formal council systems (e.g. using Twitter to report on events such as floods).</p> <p>Showing local credentials through following and friending.</p> <p>Increased personalisation.</p>

Source: developed for this thesis (adapted from Howard and Sweeting, 2004:4).

This table, based on the emerging evidence from the case studies, tells us about the potential for social media to have an impact on councillors. It indicates how, at the time of this study, the utility of social media is nudging and influencing elected representatives towards more participative styles of operating and gaining legitimacy using the new channels.

Councillors are increasing their legitimation through community involvement, as suggested by Klausen *et al* (2006:205). As Enli and Thumin (2012:87) have previously commented, the participatory pressures of modern governance systems mean that citizens and community groups no longer expect just to be passive recipients of political messaging, but want their own voices to be heard. Councillors were seen in the case studies to be consciously engaging with particular groups for collaborative or political advantage. The Lansbury case study showed how councillors used social media to test reaction to particular policy issues and in

Shawborough and Lansbury councillors re-tweeting public views on policy directions during council meetings in an attempt to influence the shape, direction and outcome of the debate.

There is a more mixed picture, which emerged from the case studies, in relation to the impact of social media on changing accountabilities. Social media were seen to have introduced new online actors to whom it might be expected councillors would feel accountable, but when questioned about this all of the interviewees indicated that their accountabilities to party, to voters and the residents stayed the same: it was their sense of responsiveness that had been most affected by social media. Certainly the dimension of responsiveness emerged strongly across the case study councils, as was illustrated by one Shawborough councillor:

Yes, because it's all public. If I were to ignore something that I'm quite capable of responding to, then other people can see that and they'll think, you know, why has he copped out of responding to this comment that somebody's made? (Shawborough backbench Labour councillor, S45).

The simple accountability dimension of giving an account to residents was present in the case studies, with many examples of councillors documenting their daily duties online. However those accounts were not just to residents: councillors in Lansbury and Shawborough gave particular attention to ensuring the council leadership and party officials were aware of their online activities in order to gain career advantage for themselves.

The research revealed that a convergence between the enabling technologies of Web 2.0, the shift from government to governance (Newman, 2007:57) and the related participatory pressures for democratic renewal created an environment in which change became possible. The summary table below lays out first of all the features of the enabling technologies and then the drivers which meant that social media became useful for councillors. It concludes with a summary of the features which were identified in the case studies as constraining social media use, illustrating some of the reasons why the pace of social media related change was uneven.

Table 7. Enabling technologies, social media drivers and constraints in local government

<p>Enabling technologies</p>	<p>The interactivity of Web 2.0 enabling blogs, wikis and social networking platforms such as Twitter, Facebook as well as ‘below the line’ comment forums and peer-to-peer rating sites such as TripAdvisor. Easy content creation at low cost. Friends’ lists enabling volume networking as well as the possibility of the mobilisation of ideas and people at scale. Personal profiles enabling identity creation. Mobile devices enabling use at home and in public spaces, increasing responsiveness and directness. Interactivity features acting to increase acquisition of followers (e.g. ‘following back’ convention on Twitter) who receive information and can engage directly with politicians.</p>
<p>Drivers: enabling features of social media for councillors</p>	<p>Low cost of entry means access for many. Easy to use applications. Network velocity – spread of ideas. Enablement of speed of response. Facilitation of transparency. Enablement of agenda shaping and news management. Facilitation of unmediated and direct communication. Mobilisation of the public. Easy peer-to-peer skills acquisition. New spaces for debate freed from physical structures. Enablement of listening to communities. Personalisation and informality, including facilitation of natural colloquial language. Creation of a sense of proximity and connectedness between citizen and representative. Information sharing. Management of local identity for councillors. Enablement of signalling of trust and councillors as sources of trusted information. Intensification of sense of place. Use in other aspects of life leading to mirroring of use in the sphere of local politics and increased normalisation.</p>
<p>Bottlenecks: constraining features of institutional responses to social media</p>	<p>Analogue rules for digital practices. Stickiness of old habits: path dependency. Organisational history of resistance. High degree of hierarchical control. Banning of use of social media in meetings. Banning of employee use. Lack of critical mass of users and peer to peer diffusion of uses of the new media. Monitoring officers and other senior managers without knowledge or experience of new media. Fear of trolling. No institutional appetite for risk. Lack of basic technological skills and confidence. Fear of loss of control or privacy. Negative attitudes to participation.</p>

Source: Developed for this thesis, adapted from Ahlqvist et al (2010).

The features illustrated in this summary table are drawn from the research in councils and indicate the potential of social media to contribute to new ways for councillors to enact their representative roles as well as the continued presence of bottlenecks or institutional

constraints. The findings spell out how the public's use of social media has intensified legitimacy and accountability for councillors, strengthened place based leadership and further deepened the trend towards the personalisation of politics and together these findings indicate that social media are leading to shifts in public perceptions of elected representatives. Councillors' use of social media makes them seem more human and less elite to voters. The findings also indicate that social media is contributing towards the creation of a more inclusive and participatory approach to local democracy in which spaces for citizens to engage directly with councillors have gained some authority and legitimacy which will be difficult, if not impossible, for councils to continue to dismiss.

The case is made here that the impact of social media on councils and councillors has so far been undervalued and this undervaluation can be partly attributed to the myths about social media being unsuitable for democratic discourse which were refuted in Chapter Three. The work redresses that undervaluation by revealing how the participatory norms of social media are playing a part in local democracy by challenging and changing the institutions of local government and the traditional representative roles of councillors.

Conclusion: A new paradigm in the making

The research shows that the enabling features of Web 2.0, and particularly social media such as Facebook and Twitter, have opened up new '*political opportunity structures*' (Pratchett, 2006:19) within which councillors had the possibility of developing new forms of engagement with citizens. Councillors wanted to take advantage of these opportunities. The findings from the fieldwork tell of the compelling utility of social media for the digitally confident councillors in the case study councils. The findings showed that those innovative councillors could (and did) use social media to construct online visible and personalised identities; to increase their legitimacy between elections by offering accounts of their work as a representative and by becoming more responsive to citizens; to position themselves as local leaders of place; and to gain political advantage over the opposition by shaping the political agenda. The thesis showed that it was the digitally confident and entrepreneurial councillors that are taking advantage of each of these enabling features of social media and that such councillors are becoming more outward-focused and interactive via social media. This finding supports and extends the arguments made by Landsbergen (2010), Copus (2010), and Hepburn (2012) that the demands of the modern networked governance environment are pushing local politicians to find new ways of enacting their roles and gaining legitimacy for particular policy directions. The thesis

describes how digitally confident and entrepreneurial councillors engage in gradual transformational change through their use of social media by adapting and '*recombining*' (Crouch, 2005, Lowndes and Roberts, 2013) their traditional practices, or ways of being a councillor, with the new less formal practices of social media, creating something new. The research revealed how social media were being used to remember and reinforce councillors' roles as local community leaders (DETR, 1998), or leaders of a particular place, freeing them from the confines of a role that (Copus, 2014) has previously described as '*politics through provision*'.

The thesis demonstrated clearly that a new sphere for local political discourse has been developed and used by councillors through the medium of the online conversational spaces created by Facebook and Twitter. These new theatres for the enactment of representation (Copus, 1999, 313-15) are seen here being employed by councillors to reach beyond the physical confines of town halls. Councillors are occupying these new theatres or spaces as well as continuing, for the moment at least, with former practices such as ward surgeries or writing to newspapers. Crouch (2005) contended that it was this kind of recombining behaviours by politicians that would eventually lead to institutional change. He observed that the speed of that change was:

...partly dependent upon the degree of flexibility allowed them by the institution, partly on the external positive and negative sanctions that will likely follow non-conformist behaviour and partly on norms that they have internalised about the ranges of conduct that are compatible with their sense of themselves (Crouch 2005:19).

The thesis gave, for the first time in the literature on local government, an understanding of the range of responses to social media that were deployed by councils in their attempt to contain and constrain the use of social media. The unmediated nature of social media enabled interactions meant that the existing institutional mechanisms for shaping and constraining the ways in which councillors engaged and interacted with citizens (e.g. signing off protocols) were weakened or bypassed, paving the way for the future development of new rule-making. Even where institutional resistance seems stronger the convergence of environmental pressures with the contentions of social media use are likely to force adaptation and change in the future, as one Cadwaller backbench councillor predicted:

But it will happen at some point. And I think what you have is the start of a generation, which isn't defined by age, but is more discerning and will get bigger and bigger... and I think they will want that kind of engagement.

The thesis makes the case that it won't simply be the individual councillors who will complete the journey from analogue to digital, but that pressures from the public will interact with the responses of the institutions of the council over a period of time to disrupt existing path dependencies and lead to new practices. Foremost amongst the practices likely to be disrupted, the evidence in this thesis indicates, are those relating to councils' control and management of the mechanisms by which citizens can participate in local democracy. Local democracy and representation and the traditional roles of the councillor face a fundamental challenge from digitally confident citizens and groups of citizens who want to enter the debate on their own terms.

The issues around participation in local democracy in this thesis emerge strongly from the data. Social media use, enabled by the development of Web 2.0, is clearly identified here as part of the current trends in governance towards a continued shift from the mechanisms of '*control through hierarchy*' (Newman, 2001:11-14) towards more diffuse and participatory notions of interactions between representative and citizen: 'Democracy 2.0'. The impact of social media on the existing institutional arrangements in English local government, while at a very early stage, has forced innovatory practices by councillors. Yet, councillors themselves are also employing social media as a new tool for political engagement, campaigning and talking to (and in turn being talked to by) the public. The participatory trends developing from the use of social media will continue to be sustainable in the longer term but will face the institutional re-emergence of path dependent council and party control mechanisms as traditional party group behaviour and preference for private debate and decision-makings are unlikely to surrender easily. That means that the digitally confident councillors will also have to be politically confident and use their social media skills to force change in the conduct of local democracy.

Attempting to capture a fast moving phenomenon like social media and divining the implications for councillors may seem like an impossible task. The thesis tackled this task by focusing on the two strands of the research questions: the impact on councillors and the impact on councils. The results gave a real insight into how councillors were using social media in their roles as elected representatives. The research showed, for the first time, that social media were already having a particularly powerful impact on councillors in their day to day

practices as they engaged with citizens more directly. The dangers for elected representatives that were represented by the more direct and participatory nature of social media were highlighted including the difficulty of managing the demands of party with the demands of the new media for councillors to be more responsive, more authentic and more accountable. The findings also showed that new forms of accountability at the local level emerged: the relational, demotic and communicative core of social media means that the right of citizens to call representatives to account is implicit in every conversation.

The thesis has demonstrated that social media has become a taken for granted part of political life for councillors as digital confidence increases and adds to our knowledge of a previously hidden area. Like a genie taken from a bottle citizens' demands to engage directly with their local representatives and councillors growing realisation that the use of social media provides them with an additional tool for political communication and engagement, means that social media in local government cannot now be suppressed. Indeed, the use of social media is changing local politics and the institutions of local government will, ultimately, just have to catch up.

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Appendix A

Extract from Stockport Council Constitution 2015⁴⁶

PROCEDURE FOR QUESTION TIME AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

1. At most Council meetings, a period of up to 30 minutes is given for people living or working in Stockport to ask questions of Councillors. You can ask up to two questions or up to three questions if representing an organisation.
2. Questions must be received before the meeting starts and must be written on the correct form so that we have the precise wording of your question and details of how to contact you. You must also say which councillor you are asking to respond to your question. You can ask the same question to two named councillors but this will count as two separate questions.
3. Just before the meeting starts, copies of the questions received in advance will be given to all Councillors.
4. Questions can be sent to the Council electronically, but must be on the pro-forma available on the Council's web site. Where your question is received 48 hours before the meeting, the Council will try to ensure that an oral response is given at the meeting. Where a question is received less than 48 hours this cannot be guaranteed and you may be offered a written response. Questions will be asked in the order received, but the Mayor may group together similar questions.
5. Subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and following discussions with the Mayor, a question may not be accepted if it
 - is about a matter for which the Council does not have responsibility or if it does not affect the Borough;
 - is defamatory, frivolous or offensive;
 - relates to a planning application or licence or traffic regulation order which is being consulted upon (quasi-judicial matters);
 - is more or less the same as a question asked at a Council Meeting in the past six months; or
 - is about a confidential matter.

⁴⁶Available at:

<http://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/documents/s28911/Council%20Meeting%20Question%20Card.pdf>

6. The Mayor will invite you to put your question to the councillor during the meeting. If you have let the Council have a question but you are not attending the meeting, the question will not be asked but you will receive a written reply.

7. When your question has been answered at the meeting, you can ask a second (supplementary) question. Your supplementary question must relate directly from the answer to the original question. The Mayor may not accept the supplementary question for the same reasons in 5 above.

8. The answer to your question can be

(a) a direct oral answer;

(b) by referring you to a publication of the Council or other published work if the information is contained in that; or

(c) where the reply cannot given at the meeting by a written answer which will be sent to you after the meeting.

9. The Councillor you have asked a question can decline to answer or may ask another Councillor to answer. That other Councillor may also decline to answer.

10. If your question is not dealt with at the meeting either because of lack of time or because the councillor you wish to ask is not at the meeting, you will get a written answer after the meeting. Where a written answer is given, a copy of the answer will be given to all councillors.

11. Discussion will not normally be allowed on questions, but any Councillor may ask for the matter raised in the question to be referred to the Executive or a Committee. Once seconded the suggestion to refer to the Executive or a committee will be voted on without discussion

Appendix B

Example of an acceptable use policy – Calderdale Council⁴⁷

Acceptable Use Policy

This 'Acceptable Use Policy', defines the purposes for which a Councillor **cannot** use their web pages. In summary these are:

- the introduction of content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages
- the processing of personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture
- the promotion of any political party or campaigning organisation
- the promotion personal financial interests, commercial ventures or personal campaigns
- using the site in an abusive or hateful manner.

Further details are given below.

Defamation

If a statement is made which exposes a person to hatred, ridicule or contempt, or which causes him to be shunned or avoided, or which has a tendency to injure him in his office, trade or profession in the estimation of right-thinking members of society generally then the person can bring an action. If the statement is made in written form the action will be for defamation, if made orally the action will be for slander.

Councillors may not use their web pages to publish defamatory statements or material. Anyone who believes that they have been defamed by a Councillor will be able to take legal action directly against the Councillor concerned. The relevant legislation is the Defamation Act 1996 and the full text can be found by visiting: [Office of Public Sector Information - Defamation Act 1996](#).

A Councillor is only permitted to publish information in the context of the Councillor's official role in respect of matters of general public interest.

Councillors are responsible for content of their own webpages. The Chief Law and Administration Officer will oversee the publication of information and provide advice to Councillors, as necessary. For the avoidance of any doubt, the Council does not authorise, or in any way sanction, the publication of statements which might be construed as defamatory.

⁴⁷ Available at: <https://www.calderdale.gov.uk/v2/council/councillors-and-decision-making/your-councillors/councillors-pages/acceptable-use-policy>

Data Protection

When managing webpages, Councillors may receive comments, enquiries or complaints from members of the public. Councillors may refer to (or publish) material that is based upon information drawn from the Local Authority or obtained from external sources. All such personal information should be treated with care and respect for relevant data protection law.

Anyone processing personal data must comply with the eight enforceable principles of good practice. This states that data must be:

- fairly and lawfully processed;
- processed for limited purposes;
- adequate, relevant and not excessive;
- accurate;
- not kept longer than necessary;
- processed in accordance with the data subject's rights;
- secure;
- not transferred to countries without adequate protection.

Personal data covers both facts and opinions about the individual. It also includes information regarding the intentions of the data controller towards the individual. The definition of processing incorporates the concepts of 'obtaining', holding' and 'disclosing'.

The Councillor confirms that he or she has read the Council's own policy on data protection and accepts the provisions of it. In doing so, the Councillor acknowledges that links to and information about web pages or addresses cannot be displayed on a Councillor's web page.

The Data Protection Act applies and the full-text of the 1998 Act can be found by visiting: [Data Protection Act 1998](#)

For reference

For further details on the eight principles of Data Protection and compliance advice from the Information Commissioner, visit: [Information Commissioner's Office - Data Protection Principles](#) .

For the Council's Privacy Policy, see: [Privacy policy](#) .

Political Publicity

Because all web pages are funded by a Local Authority, Councillors may not use their web page to promote political campaigns and advocate political stances on issues. They may not use the

web page to promote a political party or persons identified with a political party, nor to promote or oppose a view on a question of political controversy which is identifiable as the view of one political party and not of another.

Section 4 of the 1986 Local Government Act enabled the Secretary of State to issue a Code of Practice on Local Authority publicity. The original Code was amended in 2001. The Code was made more flexible in relation to publicity about individual councillors and the relevant paragraphs are:

"Publicity about individual councillors may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the Council (for example a member of the Executive or Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee) and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual councillors' proposals, decisions and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory and whilst it may acknowledge the part played by individual councillors as holders of particular positions in the council, personalisation of issues or personal image-making should be avoided.

Publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. Whilst it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual councillor which are relevant to her/his position and responsibilities within the council, and to put forward his/her justification in defence of them, this should not be done in party political terms, using political slogans, expressly advocating policies of those of a particular political party, or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups or individuals".

Representation of the People Act Restrictions

During election times (from the 'notice of an election' to the election itself), parts of Councillors' web pages will be suspended. Contact information will still however continue to be displayed.


Other Statutory Issues

Care should be taken to ensure compliance with Local Government legislation and Local Authority's policies on the following issues

- The particular legislative requirements relating to discrimination/incitement to racial hatred etc. (Anti-Terrorism, Crime And Security Act 2001 & Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000)
- Publication of obscene material (Obscene Publications Act 1959, Protection of Children Act 1978, Criminal Justice Act 1988).

The text of all legislation can be found by visiting: [Office of Public Sector Information - Acts of the UK Parliament](#).

Elected Members Code of Conduct

Calderdale Council has provisions that govern the conduct of Councillors. Councillor's web pages should be used with due regard to the 'Members Code of Conduct', see:  [Members Code of Conduct \[PDF 36KB\]](#) .

In the event of a Councillor having a complaint about the content of the Councillor web page of another Councillor then that complaint will be referred to the Monitoring Officer.

On a general level

- The site must not be used in a way that will bring Councillors or the Council into disrepute
- The site must promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person, treating others with respect and not to do anything which compromises the impartiality of those who work for or on behalf of the authority.
- To treat Local Government Officer's recommendations or known views impartially
- Councillors must not disclose information given to them in confidence or information acquired, which they believe, is of a confidential nature without the consent of a person authorised to give it.
- Councillors must not use their Councillor web page to disclose information which the Council has considered in private session, or which they are on notice is confidential for any other reason.
- Councillors must not use their Councillor web page to secure personal advantage or secure use for themselves or others of the resources of the authority (for instance, by advertising a commercial service or by using the site to encourage the Council to purchase a particular item or service).

Tainting of Decision Making through Biased / Closed Minds

Councillors who are in positions of determining quasi-judicial processes, particularly planning and licensing applications, or determining the outcome of consultation exercises must exercise care to keep an open mind on issues which he or she may be required to make decisions.

The use of individual web pages to set out a clear position on a particular issue could well provide evidence of bias based on a particular personal interest or view, or a closed mind. This would demonstrate the artificiality of the Councillor then purporting to consider openly all issues in the determination of that matter.

To have regard to all relevant advice when reaching decisions and to give reasons for decisions

Councillors must give an accurate and even-handed account of discussions or processes that lead to decisions being taken. For example, Councillors must not give a one-sided account of the reasons for a planning application being refused.

Appendix C

Summary of Results of Welsh Pilot Exercise

Methodology

This survey used public domain information, including the councils' own websites, council branded Facebook sites and council Twitter sites. Data was also drawn from the websites of the Office of National Statistics and the independent communications regulator Ofcom. It should also be noted that although all of the council websites offered information in English and Welsh only the English language option was used. Data was collected on a number of independent variables. The features which were surveyed included basic information about the 22 unitary councils and their areas, i.e. population, and also about voter turnout in the May 2008 local government elections.

Data was also collected from council websites and Facebook on the following dependent variables:

- whether each council had a presence on Facebook;
- if it was clearly signposted on the council website's opening page;
- if there was a facility for comment by the public (interactivity);
- and how many people had 'liked' the council;

Data was also collected from council websites and Twitter on:

- whether there was a council Twitter feed;
- if it was clearly signposted on the council website's opening page;
- how many followers had signed up to the council's Twitter site;
- whether the council 're-tweeted' posts from other trusted sites;
- the number of posts by the council between the 1st and the 18th of January 2012.

The survey also used data from Ofcom, published in 2011, which scored the speed of fixed broadband provision in different local government areas in Britain using 4 variables. Each council area's provision was rated from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating good provision and 5 indicating poor provision. In the UK as a whole, for example, London overall scored a 1, while the area covered by Conwy scored a 5.

Hypotheses

There were four initial hypotheses:

1. That councils which are based on cities or densely populated urban conurbations are likely to be more successful in gaining followers;
2. That there will be a relationship between the availability and speed of broadband and the adoption by councils of social media communication;
3. That councils with higher than average turnout at local council elections are more likely to have more residents following them on social media;
4. That there will be some common features among the councils which have a large number of Twitter and Facebook ‘followers’ proportional to their population;

Results

The first hypothesis was not supported. The size of Welsh councils varies a great deal, with Cardiff as the largest with a population of 305,340 and Merthyr Tydfil as the smallest with only 55,983. The table below gives the five largest councils:

Figure 1: Top 5 Welsh councils by size of population (Office of National Statistics 2011)

Cardiff	305,340
Rhondda Cynon Taff	231,952
Swansea	223,293
Carmarthenshire	173,635
Caerphilly	169,521

It might be hypothesised that Cardiff would lead the league table for followers of local council social media, seen as a percentage of their population, closely followed by Swansea. The following two tables give an indication of the actual picture.

Figure 2: Top 5 Welsh councils by Twitter followers as percentage of population

Monmouthshire	3.58
Swansea	2.77
Cardiff	2.41
Vale of Glamorgan	2.35
Pembrokeshire	2.06

Figure 3: Top 5 Welsh councils by Facebook 'likes' as percentage of population⁴⁸

Torfaen	1.71
Merthyr Tydfil	0.87
Swansea	0.69
Blaenau Gwent	0.46
Pembrokeshire	0.43

The results suggested that there were factors other than population size or urbanity to be explored to explain the differences and that further work was required.

The second hypothesis was that there would be a relationship between the availability and speed of broadband and the adoption by councils of communication through social media. If there was not enough bandwidth to download substantial amounts of data, including photographs, then it would seem unlikely that citizens would spend much time browsing their local council's social media sites.

Figure 4: Welsh Councils by Ofcom fixed broadband coverage rating (1=good, 5=poor)

Rated 2	Swansea, Vale of Glamorgan
Rated 3	Newport, Neath Port Talbot, Cardiff
Rated 4	Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Denbighshire, Monmouthshire
Rated 5	Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Conwy, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Anglesey, Merthyr, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Torfaen, Wrexham

The link between broadband availability and speed and social media followers of council sites, was disproved: both Monmouthshire and Pembrokeshire had poor coverage but a good number of social media followers. The simple equation of good coverage and therefore a large number of citizens engaging with council social media therefore didn't work and pointed to the need for further detailed investigation.

The third hypothesis was also not supported. The average turnout in Wales overall at the last local government election in 2008 was 43.5% and the five councils with the highest voter turnout are given below.

⁴⁸ The actual numbers of Facebook 'likes' indicating fans or followers of that site are smaller than those of Twitter followers in the case of all the Welsh councils

Figure 6: Top 5 councils based on published average turnout of voters at last local election⁴⁹

Gwynedd	52.40
Ceredigion	52.08
Carmarthenshire	49.98
Pembrokeshire	49.17
Powys	48.64

The table in Figure 6, when read in conjunction with the tables in Figures 2 and 3, suggested that there was no clear relationship between voter turnout in local government elections in Wales and the number of social media followers for councils, with the possible exception of Pembrokeshire. This pointed to the need for further exploration: were online users of social media less likely to vote?

The fourth hypothesis was that there would be some common features among the councils which had a large number of Twitter and Facebook ‘followers’ proportional to their population. The initial data which was collected from the published content of the top five council sites revealed at least some features in common between the popular council sites and pointed to the need for further exploration. Although the numbers were extremely small there were some patterns which emerged:

Volume – there was a weak correlation between high volume of posts and a high number of followers. It might be surmised that users who find the site useful for current information or debate sign up while others quickly stop visiting if there is nothing new or useful on the site.

Retweets – councils which retweeted or reposted messages which had originated from other trusted sources, such as arts and civic organisations had more followers than those which stuck to official announcements. It might be speculated that this practice may have the effect of making the site look less official and more diverse.

Responsiveness – councils which showed online responses to residents’ queries had more followers. Residents who had queries which received quick and personalised responses from their council may well be more likely to become regular followers of the site.

Look and style – an analysis of the content of the sites with high followership showed a more personal writing style for the content, the use of photographs and the use of URL⁵⁰ links.

The initial pilot exercise which was carried out provided some interesting data and offered an initial starting place for a more detailed survey and suggested that the next stage of the work

⁴⁹ Three councils did not publish comparable turnout data online and were excluded from the table; they were Anglesey, Newport and Torfaen.

⁵⁰ Universal Resource Locators used to refer to another source or site.

for the thesis had to move beyond the information which was easily accessible in the public domain in order to understand the impact of social media in councils more fully.

Appendix D

List of Councils in Sample Set

Essex	Taunton Deane
Hampshire	Test Valley
Lancashire	Tewkesbury
Oxfordshire	Thanet
Somerset	Three Rivers
Adur	Torridge
Ashfield	Watford
Basildon	West Somerset
Basingstoke & Deane	Wychavon
Bassetlaw	Wyre
Blaby	Barking & Dagenham
Bromsgrove	Bromley
Broxbourne	Ealing
Charnwood	Greenwich
Cheltenham	Hackney
Cherwell	Haringey
Chesterfield	Kingston upon Thames
Crawley	Lambeth
Dover	Tower Hamlets
Eastleigh	Wandsworth
Exeter	Westminster
Forest of Dean	Hull
Gedling	Knowsley
Gloucester	Middlesbrough
Harborough	Newcastle upon Tyne
Hastings	Oldham
Hinckley and Bosworth	Sheffield
Huntingdonshire	Trafford
Lichfield	Bath and North East Somerset
Malvern	Blackpool
Melton	Bristol
North Kesteven	Cheshire West and Chester
North Norfolk	Cornwall
Oxford	Northumberland
Reigate & Banstead	Peterborough
Runnymede	Poole
Sevenoaks	Portsmouth
Shepway	Reading
South Northamptonshire	Slough
South Somerset	Warrington
Surrey Heath	Windsor and Maidenhead
Tamworth	
Tandridge	

Appendix E

Tests used to explore the sample set of 84 councils and the Monitoring Officer attitude survey.

The first task was to decide whether the data was suitable for parametric statistics or whether non-parametric tests only should be used. The initial scan of the data raised three issues relating to the choice of tests and these are detailed below:

1. Interval or ratio data: Data from the attitude statements in the Monitoring Officer survey is ordinal, but this is often treated as interval data;
2. Random sampling: both samples are not entirely random, as the 84 councils were also weighted for type and broadband availability and the survey sample of monitoring officers was an opportunity sample so not strictly random, but many surveys are like this;
3. Drawn from a normally distributed population: application of normality tests (using SPSS, Kolmagorov-Smirnoff through the sequence ANALYSE/DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS/EXPLORE) showed that much of the data is not normally distributed.

With regard to the tests that were applied to the sample set of 84 councils, the need was to choose tests which explored the relationships among the different variables: for example 'Is there a relationship between voter turnout and number of Twitter followers?' The choice of a non-parametric test, Spearman's Rank Order, was used rather than the Chi-square test for independence (Pallant, 2010:113) because the data violated the assumption of minimum expected cell frequency of 5 or more. A scatterplot was generated in each case to show the spread of the data. For example, the relationship between Twitter followers and three main variables of population size, density and turnout was investigated using Spearman's rho. The results are given in the table below:

Table 1 Correlations between variables and Twitter Followers using Spearman's rho

Variable		
Population	.751	
Density	.451	
Turnout	-.503	

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

Appendix F

List of Variables

1. Type of council, District, County, Unitary, Metropolitan, London Borough.
2. Democratically elected mayor, yes/no.
3. Political composition/control, Lab, Con, Lib Dem, Other, NOC.
4. Population size.
5. Population density.
6. Broadband speed, OfCOM scoring, 1-5.
7. Voter turnout at last election.
8. Council Facebook page, yes/no.
9. Council Twitter page, yes/no.
10. Facebook 'likes'.
11. Twitter followers.
- 12/13. Facebook/Twitter interactivity, responses to public visible, yes/no.
14. Retweeting other organisations, yes/no, public sector only, yes/no.
15. Councillor blogs (identified as particular council), yes/no.
16. Tweets in the last 24 hours.
- 17/18. Facebook/Twitter informality, (see Appendix G).
19. Date of adoption of Facebook.
20. Date of adoption of Twitter.
21. Total tweets to date.

Appendix G

Measurement Tool for Coding Formality/Informality Variable:

1. Very Formal – press releases or information only and very formal language.
2. Formal – mostly press releases or information, less formal language.
3. Some informality – some evidence of photographs, some names, use of URLs, reposting of other council related organisations eg, police, health, fire.
4. Informal – Mixed content with photographs, names, use of URLs, reposting of range of organisations and individuals.
5. Very informal – as informal plus very conversational style, use of first names, colloquial language, clear identification of names of council posters/tweeters, use of light humour and very responsive to citizens' queries.

Appendix H

Strategic sampling matrix for case study selection 2012

Criteria	Final selection (council names changed to mask identity)
Active on both Facebook and Twitter	Shawbury, Wallingsworth, Lansbury, Cadwaller
At least one council where several councillors had won awards for blogging (e.g. Total Politics Awards)	Cadwaller, 5 councillors in top 35 councillor blogs awards 2011
At least one which webcasts council meetings	Cadwaller, Shawbury, Lansbury
Four different types of council	London borough, met, unitary, mayoral district
Geographical spread – north and south	London, south-west, north west, home counties/east of England
Political control spread	2 Labour, 1 Liberal Democrat, 1 Conservative which moved to Liberal Democrat/Independent control during study
At least one mayoral council	Wallingsworth
At least one rural council	Cadwaller
At least one London Borough	Lansbury
At least one early adopter of social media	Lansbury, Cadwaller
At least one with high social media followers	Lansbury, highest number of Twitter followers of all London boroughs in 2012
At least one where Leader doesn't use social media	Cadwaller
At least one where Leader does use social media	Lansbury, Shawborough, Wallingsworth

Appendix I

List of interviewees: job titles and political positions

Lansbury

No.	Councillors	No.	Officers
L50	Cabinet member for Safer and Stronger Neighbourhoods	L12	Head of Scrutiny
L50	Cabinet member for Social Services (Adults and Children) (Lab)	L22	Head of Publishing
L23	Backbench member (LD)	L18	Director of Campaigns and Communication
L08	Vice Chair Scrutiny Committee (Lab)		
L53	Backbench member (Lab)		
L52	Backbench member (Lab)		
L09	Scrutiny Chair (Lab)		

Cadwallar

No.	Councillors	No.	Officers
C29	Backbencher (later Cabinet member) (Ind)	C31	Assistant Head of Service for Strategy & Localism
C26	Leader of Liberal Democrat Group (later Cabinet member) (LD)	C25	Corporate Communications Manager
C27	Scrutiny Chair (Con)	C30	Head of Democratic Services
C39	Backbencher (Leader of Labour Group) (Lab) Hannah		
C33	Backbencher (Ind)		
C32	Backbencher (LD)		
C38	Backbencher (LD)		

Wallingsworth

No.	Councillors	No.	Officers
W14a, W49	The Mayor (LD) x2	W14b	Mayor's Assistant
W16a	Chair of Overview and Scrutiny (LD)	W15a W15b	Head of Scrutiny Scrutiny Officer
W16b	Chair of Budget Scrutiny (Lab)	W36	Head of Communications
		W37	Communications Officer

Shawborough

No.	Councillors	No.	Officers
S44	Leader (Lab)	S43	Chief of Staff
S42	Former leader now backbencher (LD)	S46	Head of Communications
S47	Backbencher (LD)	S40	Assistant Chief Executive and Head of Scrutiny
S24	Deputy Cabinet Member for Town Centres and Development (Lab)	S48	Monitoring Officer
S45	Backbencher (Lab)		

Appendix J

Question sets

Interviews Question Set 1 Councillors

Initial tasks: Explanation of research, signing consent form, getting permission for recording and note taking.

Establishing questions:

Name, Council role – how long a councillor, what positions including current role, political party?

Social media related questions:

Tell me about your own use of social media. Do you use Twitter? Do you use Facebook? Do you blog? Do you have any separation between personal use and political/professional use? What do you actually use it for? What is positive about social media, what is negative? Would you describe yourself as an experienced and confident user? How did you learn to use social media? Were you given training by party or council? Do you write to the newspapers/hold ward surgeries? Has this changed? And if don't use, why not? What are the main barriers to your use? If non-users why do you think other councillors use it and what do you think that it is useful for? If non-users ask for more general observations on the phenomenon in order to tease out issues.

If non-user ask: Will you use in future do you think? What would help you to start using if anything?

If user: tell me about what you follow/listen to watch – what do you pay most attention to online? Do you mainly follow your own party/ national figures and organisations/local people and organisations or people with different views on line?

Could you give me an example of where something which you read or posted online which led to a change in your thinking or behaviour as a councillor?

I'm interested in what encourages councillors to use social media and what constrains them. Can I ask about whether you have ever been in trouble with the Standards Committee or the Monitoring Officer about your social media use? Are you aware of any rules or guidance from the party or council? Tweeting in council meetings for example? Can I explore the relationship between your party and your online output?

Accountability:

Can you tell me where you feel your main accountability as a councillor/mayor lies?

Prompt: Voters, ward and fellow councillors, party, wider ideals, personal values, newspapers?

Do you feel accountable in any way to those who are expressing their opinions online?

Do you feel you have to answer campaigners on forums and blogs?

How is this different from what you did before? Same or different?

Finally: Any general points that you might want to make that I haven't covered? Thank you.

Question Set 2 Officers

Initial tasks: Explanation of research, signing consent form, getting permission for recording and note taking.

Establishing questions: Name; Description of role in Council: how long, positions held, structure.

If involved in scrutiny/democratic services, how many committees, how does it operate and recent changes to constitution? If involved in communications, ask about structure, operation of traditional 'grid' and management of social media output.

Social media questions:

Tell me about your own personal use of social media. Do you use Twitter? Do you use Facebook? Do you blog? Do you have any separation between personal use and political/professional use? What do you actually use it for? Do you have any concerns about your own social media use?

What is positive about social media, what is negative? Would you describe yourself as an experienced and confident user? Enthusiast or sceptic? How did you learn? What are your influences? Who do you follow?

And if don't use, why not, observations/what do you think that it is useful for? Will you use in future do you think?

Council use questions:

Tell me about when the council adopted social media and how councillors learn to use social media – diffusion

Do you see any potential problems or challenges from your perspective as an officer? Prompts: scale, control, pitfalls in public discussion with residents?

Aware of any standards issues?

How are the rules for communication with the conventional press different from social media?

Predictions for the future – what will change?

What are your observations on the impact of social media on 1)Accountability 2) Role of party 3) councillors views of their roles 4) scrutiny 5) use in council meetings

What is different if anything?

Finally: Any general points that you might want to make that I haven't covered? Thank you.

Appendix K

Consent Form: Social media and accountability in local government

This information sheet gives details of a research project set up at De Montfort University to study the impact of social media in local government. The project is part of a PhD programme within the Politics and Public Policy department of the Faculty of Business and Law, De Montfort University.

Please take some time to read the following information carefully.

- **Why is this project being undertaken?**

The aim of the project is to provide a full picture of how social media is currently being used in local government. All the information that is collected from interviews and documents will help to explain the impact of social media and to use that information to provide councils with some guidance about better ways of adapting to social media in the future.

Four English councils are directly involved in the research project and a statistical study of a further eighty-five councils is also taking place.

- **What do I have to do?**

As part of the research you will be asked to

Sign the attached consent form and take part in the interview which will last approximately one hour. You may also be asked to take part in a follow up interview. As part of the interview you will be asked to take part in a short questionnaire.

- **What happens to the information collected?**

Information will be used by the researcher and will be labelled only with a study number so that it cannot be linked to you.

- **How is confidentiality ensured?**

All the information collected will be stored in strict confidence, as is required by law in the Data Protection. The researcher is registered as a data controller with the Information Commission.

The details of the individual and the council concerned will be anonymised in order to avoid identification.

- **What are the advantages of taking part in the project?**

The main advantage of taking part is that you will be helping the efforts of local government researchers to understand more about the impact of the new phenomenon of social media within democratic processes and how councils might adapt usage in the future.

- **What if I have any questions or problems?**

If there are any questions or problems then you can discuss them with the researcher and you can also contact the academic responsible for overall supervision of the project, Professor Colin Copus, De Montfort University, ccopus@dmu.ac.uk . The project has been approved by the University's ethics committee, but if you have any concerns please contact the person responsible for ethics issues within the Business and Law Faculty of the University; Jo Samanta, JSamanta@dmu.ac.uk

- **Will I get to know the findings of the project?**

The findings from research study will be published in the final PhD thesis and electronic copies will be available on request. Material from the study may also be used in presentations, academic journals and in articles within the local government press. None of these publications or presentations will identify individual people or organisations.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

I have read the attached information sheet and I agree to take part in this research.

Name: Signature: Date:

Appendix L

Monitoring Officer Questionnaire (text version)

The views of Monitoring Officers on councillors' use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter are being sought as part of a wider PHD study on the impact of social media on accountability. The study is being carried out by Jane Scullion, a researcher at the Local Governance Research Unit at De Montfort University.

All responses are anonymised by the software and the researcher is not able to access any details of individuals or identify councils from email addresses. Answering the questionnaire should take less than ten minutes and your help would be greatly appreciated.

Your council

Please tick which of these currently happens in your council: (tick boxes required)

Full council meeting is webcast live

Other council meetings are webcast live

On-line petitions are regularly used by the public in this council

The Leader blogs in his own right

The Leader is a regular user of Twitter or Facebook

Senior managers use social media for comment in the public domain

There are some very active social media users amongst our councillors

There are some very active social media users amongst our regular complainants

Use of social media in council meetings is actively discouraged in this council

Social media is not particularly an issue in our council – few councillors use it

IT and Comms look after the council's social media output and the politicians don't get involved

Facebook and Twitter in this council is mostly about service delivery

Constitution

Have you amended or revised the council's constitution (including standing orders) in the last three years to take account of social media use? Yes, No, Don't know

Have you provided any written guidance to councillors on social media? Yes, No, Don't know

Do you cover social media use in the induction for new councillors? Yes, No, Don't know

Standards

Have you had to advise councillors informally on any aspect of their social media use in the last three years?

Yes, No, Don't Know

Have there been any formal complaints to you or your council's Standards Committee about councillors' social media use in the last three years?

Yes, No, Don't Know

Have there been any complaints regarding social media use by councillors which have led to a Standards Committee hearing in the last three years?

Yes, No, Don't Know

The future

Do you expect social media use by councillors to rise from its current level?

Yes, No, Not Sure

Are you likely to make changes to the council's constitution further as a result of the increasing use of social media?

Yes, No, Not sure

Do you expect to provide additional guidance on social media for councillors in the next year?

Yes, No, Not sure

Which of these statements best describes your own view of social media use by councillors: (tick box here) tick as many as apply/ or agree/disagree/don't know?

Social media is a fashion; it will shortly be replaced by something else

Social media is here to stay

It's mostly for younger councillors and won't ever catch on with older councillors

The problem with social media is that it blurs personal and professional boundaries

We can control what councillors do on social media with a new set of rules

Social media should be treated like conventional media; new rules are not required

Councillors don't yet seem to realise how harmful social media can be to their reputations

We need new ways of thinking about how councillors interact with social media in their roles as representatives

Social media is an inappropriate channel for the discussion of quasi-judicial decisions like planning

Social media makes councillors more vulnerable to pressure from public campaigns than in the past

Comment box:

About you:

What type of council do you work for? (Tick boxes here)

County, District, London Borough Metropolitan Borough, Unitary, Unitary County

How long have you been a Monitoring Officer? (Tick boxes here)

1-5 years, 6-10 years, more than 10 years

Which description best fits your own personal use of social media?

Don't use at all and never going to do so, Don't use at the moment but may use in future, Personal use only and concerned about privacy, Confident user, posting or tweeting regularly, None of these

Comment box here

Thank you for your help

Appendix M

Results of Monitoring Officer survey

There were 54 men in the sample and 51 women (1 missing data). 31 had been monitoring officers for 1-5 years, 34 for 6-10 years and the remaining 41 had served for over 10 years. In terms of personal use of social media 39 of the respondents had never used social media, 38 occasionally, 14 were moderate users and 15 were frequent users.

The main focus of the survey was on whether three personal characteristics made a difference to attitudes (positive or negative) held about social media: personal use of social media, length of service (used here as a proxy for age as the post is usually held by a senior officer with considerable experience), and gender.

With regard to the choice of tests, overall, and in common with many attitude questionnaires, the data fitted some of the assumptions for parametric tests, but not all. Parametric tests are said to be robust to some violations of their assumptions (see Davies 2013:24), but for comparison both the parametric and non-parametric versions of Anova were run. The Excel spreadsheet below gives the descriptive statistics for the attitude statements and then the results for the one-way Anovas (parametric) as well as the results for the Kruskal-Wallis tests (non-parametric).

Question	Length of Service		Frequency of Use		Gender	
	ANOVA	K-W	ANOVA	K-W	ANOVA	K-W
The Council's constitution already reflects the development of social media	2-tailed	1-tailed				
Social media should be treated like conventional media - no new rules are required						
We induct all new councillors in the use of social media as part of their role	1-tailed	1-tailed				
Social media is not particularly an issue in our council - few councillors use it						
Social media is a disaster						

waiting to happen in this council						
We encourage all our councillors to use social media for their council business			1-tailed	1-tailed		
Our Standards Committee (or equivalent) has already had to deal with social media issues						
This council should ban the use of social media during meetings whether for personal or political purposes						
Councillors don't realise how harmful social media can be to their reputations					2-tailed	2-tailed
Banning personal social media use on council accounts is the only answer						
Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms are only used by younger councillors			2-tailed	2-tailed		
Senior officers are really worried about privacy issues on social media						
Social media is a really inappropriate medium for discussion of			2-tailed	1-tailed*	1-tailed*	1-tailed

quasi-judicial decisions like planning						
The political party whips should be clipping politicians' wings on inappropriate social media use					1-tailed	

*Result only approaches one-tailed significance

Responses to questions 9a and 9b were then cleaned to exclude 'don't know answers, cross-tabulations were created and Chi Square tests were run. The results are given below:

Question 9a

			Length of Service				Frequency of Use				Gender *		
			1 - 5 years	6 - 10 years	10 years plus	Total	Never	Occasionally	Moderately/frequently	Total	Male	Female	Total
As a Monitoring Officer I have had to speak to at least one councillor about appropriate social media use	Agree	Count	18	22	24	64	25	23	16	64	40	23	63
		Expected Count	17.8	21.8	24.4	64.0	23.8	23.8	16.5	64.0	34.1	28.9	63.0
		Column %	66.7%	66.7%	64.9%	66.0%	69.4%	63.9%	64.0%	66.0%	76.9%	52.3%	65.6%
		Std. Residual	.0	.0	-.1	.3	-.2	-.1			1.0	-1.1	
	Disagree	Count	9	11	13	33	11	13	9	33	12	21	33
		Expected Count	9.2	11.2	12.6	33.0	12.2	12.2	8.5	33.0	17.9	15.1	33.0
		Column %	33.3%	33.3%	35.1%	34.0%	30.6%	36.1%	36.0%	34.0%	23.1%	47.7%	34.4%
		Std. Residual	-.1	-.1	.1	-.4	.2	.2			-1.4	1.5	
Total		Count	27	33	37	97	36	36	25	97	52	44	96

nt													
Expected Count	27.0	33.0	37.0	97.0	36.0	36.0		25.0	97.0	52.0	44.0	96.0	
Column %	100.0%	100.0%	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%	100.0%		100.0%	10.0%	100.0%	10.0%	10.0%	

Length of Service

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.033	2	.984
Likelihood Ratio	.033	2	.984
Linear-by-Linear Association	.025	1	.874
N of Valid Cases	97		

Frequency of Use

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.306	2	.858
Likelihood Ratio	.309	2	.857
Linear-by-Linear Association	.224	1	.636
N of Valid Cases	97		

***Gender is significant**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.420	1	.011		

Continuity Correction	5.374	1	.020		
Likelihood Ratio	6.463	1	.011		
Fisher's Exact Test				.017	.010
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.353	1	.012		
N of Valid Cases	96				

Question 9b

			1 - 5 years	6 - 10 years	10 years plus	Total	Never	Occasionally	Moderately/frequently	Total	Male	Female	Total
There have been no formal complaints about councilors' social media use in the last three years	Agree	Count	10	9	19	38	15	14	9	38	18	20	38
		Expected Count	11.2	11.2	15.5	38.0	13.8	13.4	10.8	38.0	21.0	17.0	38.0
	Column %	.4	.3	.5	.4	.5	.5	.4	.4	.4	.4	.5	.4
	Std. Residual	-.4	-.7	.9		.3	.2	-.5		-.6	.7		
Disagree	Count	Count	16	17	17	50	17	17	16	50	30	19	49
		Expected Count	14.8	14.8	20.5	50.0	18.2	17.6	14.2	50.0	27.0	22.0	49.0
	Column %	.6	.7	.5	.6	.5	.5	.6	.6	.6	.6	.5	.6
	Std. Residual	.3	.6	-.8		-.3	-.1	.5		.6	-.6		
Total	Count	26	26	36	88	32	31	25	88	48	39	87	
	Expected Count	26.0	26.0	36.0	88.0	32.0	31.0	25.0	88.0	48.0	39.0	87.0	
	Column %	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	

Length of Service

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.365	2	.307
Likelihood Ratio	2.369	2	.306
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.451	1	.228
N of Valid Cases	88		

Frequency of Use

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.753	2	.686
Likelihood Ratio	.761	2	.684
Linear-by-Linear Association	.633	1	.426
N of Valid Cases	88		

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson	1.66	1	.197		

on Chi-Square	1				
Continuity Correction	1.148	1	.284		
Likelihood Ratio	1.663	1	.197		
Fisher's Exact Test				.277	.142
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.642	1	.200		
N of Valid Cases	87				

Crosstabs

There have been no formal complaints about councillors' social media use in the last three years	Agree	Count	10	9	19	38	15	14	9	38	18	20	
		Expected Count	11.2	11.2	15.5	38.0	13.8	13.4	10.8	38.0	21.0	17.0	
		Column %	.4	.3	.5	.4	.5	.5	.4	.4	.4	.4	.5
		Std. Residual	-.4	-.7	.9		.3	.2	-.5		-.6	.7	
	Disagree	Count	16	17	17	50	17	17	16	50	30	19	
		Expected Count	14.8	14.8	20.5	50.0	18.2	17.6	14.2	50.0	27.0	22.0	
		Column %	.6	.7	.5	.6	.5	.5	.6	.6	.6	.5	
		Std. Residual	.3	.6	-.8		-.3	-.1	.5		.6	-.6	
Total		Count	26	26	36	88	32	31	25	88	48	39	
		Expected Count	26.0	26.0	36.0	88.0	32.0	31.0	25.0	88.0	48.0	39.0	
		Column %	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	

Length of Service

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.365	2	.307
Likelihood Ratio	2.369	2	.306

Linear-by-Linear Association	1.451	1	.228
N of Valid Cases	88		

Frequency of Use

	Value	df	Asymp . Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.753	2	.686
Likelihood Ratio	.761	2	.684
Linear-by-Linear Association	.633	1	.426
N of Valid Cases	88		

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp . Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.661	1	.197		
Continuity Correction ^b	1.148	1	.284		
Likelihood Ratio	1.663	1	.197		
Fisher's Exact Test				.277	.142
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.642	1	.200		
N of Valid Cases	87				

Appendix P

Total Tweets for sample set council sites, August 2014

Essex	7597
Hampshire	11100
Lancashire	7687
Oxfordshire	4342
Somerset	1431
Adur	237
Ashfield	134
Basildon	4801
Basingstoke & Deane	2552
Bassetlaw	1050
Blaby	2075
Bromsgrove	1128
Broxbourne	1300
Charnwood	7828
Cheltenham	3433
Cherwell	2637
Chesterfield	5110
Crawley	4832
Dover	5578
Eastleigh	5278
Exeter	6381
Forest of Dean	1767
Gedling	3100
Gloucester	3058
Harborough	1449
Hastings	2304
Hinckley and Bosworth	2840
Huntingdonshire	1762
Lichfield	2415
Malvern	1140
Melton	1
North Kesteven	4574
North Norfolk	2185
Oxford	2915
Reigate & Banstead	1956
Runnymede	3363
Sevenoaks	1810
Shepway	1909
South Northamptonshire	2448
South Somerset	1754
Surrey Heath	6720
Tamworth	10400
Tandridge	6635
Taunton Deane	773

Test Valley	1839
Tewkesbury	2326
Thanet	2726
Three Rivers	4436
Torridge	1078
Watford	3482
West Somerset	1689
Wychavon	2457
Wyre	4768
Barking & Dagenham	0
Bromley	2008
Ealing	5043
Greenwich	8504
Hackney	5165
Haringey	0
Kingston upon Thames	4830
Lambeth	5454
Tower Hamlets	1383
Wandsworth	6530
Westminster	4838
Hull	14000
Knowsley	5821
Middlesbrough	2480
Newcastle upon Tyne	9821
Oldham	18000
Sheffield	11200
Trafford	4532
Bath and North East Somerset	9833
Blackpool	8284
Bristol	12800
Cheshire West and Chester	1400
Cornwall	7681
Northumberland	9843
Peterborough	7843
Poole	3671
Portsmouth	3328
Reading	2490
Slough	5382
Warrington	2690
Windsor and Maidenhead	136