

Scottish Affairs 23.4 (2014): 486–507

DOI: 10.3366/scot.2014.0045

© Edinburgh University Press

www.euppublishing.com/scot

DISCONNECTED DEMOCRACY? A SURVEY OF SCOTTISH COMMUNITY COUNCILS' ONLINE PRESENCES

Peter Cruickshank, Bruce Ryan and Colin Smith

Abstract

Community Councils are the bottom rung of Scotland's democracy ladder, having few – but highly significant – statutory consultative duties (especially with regard to planning) and no service-delivery duties. Generally they have failed to live up to expectations in terms of activity and impact, and have struggled to gain legitimacy. Despite this, they are often highlighted in policy debates around community involvement, and have been on the agenda again recently with the release of two significant reports calling for increased powers, and the publication of a Scottish Government working group report examining ways to build their resilience and capacity.

The Internet potentially offers Community Councils potentially useful capabilities. However, survey data shows that only 22% of Community Councils maintain up-to-date online public presences and only 4% have easily-accessible content relating to planning. Worse, only 14% of up-to-date

Peter Cruickshank is a Research Fellow within the Centre for Social Informatics and a Lecturer in Information Systems. He has been lead researcher on a number of projects investigating the role technology can play in supporting the democratic process. He has a particular interest in the role that visiting political sites can play in the transition to political activity.

Dr Bruce Ryan was a Community Councillor and Treasurer of a CC in Fife, where he saw at first hand some of the issues with CCs. He is a researcher at the Centre for Social Informatics at Edinburgh Napier University and has recently completed an MSc in Information Systems Development.

Dr Colin Smith lectures in Information Systems and carries out research as a member of the Centre for Social Informatics. His general research interests are in the relationships between new technologies, innovation and organisational change in processes of governance. He has published widely on subjects such as electronic service delivery by local authorities.

presences support digital dialogue. Such poor communication is a digital symptom of a disease of poverty, namely CCs' lack of duties and relevance. This article examines these digital symptoms and suggests appropriate treatment. Without such treatment, the CC system may well just die.

The article provides detailed data and analysis to inform the ongoing debate. It updates a study carried out in 2004 to 2006, investigating how technology could be developed to help regenerate democracy at the local community level. Although the 2012 survey reveals some good examples of active online presences and support by local authorities, in general there is no sense of improvement in information provision online.

Keywords: Community councils; community development; digital democracy; local government.

Introduction

The internet pervades almost everything in modern Scottish life. Even nappy brands have Facebook pages. There are many Europe-wide e-participation and e-democracy schemes (Council of Europe). Government uses the internet to inform, connect with and raise tax from citizens. Online may soon be the major route for state benefits (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013). The Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament have information-rich websites, while the Scottish Parliament can be justifiably proud of its home-grown online petition system.

Politicians use Twitter and Facebook to connect with their constituents – notable Scottish examples include Patrick Harvie (2013) and Tom Harris (2013). Scotland's own 'cyberNats' may have helped deliver the 2007 and 2011 SNP victories (Better Nation, 2012). Recently, Glasgow has won a major grant to become a 'smart city' (BBC, 2013). More locally, each Scottish Local Authority has a website providing information and access to services.

But there is a third tier nestling down below the Scottish Government and Local Authority tiers of government – Community Councils (CCs). These were set up in 1973 as successors to Burgh and Parish Councils to represent small pieces of Local Authority areas and have had mixed success at best.

In the light of the opportunities offered by the internet, especially the ease of being online offered by social media systems, and of European examples of its use by local government, we became interested in how well CCs use the internet to communicate with their citizens.

It might be expected that the majority of CCs would use online methods to connect with citizens – if only because this could increase efficiency and decrease operating costs. Yet the opposite seems to be the case. We know that CCs **can** be online – there are some excellent examples. We **believe** that they should be online to maximise connections with citizens. But many are **not** online. So this article has two purposes: firstly to inform and secondly to raise questions and form an agenda for further work.

The major questions addressed in this article are how many CCs are online, how well CC online presences are set up to allow communication with citizens and what might improve matters.

Representing Communities

Community Councils were introduced by the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 to replace the former Burgh and Parish Councils. They were charged with ascertaining, co-ordinating and expressing the views of their communities and taking 'expedient and practicable action' (UK Government, 1973). They have been Scotland's attempt to retain independent very local government (McIntosh, et al., 1999, p. 37) and were made statutory consultees for planning permission applications in the Local Government etc (Scotland) Act 1994 (Scottish Government, 2011a). They are also statutory consultees on licensing matters. Apart from this, CCs have no statutory powers or responsibilities.

Despite their potential, CCs have had a history of problems. For instance the McIntosh Report (1999, pp. 38–39) noted that CC elections were 'very poorly supported' and recommended that CCs should renew themselves, specifically addressing how effectively they establish public opinion in their own areas. The Report suggested that responsibility for initiating renewal lay in the first instance with Local Authorities.

A publication created to inform the McIntosh Report gives much detail on this history of CCs up to 1999 (Goodlad, Flint, Kearns, Keoghan, Paddison, & Raco, 1999). At this time, potentially 1390 CCs could exist but only 1152 were active, covering 83% of the Scottish population. It is interesting to note that the 'missing' CCs were concentrated in two local authorities (LAs) that were slow to set up CC schemes – unfortunately Goodlad does not say which two. The number of Community Councilors was found to be around 65% of the potential number. Elections were infrequent, due to candidate numbers very often being less than the number of places available. This was seen by many as reducing CCs' democratic legitimacy and influencing some LA councillors to

Scottish Community Councils' Online Presences

ignore CCs, although some CCs saw lack of candidates as evidence that the current CC was satisfactory. Others regarded it as an expression of apathy or disillusionment with CCs.

There was also disagreement over CCs' powers – such as whether they could enter into contracts – and whether local authority duties could or should be delegated to them. (At the time this had not occurred.) Community Councillors were generally aged over 40, and often were not representative of the demographics of their areas.

The Scottish Government has made several attempts to invigorate CCs: an inquiry into how it could 'help CCs fulfil their role' (Scottish Government, 2005); a 'Good Practice Guidance for Local Authorities and Community Councils' (Scottish Government, 2009); some pilot schemes focusing on 'budget management, elections and asset management' (Scottish Government, 2011b); and, most recently, a Short Life Working Group to 'look at ways to build the resilience and capacity of Community Councils, in order to strengthen their role as voices for their communities' (Scottish Government, 2012a).

Outside government, Reform Scotland (Thomson, Mawdsley, & Payne, 2012) and the Jimmy Reid Foundation (Bort, McAlpine, & Morgan, 2012) have suggested improvements to CCs' roles, funding and standing within Scottish democracy – and have pointed out that Scotland has exceptionally large units of local government with all that implies in terms of responsive and democratically accountable government.

How democratic is the representation?

Following on from this and perhaps prefiguring our results on CCs' online performance is the rarity of contested elections. Uncontested elections have been a feature of CCs throughout their existence (Goodlad et al., 1999): for instance, using data from 2011 (BBC, 2011) (National Records of Scotland, 2011), we found that nearly two thirds of CC elections were uncontested (Ryan & Cruickshank, 2012, p. 5), thus denying democratic choice to many citizens. This lack of candidates may be symptomatic of CCs' failure to communicate: if CCs are not on citizens' agendas and are not seen to be active, the appeal of becoming a Community Councillor will be reduced. Tatty, out-of-date noticeboards do not promote CCs in any way (Figure 1).

(There are other potential reasons for CCs' lack of appeal. For example, they have low budgets and so cannot do much, while they have no powers or service-delivery duties. Community Councillors are unpaid so for the

Figure 1
Tatty noticeboards are not the way of the future © Burns (2013)



ambitious, full-time, remunerative positions such as LA Councillors may appeal more.)

This must mean that CCs need to show that they matter (as well as being given a place that makes them matter). Widespread opinion-gathering activities, followed by appropriate analysis and communication of the results, would not only gather opinions but show that CCs are fully active – and where better to do this than online? Of course, there would need to be offline activity too, so that CCs are fully inclusive.

Context: Europe and the Internet

Examples from Europe

One challenge that CCs face is their limited roles and very limited funding. This is in contrast to their equivalents in other European countries.

In Scotland, service-provision is associated with Local Authorities and central government. As has already been observed, CCs have three statutory **representative** roles: community opinions, planning and licensing. CCs have no obligatory service-provision duties. In terms of funding, CCs' average

Scottish Community Councils' Online Presences

annual income is around £400 (Bort, McAlpine, & Morgan, 2012) – mostly from Local Authority grants – enough to hire a monthly meeting room, pay for some stationery and precious little else.

By contrast, other European countries' equivalent local democratic units provide services, and raise income to enable this. For example, Austria's *Gemeinden*¹ provide services such as water, sewerage and recreation facilities. According to the *Österreichischer Gemeindebund's* press officer, *Gemeinden* are funded from federal taxes, local taxes and charges (Kozak, 2013). *Gemeinden* have consistently punched above their weight since World War 2 (*Österreichischer Gemeindebund*, 2003) and have a strong voice in European matters (*Österreichischer Gemeindebund*, 2013)

Similarly, Norwegian *kommuner*² provide services such as primary and lower secondary schools, nurseries and kindergartens, some social services, local land-use planning, roads and harbours, and work on agricultural and environmental issues. In 2003, *kommuner* spent approximately £20 billion on these services. *Kommuner* received 42% of their income from local income and property taxes and 47% from grants from local government and other sources (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2003).

These European local government units use the internet to communicate with their citizens. In 2009, 98% of *Gemeinden* had websites. Of these, 80% were under the 'official' Austrian Government '.gv.at' domain, 95% had antivirus features, 88% had firewalls but only 55% had back-up. 94% followed conformed to the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative's 'A' standards (Centre for eGovernment, 2009). As early as 2003, 90% of *kommuner* had websites (Haug & Jansen, 2003). At the time Norway was lagging behind other Nordic countries: all Swedish and Danish municipalities had websites. In 2011, 58% of *kommuner* had social media presences – the major provider was Facebook, used by 38% of *kommuner* (Volan, 2011). Despite this, online engagement by citizens has not been widespread (Saglie & Vabo, 2009) showing that being active online should not be expected to be a panacea.

Opportunities from online

Amongst other things, the internet is a vast communications tool, enabling expression and gathering of opinions, facts and information from disseminating cutting-edge science, e.g. (Cornell University Library, 2013), to making restaurant bookings, e.g. (Livebookings Holdings Ltd, 2012). Initially, in what has become known as Web 1.0, 'content creators were few . . . with the

Figure 2
No! You are not a tank commander! © 2012 Solihull Police



vast majority of users simply acting as consumers of content' (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). At this stage, the internet essentially allowed information provision.

Starting in the early part of the last decade, Web 2.0 arose as a set of technologies which combined with more powerful home computers and improved connection speeds to enable the growth of online social networks and two-way online communication where *'any* participant can be a content creator': that is, it allows world-wide information-gathering and conversations. Social media users now number over a billion people (Lunden, 2012): such services, above all Facebook and Twitter, have ensured that *'techie'* skills are not necessary for engaging powerful online activity, and have reached penetration rates well in excess of 50% in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

There are numerous examples of the importance and influence of social media. For example, police forces with strong social media presences have better relationships with the citizens they are policing – they are seen as *'authoritative, trustworthy sources'* (BBC, 2012b) (Denef et al., 2012). Twitter is used to publish up-to-date public information such as road-gritting, e.g. (Birmingham City Council, 2013) and changes to train services, e.g. (Scotrail, 2013). (Both of these also have equivalent traditional websites.) Twitter is also used by Lothian and Borders Police to appeal for witnesses (Lothian and Borders Police, 2013) and has been used to disseminate driver-safety tips; see Figure 2 (Solihull police, 2012). Finally, the Scottish Government has recognised the influence of the internet in policies such as *'digital first'*

Scottish Community Councils' Online Presences

(Scottish Government, 2013) and legislation against offensive online behavior (Scottish Government, 2012b).

Social media are ideal for public conversations: CCs can use them to make announcements and provide information, then receive feedback from constituents. Some tools enable closed groups, so that conversations can be restricted to 'approved' participants. Blogging tools such as Wordpress allow structuring of information and debates. Facebook and Twitter, despite being overwhelmingly popular (eBIZ|MBA, 2013), are broadly chronological.

Email can be used to ask for opinions, but it necessitates gathering of email addresses. Blog posts and tweets can do the same but allow respondents to be anonymous, while allowing responses to be public and thus to engender further responses.

Politicians can be understandably wary of the risks of the use of social media (Siddique & Carrell, 2010) but nevertheless these examples show that highly formal organisations can effectively use informal tools such as social media. It should be possible for relatively low-formality, 'grassroots' organizations such as CCs to use them too. The appetite for such engagement exists: 14% of UK adults have taken part in online discussions of civic or political issues (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

In 2004–6, that is towards the beginning of the Web2.0 era, Edinburgh Napier University worked with 5 Stirlingshire CCs and 1 North Lanarkshire CC to develop websites that allowed CCs to host discussion of issues with constituents and Community Councillors (CCllrs) to converse privately online (Whyte, Macintosh, & Shell, 2006). This experiment showed that web-based tools enabled and encouraged more people to have their say, that there was significant appetite for such tools and that electronic documentation is readily used if CCllrs have web access and relevant skills.

Because at this time few CCs had the resources to produce and manage their own tools, it was recommended that LAs should be proactive in disseminating them, including providing administrative support, financing and adequate liability-protection. Such measures would assist their Community Planning and Best Value duties in regard to communication and community engagement. This experiment finished in 2006 and the tools were not maintained. Despite this, most of the CCs involved are still online in various ways.

Methodology

We carried out our research in July 2012 in order to address a perceived lack of data on the current situation. Using lists of CCs from Local Authority

websites, we searched for each CC on Google. If a relevant-seeming hit appeared in the first two pages, the URL was investigated and the hosting and content categorised.

CC websites were deemed up-to-date if they had been updated in the last 2 months, to allow for summer breaks and minutes not being put online until they had been approved at succeeding meetings. To ensure completeness, Local Authorities' Community Council Liaison Officers (CCLOs) were asked to advise on numbers of CCs – some Local Authorities listed online only those CCs which were active.

To investigate the drivers behind this data, representatives of 7 CCs (3 in Stirling, 3 in Falkirk and 1 in North Lanarkshire) were interviewed. These CCs were selected to enable follow-up of previous research (Whyte, Macintosh, & Shell, 2006): interviews with the Stirling CCs who had taken part in that research were requested but only 3 of these agreed to be interviewed. The North Lanarkshire CC had also taken part in the earlier research. Falkirk area was chosen because a majority of its CCs were online, but none of its CCs had taken part in the earlier research and so might provide a counterpoint. All Falkirk CCs were contacted but only 3 agreed to be interviewed.

Research Findings

Our research looked at many aspects of CC online offerings – we report the essential detail here. The results of our survey are summarised below.

In summary, there are 1156 CCs that function to some extent, of a potential 1369 (ie 85% exist – 15% are 'missing'). Only 658 (57% of existing CCs) are online in any way; only about a quarter (307 or 27%) of all existing CCs were found to have been active online.

Discussion

This data closely agrees with the BBC's 2011 finding that only 82% of CCs were active (BBC, 2011). These numbers are consistent with those found by (Goodlad et al., 1999) – that is the situation has not noticeably improved in over a decade. It also shows that only around half of existing CCs have been using their websites to communicate with their communities at all, though much content is out of date.

This apparent failure to communicate online is not confined to CCs: only one third of small- and medium-sized companies in the UK have online presences, while potentially 16 million people in the UK lack the basic skills to

Scottish Community Councils' Online Presences

Table 1
Community Councils' online presences

	Inactive CCs	Active CCs with...			Total CCs
		No online presence	Out-of-date presences	Up-to-date presences	
Local Authority					
<i>Aberdeen</i>	5	7	9	9	30
<i>Aberdeenshire</i>	15	19	20	19	73
<i>Angus</i>	–	12	8	5	25
<i>Argyll & Bute</i>	2	15	20	19	56
<i>Clackmannanshire</i>	–	3	3	3	9
<i>Dumfries & Galloway</i>	17	72	9	9	107
<i>Dundee</i>	11	–	5	3	19
<i>East Ayrshire</i>	5	26	3	1	35
<i>East Dunbartonshire*</i>	1	7	4	1	13
<i>East Lothian</i>	1	9	2	8	20
<i>East Renfrewshire</i>	–	–	3	7	10
<i>Edinburgh</i>	4	–	18	24	46
<i>Eilean Siar</i>	4	22	3	1	30
<i>Falkirk</i>	–	–	9	9	18
<i>Fife</i>	23	40	21	21	105
<i>Glasgow</i>	19	31	37	14	101
<i>Highland</i>	3	75	42	37	157
<i>Inverclyde</i>	2	–	5	4	11
<i>Midlothian</i>	–	7	7	2	16
<i>Moray</i>	4	–	2	14	20
<i>North Ayrshire</i>	5	4	6	2	17
<i>North Lanarkshire</i>	44	6	14	17	81
<i>Orkney</i>	–	–	18	2	20
<i>Perth & Kinross</i>	5	15	18	14	52
<i>Renfrewshire</i>	4	12	6	4	26
<i>Scottish Borders</i>	2	25	18	22	67

Table 1 (Cont.)

Local Authority	Active CCs with...				Total CCs
	Inactive CCs	No online presence	Out-of-date presences	Up-to-date presences	
<i>Shetland</i>	–	13	2	3	18
<i>South Ayrshire</i>	2	15	8	4	29
<i>South Lanarkshire</i>	25	17	9	7	58
<i>Stirling</i>	–	19	9	15	43
<i>West Dunbartonshire</i>	7	4	3	3	17
<i>West Lothian</i>	4	22	10	4	40
Total	213	498	351	307	1369
<i>Percent of all CCs</i>	16%	36%	26%	22%	100%
<i>Percent of active CCs</i>	NA	43%	30%	27%	100%

**Note: East Dunbartonshire did not respond to requests to confirm the data on numbers of potential and active CCs, so their council website was used to generate the data: a map showed 13 CC areas and a list of CC contacts named 12 CCs. Hence it was assumed that these 12 were active and that the CC omitted from this list was inactive.*

use the internet (BBC, 2012a). However, complete technophobes are in a decreasing minority (Office for National Statistics, 2012), while the UK public is increasingly adopting web 2.0 technologies (Twitichen & Adams, 2011).

More importantly, companies are responsible to only limited numbers of stakeholders. The challenge CCs face is to represent *all* citizens in their areas. And yet they are missing out on a major communication channel: the CCLOs – the Local Authority officials who deal most closely with CCs – report that some CCs refuse to even use email or do not take up IT/social-media training.

Our research is confined to internet activity, but those active CCs which confine communication to physical means (e.g. monthly meetings, newspaper adverts, mailings and notice-boards) are, arguably, disengaging from a large proportion of their electorate and ignoring a valuable ‘channel to market’ for obtaining community opinions. In the words of a recent commentator, ‘if you don’t have the sophistication to set up an [email] account, don’t expect me to trust you to have the sophistication to fix my broken community’ (Burns, 2012).

Scottish Community Councils' Online Presences

As we have noted, only around a quarter (27%) of active CCs have up-to-date online presences. A system that provides little up-to-date information is unlikely to inspire confidence. In mitigation, an additional 6% had last been updated earlier in 2012, taking the total with some viable activity to one third but this would still leave around a sixth of CCs being totally out of date, never mind the 52% that are either not online or non-existent.

The choice of internet site can make a difference

Almost all community-driven presences, i.e. those presences under the control of CCs and/or other parts of the local community (93%) were updated monthly and had a wide range of content (58% with minutes, local information, local news, 14% with planning content). LA-hosted presences on the other hand were in general minimal web 1.0-style information providers, often providing just minutes.

It was noticeable that the small number of CCs (7%) that used Facebook updated more quickly and more frequently than other up-to-date CCs. A possible interpretation is that CCs that have the impetus to keep their sites up to date are similarly empowered to have wider ranges of content, hence informing their constituents and others outside the CC area.

It is also possible that LA provision of presences encourages CCs to merely follow the minimum standards provided by LA templates and mechanisms. Individual CCs should not necessarily be blamed for their presences' lack of content: one CCLO told us that she would very much like to improve her CCs' presences but she has no resources apart from her CCs' annual grants. Yet the CCLO of another LA that provides websites for all of her CCs told us she planned to make it possible for these sites' content to be greatly enriched in the near future. So variance in the standards set by LA-hosting could well be a 'postcode lottery' or a feature of devolved powers.

Whatever the host choices, and no matter who makes them, clearly only a very few presences are both up-to-date and have informative, engaging content.

Online Community Councils aren't communicating frequently enough

The vast majority (94%) of up-to-date presences were updated monthly or more frequently: this might be good enough if CC presences only hosted meeting minutes.

Peter Cruickshank, Bruce Ryan and Colin Smith

Many CCs' presences also have local news and events reports: these will need frequent updating to be of any use. For example, the former secretary of St Andrews CC runs a local events service which was originally associated with the CC. He adds events to the database most evenings, then schedules tweets about these events to be sent out during the following day (Lindsay, 2012).

Engagement with the planning process is missing too

CCs are statutory consultees for planning matters and licensing: responses to LAs about such issues may be required within 3 weeks of publication. In practice, CCs' planning duties may be delegated to planning committees that meet more frequently.³ If citizens are to be consulted on such matters, much more rapid updates are needed. With just monthly updates, the first that citizens might know of any planning discussion would be when it was published in the full CC minutes – by which time it might well be too late for them to get involved.

Because CCs have planning duties, one might also have expected CC websites to have easily-accessed online planning discussions. This was not observed: only 4% of all presences had planning sections. While it might be that planning discussions were contained within meeting minutes (which were not examined in any detail), we found remarkably few opportunities to easily find, let alone comment on, planning matters on CC presences. Tell Me Scotland (<http://www.tellmesotland.gov.uk>) is a new SG-supported searchable source of planning and other public information that CCs could use to find and publicise planning issues in their areas.

In short, not being online must lead to disengagement by CCs and denial of popular input.

Most CC online communication is one-way

So far, we have examined how CCs use the internet to provide information, i.e. to be web 1.0 practitioners. CCs are tasked with gathering community opinions and so need to talk with their citizens. That is, they need to be web 2.0 practitioners. We found that only 14% of up-to-date presences – that is just over 40 CCs out of the potential 1369 allowed these two-way conversations, by using Facebook, blogs and fora.

Scottish Community Councils' Online Presences

There are many possible factors behind this result, for example:

- Interviews and conversations with CCs in Falkirk and Edinburgh suggest fear of abuse is a major factor.
- CCs may wish to hide private conversations.
- Possibly CCs who do not currently use social media would wish support and advice from their CCLOs. Several CCLOs told us they were banned from using social media at work.
- We did not rigorously investigate Twitter. (A trial investigation of 2 LAs found very few twitter accounts.) It is possible that CCLRs tweet under their own names, instead of as their CCs – but this only helps if their relationship with their CC is acknowledged.
- One interviewed CC said that Twitter was too 'rapid' for its needs – it only needed to put out information every few weeks or so, and that for it, an LA-hosted presence and an email address were enough.

Too often, it depends on a single enthusiast

Based on interview evidence it seems that in many cases CCs' internet presences seem to rely on single CCLRs, and that continuity plans were basic or non-existent. One example from our interviews was a hard-won emailing list that was kept on a CCLR's personal PC, with a 'back-up' on his wife's PC. It is easy to see how this list might be lost, and the consequences for the CC's activity. While of course administrator login details should not be broadcast, access can be securely shared.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our simple conclusion is that the majority of CCs are not using online methods effectively: a quarter have up-to-date web presences, and a dismal 14% can use online methods to receive citizens' input. CCs which confine communication to monthly meetings, mailshots and noticeboards have disengaged from a large proportion of their electorate, ignored a valuable channel for obtaining community opinions, and do not provide information quickly enough to be useful in their few defined roles: planning and licencing consultation. They therefore are arguably not fulfilling their statutory duty.

A majority of people in Scotland are online in one or more ways, so CCs need to find online methods that will suit their citizens. While CCs' budgets

Peter Cruickshank, Bruce Ryan and Colin Smith

can be very low, template-driven websites and social media accounts have little or no financial cost, while mailings and newspaper adverts can be very costly. Of course we recognise that while being online is necessary, it is not sufficient: there are citizens who are not online and CCs need to cater for them too.

There are drawbacks to most communication methods and finding the best ones for each CC will not be a mistake-free, cost-free journey. Wrong turns can be reduced if CCs can share the lessons they have learned with each other. CCLOs could well play a pivotal role in enabling and supporting such a community: they are, after all, the official links between CCs and are in the best position to request support from their LAs.

We suggest a simple (but possibly challenging) road-map to improvement. The main issues found were primarily lack of worthwhile web presences, including a conspicuous absence of easily accessible planning information, and a stunning lack of online 2-way conversations.

Actions for CCs

The first step would be for CCs to communicate with each other about the practices they have found to work for them and their communities, mentoring each other about their experiences, costs, pitfalls and successes. Such mentoring would be in the spirit of social media, where the value stems from the networks themselves, and would be a response to the logic of the technology. It would also enable CCs to demonstrate their validity as learning and representative organisations. CCs who wish to go online should be able to ask for help from 'mentor' CCs and other sources.

Any such efforts will require CCs and CCLrs to be ready and willing to use online – because CCs are autonomous and CCLrs are in general capable adults, the current situation is a most likely to be a reflection of a general lack of willingness to do online well rather than pure and simple inability.

Actions for LAs

CCLOs could be invaluable in fostering such conversations, especially given the current absence of any Scotland-wide CC network. The ideal would be a Community of Practice where CCs and individual CCLrs can share knowledge and ideas about a variety of methods and topics. (Learning how to use online is not the sole challenge for CCs and CCLrs.) Such a network would not arise

Scottish Community Councils' Online Presences

quickly, and mistakes would be made, but if starts can be made within LAs, CCLOs could be instrumental in bringing these fledgling networks together and breaking down the barriers between LA 'silos'.

To that end, CCLOs need to be able to help CCs past fear- and ignorance-based barriers, and to be high enough in their LAs to demand resources and make real change. 'Resources' here does not mean simply money but access to online expertise within their LAs – there are LA officials who specialise in online communication and free social media surgeries are available (Podnosh, 2013). Many methods of going online are free, so the major cost should be time.

Actions for the Scottish Government

Actions by LAs, CCLOs and CCs to go online may well need government support. This would not mean more funds, but encouragement and insistence on the purposes of CCs, specifically communication that has the potential to include everyone. As we see it, this means full inclusion of online in CCs' communication portfolios. This would be in line with SG's 'digital first' policy (Scottish Government, 2013).

On the other hand, formal portals and central mechanisms are **not** the way forward. The history of the Association of Scottish Community Councils shows that central organisations can be stultifying and expensive. Knowledge repositories can become 'knowledge junkyards', so the way forward lies in enabling and developing any organisation's most valuable asset – its people and the formal and informal networks in which they operate.

Ideas for further work

This research has highlighted a number of issues so it seems reasonable to conclude with a summary of the most pertinent that could be investigated further.

The CCs' technological choices could be researched, including (a) the use of Facebook and other social media as supplements to traditional websites, (b) the use of non-public online resources and discussions such as closed Facebook accounts and private mailing lists and (c) understanding why so many CCs are disengaged from online communication. An investigation into CCLOs' and CCLrs' personal motivations into use of online methods may increase understanding of how and why CCs use online tools effectively.

Drivers and inhibitors of online communication could be investigated. Firstly, there is currently no available demographic data on CCLRs, the stereotypical CCLR is older (retired or nearly so) and conservative/traditional. (The former head of the now-defunct ASCC has suggested that CCs have a 'dwindling and aging membership', and that people who wish to work for their communities now do so in other ways (Shannon, 2011).)

Secondly, if this stereotype holds true, CCLRs intersect one of the major groups trapped behind the digital divide (Low Incomes Tax Reform Group, 2012). Also, the people most likely to need support from any form of government are also likely to be behind the digital divide. Both of these factors could militate against CCs going online. Obtaining CCLR demographics would be a good start along this path.

Thirdly, it is possible that there is a difference in online performance between those CCs who have extra money, e.g. (Moniaive Action Project, 2009) to spend on it and those which purely rely on grants from their LAs. If 'richer' CCs do perform better online, the difference is likely to be partly at least due to costs of technology. If there is no difference, the limitation in CCs' online performance are more likely to come from other sources such as limits to what CCs can and actually want to do.

Fourthly, it is possible that poor online performance is related to CCs' lack of powers and duties, budget and electoral systems. In other words, would giving CCs the skills and wherewithal to communicate well online be enough on its own, or do they need more stimulus, such as more to communicate about?

Reasons for CCs not existing could be investigated. (Goodlad et al., 1999) commented on this over 10 years ago. In Dundee, there are only 3 CCs, supplemented by 5 Neighbourhood Representative Structures (Dundee City Council, undated). CCs may well have stepped into the background, devolving matters to development trusts. (One of the interviewed CCs had done just this.) CCs are perhaps less relevant for such reasons, and so may not attract candidates.

CC communication portfolios should be investigated. This research has only looked at online communication, which we suggest is necessary but which we recognise is not sufficient. How CCs can bridge the digital divide would be a useful sub-topic in this direction. Also, this research has concentrated on websites. There are many ways of going online, each of which has its own audience, advantages and disadvantages. For example, anyone may comment on a LiveJournal post but only signed-in Facebook members can interact with Facebook pages.

Methods for sharing the lessons and documenting the ways CCs have been able to engage with citizens online. It may well be beneficial to monitor some

Scottish Community Councils' Online Presences

CCs who choose to move from being disengaged to fully engaged with online: the lessons from this process would be made available to all other CCs. Ideally CCs in this process would be mentored by CCs who are already fully engaged.

Finally, this research has necessarily been limited to a snapshot of CC online presences, which would ideally be regularly updated. Results of a further survey carried out in 2014 will be published in due course and ongoing developments will need to be monitored.

We hope this article will inform the debate around the Community Empowerment Bill currently before Holyrood.

Notes

1. Austria is not too dissimilar to Scotland, having a population of 8,375,000 (European Union, 2013a) and a large proportion of remote mountainous regions. Austria has 9 Bundesländer ('federal states'), divided into 84 Bezirke ('districts') and 15 Statutarstädte ('statutory cities'). Bezirke are subdivided into Gemeinden ('parishes'), of which there are 2346 (Österreichischer Gemeindebund, 2013).
2. Norway has a population of 4,986,000 (European Union, 2013b). Its local government structure has 19 fylker ('counties'), divided into 434 kommuner ('municipalities').
3. For example, when one of the authors of this paper was a CCLr in St Andrews in 2004–5, the CCs' planning committee met twice a month, basing its responses on members' local knowledge and local guidelines. Despite St Andrews CC's webmaster being on the planning committee, the author does not recall any planning matters being opened to the public via the CC's website. In hindsight, it should have been possible for the planning committee's responses, which were usually created electronically, to be added to the CC's website.

Works Cited

- BBC (2011). *Community Councils in your area*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-15540699>. [Accessed 25 May 2011]
- BBC (2012a). *Millions in UK 'lack basic online skills'*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-20236708>. [Accessed 14 January 2013]
- BBC (2012b). *Social media benefits to police investigated*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-20641190>. [Accessed 10 December 2012]
- BBC (2013). *Glasgow wins 'smart city' government cash*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-21180007>. [Accessed 28 February 2013]
- Better Nation (2012). *Prediction 2012 – Death of the Cybernat*. <http://www.betternation.org/2012/01/prediction-2012-death-of-the-cybernat>. [Accessed 28 February 2013]

Peter Cruickshank, Bruce Ryan and Colin Smith

- Birmingham City Council (2013). *BCC Disruption*. <https://twitter.com/BCCDisruption>. [Accessed 21 January 2013]
- Bort, E., McAlpine, R., & Morgan, G. (2012). *The Silent Crisis: Failure and Revival in Local Democracy in Scotland*. <http://reidfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/The-Silent-Crisis1.pdf>. [Accessed 24 May 2012]
- Burns, H. (2012). *Disconnected Democracy: what Scotland's Community Councils aren't doing online*. <http://idea15.wordpress.com/2012/11/08/disconnected-democracy-what-scotlands-community-councils-arent-doing-online>. [Accessed 21 February 2013]
- Burns, H. (2013). *How not to promote local democracy*. <http://idea15.wordpress.com/2013/02/20/how-not-to-promote-local-democracy>. [Accessed 26 February 2013]
- Centre for eGovernment (2009). *An eGovernment survey amongst austrian municipalities*. <http://pep-net.eu/blog/2009/06/23/an-egovernment-survey-among-austrian-municipalities>. [Accessed 21 June 2012]
- Cormode, G., & Krishnamurthy, B (2008). *Key differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0*. <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2125/1972>. [Accessed 8 December 2012]
- Cornell University Library (2013). *arXiv.org*. <http://arxiv.org>. [Accessed 8 December 2012]
- Council of Europe (n.d.). *Forum for the Future of Democracy*. http://www.coe.int/t/dgap/forum-democracy/default_en.asp. [Accessed 28 February 2013]
- Denef, S., Kaptein, N., Bayerl, P. S., & Ramirez, L. (2012). *Best Practice in Police Social Media Adaptation*. http://www.composite-project.eu/tl_files/fm_k0005/download/COMPOSITE-social-media-best-practice.pdf. [Accessed 10 December 2012]
- Department for Work and Pensions (2013). *Policy*. <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/universal-credit>. [Accessed 28 February 2013]
- Dundee City Council. (n.d.). *Community Councils and Neighbourhood Representative Structures*. <http://www.dundee.gov.uk/communities/communitycouncils>. [Accessed 17 August 2013]
- eBIZ|MBA (2013). *Top 15 Most Popular Social Networking Sites | January 2013*. <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites>. [Accessed 21 January 2013]
- European Union (2013a). *Annual average population (1 000) by NUTS 2 regions*. <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tgs00001&plugin=1>. [Accessed 14 January 2013]
- European Union (2013b). *Population on 1 January by age and sex*. http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=demo_pjan&lang=en. [Accessed 15 March 2013]
- Goodlad, R., Flint, J., Kearns, A., Keogh, M., Paddison, R., & Raco, M. (1999). *The Role and Effectiveness of Community Councils with Regard to Community Consultation*. Edinburgh: Scottish Office Central Research Unit.
- Harris, T (2013). *Tom Harris MP*. <http://tomharris.org.uk>. [Accessed April 6, 2013]

Scottish Community Councils' Online Presences

- Harvie, P (2013). *Patrick Harvie MSP*. <http://www.patrickharviemsp.com>. [Accessed 6 April 2013]
- Haug, A. V., & Jansen, A. (2003). *The window of opportunity for e-democracy is wide open*. http://www.jus.uio.no/ifp/om/organisasjon/afin/forskning/notatserien/2004/the_window_of_opportunity.pdf. [Accessed 21 June 2012]
- Kozak, D. (2013). email conversation.
- Lindsay, P. (2012). email conversation.
- Livebookings Holdings Ltd (2012). *Bookatable*. <http://www.bookatable.com>. [Accessed 8 December 2012]
- Lothian and Borders Police (2013). *@LBP_Police*. https://twitter.com/LBP_Police. [Accessed 28 February 2013]
- Low Incomes Tax Reform Group (2012). *Digital Exclusion*. London: The Chartered Institute of Taxation.
- Lunden, I. (2012). *ITU: There Are Now Over 1 Billion Users Of Social Media Worldwide, Most On Mobile*. <http://techcrunch.com/2012/05/14/itu-there-are-now-over-1-billion-users-of-social-media-worldwide-most-on-mobile>. [Accessed 8 December 2012]
- McIntosh, N., Alexander, A., Cubie, A., Leicester, G., Mackay, E., Millar, M., Smith, M., Watt, M. (1999). *The Report of the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament*. Edinburgh: Scottish Office.
- Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (2003). *Local Government in Norway*. http://www.forumpartnerships.zsi.at/attach/NO_04_B_MLGRD_LocalGovernment.pdf. [Accessed 11 January 2013]
- Moniaive Action Project (2009). *Glencairn Community Council Windfarm Fund*. <http://www.monaiave.org.uk/windfarm-fund>. [Accessed 17 August 2013]
- National Records of Scotland (2011). *Mid-2010 Population Estimates Scotland*. <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/files2/stats/population-estimates/mid-2010/mid-year-pop-est-2010.pdf>. [Accessed 4 September 2012]
- Office for National Statistics (2011). *Internet Access – Households and Individuals, 2011*. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tc%3A77-226727>. [Accessed 15 March 2013]
- Office for National Statistics (2012). *Statistical bulletin: Internet Access – Households and Individuals, 2012*. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access---households-and-individuals/2012/stb-internet-access--households-and-individuals--2012.html>. [Accessed 20 September 2012]
- Österreichischer Gemeindebund (2003). *Strong municipalities – Europe's driving force*. http://www.gemeindebund.at/rcms/upload/7_60_1_eng.pdf. [Accessed 14 January 2013]
- Österreichischer Gemeindebund (2013). *Gemeinden in Europa*. <http://www.gemeindebund.at/content.php?m=3&sm=8#item40>. [Accessed 21 January 2013]
- Podnosh (2013). *Social Media Surgery*. <http://socialmediasurgery.com>. [Accessed 17 January 2013]

Peter Cruickshank, Bruce Ryan and Colin Smith

- Ryan, B. M., & Cruickshank, P. (2012). *Scottish Community Councils – a survey*. <http://www.iidi.napier.ac.uk/c/publications/publicationid/13373555> [Accessed 26 February 2013]
- Saglie, J., & Vabo, S. I. (2009). Size and e-Democracy: Online participation in Norwegian Local Politics, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 32 (4), 382–401.
- Scotrail (2013). *Scotrail*. <https://twitter.com/ScotRail>. [Accessed 21 January 2013]
- Scottish Government (2005). *What can we do to help community councils fulfil their role? A discussion paper by the Scottish Executive*. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/10/31132008/20095> [Accessed 27 May 2012]
- Scottish Government (2009). *Good Practice Guidance version 2* <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/local-government/CommunityCouncils/GoodPracticeGuidanceVer2>. [Accessed 28 May 2012]
- Scottish Government (2011a). *Community Councils and Planning: Review of the Town and Country Planning System in Scotland – Planning Advice Note 47*. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/1996/03/18415/28371>. [Accessed 7 September 2012]
- Scottish Government (2011b). *Community Council Pilot Schemes*. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/local-government/CommunityCouncils/CCPilotSchemes>. [Accessed 26 May 2012]
- Scottish Government (2012a). *Short-Life Working Group*. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/local-government/CommunityCouncils/CCShortLifeWorkingGroup>. [Accessed 28 May 2012]
- Scottish Government (2012b). *Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012*. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Justice/law/sectarianism-action-1/football-violence/bill>. [Accessed 17 August 2013]
- Scottish Government. (2013). *Scotland's Digital Future*. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Economy/digital>. [Accessed 13 August 2013]
- Shannon, K. (2011). *Heart of the Community: Vincent Waters interview*. <http://www.holyrood.com/articles/2011/11/28/heart-of-the-community-vincent-waters-interview>. [Accessed 25 May 2012]
- Siddique, H., & Carrell, S. (2010). *Election 2010: Labour sacks candidate Stuart MacLennan in Twitter row*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/apr/09/stuart-maclennan-sacked-twitter-general-election>. [Accessed 5 March 2013]
- Solihull police (2012). *No! You are not a tank commander!*. <https://twitter.com/SolihullPolice/status/279115899284361217/photo/1>. [Accessed 13 December 2012]
- Thomson, B., Mawdsley, G., & Payne, A. (2012). *Renewing Local Government*. http://reformscotland.com/public/publications/Renewing_Local_Government.pdf. [Accessed 24 May 2012]

Scottish Community Councils' Online Presences

- Twitchen, C., & Adams, D. (2011). Increasing levels of public participation in planning using web 2.0 technology. *Birmingham City University Centre for Environment and Society Research Working Papers* vol 5, 1–10.
- UK Government (1973). *Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973*. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1973/65/part/IV>. [Accessed 4 September 2012]
- Volan, I. (2011). *Norway: almost 40% of municipalities use Facebook*. <http://socialmedianordic.com/2011/09/09/norway-almost-40-percent-of-municipalities-use-facebook>. [Accessed 21 June 2012]
- Whyte, A., Macintosh, A., & Shell, D. (2006). *An e-Democracy Model for Communities: Final Report of the e-Community Council Project*. http://itc.napier.ac.uk/itc/Documents/e-community_council_final_report.pdf. [Accessed 26 September 2012]