Local governance and service provision in the era of new technology

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Introduction and background:

Social media has changed the world in which we work, socialise and govern. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube: the tools that have emerged have placed the connecting power of the internet into the hands of every one of us. People who want to market and sell are discovering powerful new channels. Staff and employers are experiencing a change in relationships as online profiles and personal brands become important in winning business and maintaining contacts. News travels faster. Public accountability can be swifter and more challenging. The power of individuals to publish and share messages is now significant enough that no company or government can ignore it. This is happening here and now. There has been unparalleled optimism in the ability of social media and open data to change the relationship between governors and governed as the electronic age creates a more equal footing in terms of access to information and perhaps more importantly access to communication channels.

In this context, the expectations on local authorities to engage, work openly, be accountable and move more quickly on issues is growing. Meanwhile we're in the midst of a serious fiscal crisis which has brought about deep cuts in public finances at the same time that public demands and expectations are rising.

Social media tools can provide an excellent opportunity to innovate, to do things that weren't possible before. It's entirely possible for local authorities to use these tools to achieve real value against their objectives by engaging citizens, listening more and harnessing local energy to help with local activities. Alongside this, the available toolset is growing, as national and international web tools are developed that offer local councils powerful new infrastructure for supporting communities and delivering public services. But early aspirations of widespread adoption and fundamental change have yet to be achieved. This paper explores some of the challenges in using new social technologies effectively and the opportunities yet to be achieved.

The long promised revolution

Social media enthusiasts have been predicting revolution for some time, but in 2011 we finally saw it happen. In countries like Libya, Egypt and Tunisia governments crumbled in the face of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube driven movements. Social media didn't drive the revolution, but it made the transfer of information and the establishment of new networks of like-minded individuals possible. Social networks allowed people all over the world to provide encouragement to revolutionaries and provide the young protesters with a (justified?) sense of safety and security because the world was watching.

But the Arab Spring may yet prove to be a false revolution. Ba'athist and 'Arab strong-man' regimes while undoubtedly oppressive did provide some security and opportunity for women and religious minorities which may prove elusive under Islamist rule. Changing from a steady state to one of decline wasn't the aspiration of those who gathered in Tahrir

Square, but it may be what they get. Their massive digital footprint and their deep and multiple levels of connections online gave them a false sense of the pervasiveness of their worldview. While liberal viewpoints and democratic aspirations seemed universal during the time of change because the people who held these views had the new online skills and articulacy required to get people out to protest, but not to vote in the weight of numbers required.

This isn't a failure of the media, but is rather a case of misplaced optimism in human nature, a natural tendency to assume that loud voices represent majority opinion and the ability of cultures to change fundamentally.

The biggest social action so far inspired by social media in England has been the riots and looting in the Summer of 2011. And although these were more often instigated by troublemakers using Blackberry Messenger - an electronic media, yes - but a private and closed network. Those prosecuted for inciting violence were often using Twitter or Facebook, but it's questionable how effective these tools were for promoting violence - though they were certainly used for reporting and tracking the violence and for following up and prosecuting those who wanted to jump on the bandwagon or were foolish enough to publish tales of their exploits. Perhaps as importantly, the open networks were used by people to avoid trouble, to inspire impromptu clean-ups and provide re-assurance.

The social media evolution.

The social media and open data revolution promised in the West has failed to materialise, or at least arrive quickly. In England, among data activists and even among some politicians there was unbridled optimism in the power of published raw data to transform the nature of governance, to get people engaged in the minutiae of government and to transform the behaviour of bureaucrats - eliminating fraud and wasteful spending. It's unclear whether the publication of data has made much of any difference to spending behaviour, and there are few examples of public money being saved by opening up contracts to public scrutiny.

But simply because the open data revolution has failed to live up to the early promises doesn't mean that it wasn't worthwhile. In a democracy there are some things which have significant existence value. It's important for citizens to be able to scrutinise accounts even if they choose not to. It's important for procurement to be fair and open even if publishing contracts doesn't transform the market. And at the edges, people are engaging more often with electronic consultations and online petitions. People are discussing local issues online in Facebook groups as well as 'hyper-local sites' and other geographically focused fora on communities of interest sites, for example parenting sites.

Nor does the failure to fundamentally change behaviour mean that social media isn't a revolutionary phenomenon. The development of the printing press fundamentally changed the nature of political relationships in the West because it forever changed the economics of information consumption. Social media has forever changed the economics of information publication and dissemination and information interchange between publishers and consumers - and this is a far more radical change.

It's not tools, it's connections

When people talk about social media, it's often about the tools. Twitter. YouTube. Blogging. Facebook. The focus on tools can be distracting, but these tools alone are not

what offer such tremendous potential for change. It's the connective power of the Internet and the easy interface these tools offer. Even when people have an understanding of what the tools are many perceive them as simply full of celebrity frivolity and time-wasting or as a potential platform for leaks and gaffes. It doesn't help that this is a part of the social media story and there are plenty of examples for the cynical and the frightened to point to.

Where social media is being used by government, it's not always being used well. Although social media can be an amazing marketing tool for both commercial and civic uses, it works best if it's truly used as a two-way mechanism for engagement, strategic but organic. Using social media effectively even as a mostly one-way method of communication and as a supplement to more 'traditional' social media channels requires a new and evolving set of skills which are not often cultivated in government.

The political imperative

In the UK, the policy landscape has been developing over a number of years. Despite a change of government, there has been a continued emphasis on developing digital government (particularly central government) and enhancing electronic service delivery as well as engagement. (Show Us a Better Way, Digital Britain, etc)

There has also been a long standing recognition that people want to access government information and services online and efforts from DirectGov to the newer Alpha (and now Beta Gov) are making significant strides (at least in intent) toward consolidating and making government information easier to find and in a way search-driven and interactive way that people are increasingly becoming used to on the web. But the very nature of these initiatives are centralising, which can be counter to the diverse nature of the web and is certainly counter-intuitive when it comes to the wide range of localised services offered by hundreds of local authorities in the UK.

The best commercial web experience, with layers of effective communication, allows users to choose the level of interactivity they prefer. Much of local government has barely moved beyond broadcast to well-ordered self-service information through an easy to navigate, search optimised website. Most have now experimented with Web 2.0 tools, but few have used them to really engage with the public.

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Traditional comms	print, broadcast, leaflet, public meetings, events	
Web 1.0	well ordered website, with self-service information	
Web 1.5	transactional website, with possibility of citizen / customer feedback	
Web 2.0	consumer created content, full dialogue	

Much of local government is still firmly stuck in a Web 1.0 world, with brief and ineffective forays into the world of Web 1.5.

1. Changing the relationship between citizens and local authorities

People are now turning first to the web to find everything from information about days out, entertainment, shopping and making connections with friends and colleagues. Citizens will expect that local government will be able to provide its services online with a similar level of interactivity that they find everywhere from Amazon to the comments section of their online local newspaper. If local government fails to keep the pace, when it comes to paying for school lunches, consultation on planning matters or finding out information about local events, it will increasingly seem less relevant and will not be able to fulfill its role in the leadership of place.

Facebook has almost 30 million user accounts in the UK - roughly half[1] of the UK population. Throughout the UK more local residents are using online networks than are reading local newspapers.

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[1] http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/jun/13/has-facebook-peaked-drop-uk-users
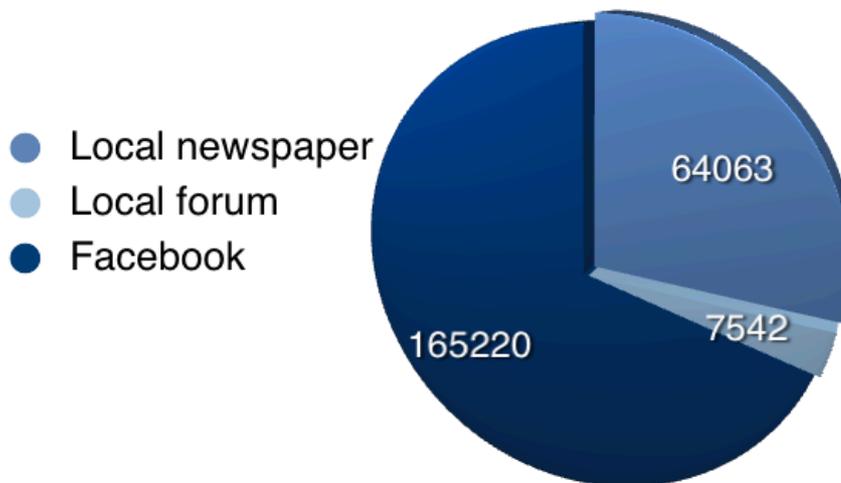
Analysis by Michelle Ide-Smith for Cambridgeshire County Council on online user numbers for the local geographic area

Over two-thirds of UK residents are participating in 'social computing' - rising to 87% of 18 to 24 year olds. But it's not just kids online. The average age of Facebook users is 38, Twitter - 39 and even older for professional services like LinkedIn. Seventy percent of UK households have access to the Internet and the vast majority of that is through a broadband connection.

1.1 Enhancing democracy

From the Downing Street Petitions, the Have Your Say functions on almost every leading news outlet online, major institutions are taking their cues from the way people were already operating online through blogs, forums and Amazon style rating systems.

Participation and the ability to feed back is now the norm. Local government will be expected to respond in the same way, to convene the space for dialogue and debate or at least to participate in the debate where it occurs. Councillors, more than councils, are rising to this challenge by going online to local forums and social networks, by embracing Twitter and writing blogs. All councils are now required to have some form of electronic petitioning - some are highly visible and well-used, others languish in the unnavigable realms of the local authority website. Many councils still struggle to find the balance to holding themselves hostage to well-organised Internet campaigns influencing decisions and simply ignoring the voice of the people.

Despite some councils making great strides in engagement online, many councils are still focused too heavily on traditional methods of engagement - including expensive broad-spectrum advertising and paper-based dissemination of information through brochures and leaflets. There is still a wide gulf between the few people who have digital communication skills and those who have engagement skills and advice often issued from well-meaning sources will often have very little advice on using the web for engagement or the effective integration of traditional and Web 2.0 methods.

Face to face meetings are important and can never be replaced, but they are expensive and exclude huge swathes of people who are unwilling to the risk their time to attend an

event in a dreary community hall on a damp Tuesday evening. Many people are far too intimidated to speak up in a public forum. Councils must seek to be broadly inclusive and this means blending the online and offline.

Where government does not open up an effective debate - and this means a significant online component - citizens will increasingly take on this role themselves. Vibrant discussion on local issues are taking place on hyper-local websites - social network or blog based. When well-run these fora can be fabulous civic spaces - places to discuss everything from local improvements and things to do with kids to local singles' nights. They are providing an online space which provides the role of everything from town-hall meeting to church social and school-gate chat.

Citizens can act disruptively, too. Sometimes this is well intentioned disruption - such as support for filing freedom of information requests and sharing the information discovered through sites like What Do They Know. Interest groups can use sites like these and other aspects of the social web for their own ends. This may or may not be in line with fair access to democratic channels or be in support of better service provision on an equitable basis. Local government cannot stop this, but must seek to work in this space.

In a recent example, a council in Southern England sought to merge two schools. A local parent objected. He followed the usual channels of engagement, but also used the social web to make his case. He was successful in gaining attention and support and the council decided not to merge the schools. Officers afterwards still felt that the school merger had been the right decision. Instead of arguing the case in a public forum and engaging in the debate or presenting the facts, the council simply backed down. Whether or not the schools should have been merged is not something this author can determine, but I can assert that the council was remiss in not making its case publicly. By its very absence in the conversation, citizens didn't have the opportunity to fully get the facts or engage in the debate. As councils have to face increasingly tough financial decisions often reducing or eliminating services, citizens should be able to expect to hear all perspectives - including official ones - through a medium which they can access as they have time and to which they can respond.

Leadership of place will increasingly mean leading and directing debate online and supporting collaboration and action by citizens for citizens. Councils which fail to participate are neglecting their democratic duties.

1. 2 The open data agenda

The open government data agenda started incredibly strongly. President Barack Obama chose opening government data as one of his key priorities for the early days of his office. Promoting performance management at the same time, his administration linked the two initiatives promoting the notion of a government responsible to the people it service and giving them the tools of information and transparency to hold it to account. The previous UK government began to promote open data primarily at a central government level and the coalition government followed suit with new requirements on local government to publish open data sets.

The early promises of economic stimulation and a radical transparency agenda have again failed to come to fruition. And although some councils have made notable experiments with opening up data and achieving behaviour change in staff (for example Windsor and Maidenhead's publication of energy consumption data which led to a reduction in energy

consumption). But there has been little in terms of publication of wide sets of data beyond the required and little commercial use of non-personal data that led to either financial gains or social benefits.

Having worked with practitioners closely, I believe there's a great over-estimation of the public's desire to consume open data. Much of the public has limited understanding of data and statistics and many struggle with basic numeracy. Local government has not worked well with designers and developers. Believing the hype of free development of apps and new uses of data sets, local government has pushed out boring or useless data and has been surprised by how few data sets have been turned into something interesting.

The public has been little interested in the becoming arm chair auditors or regulators. While there is no denying that sunlight is the best disinfectant - skilled and informed review cannot be replaced by an apathetic citizenry having theoretical access to the data in either raw form - which few have the skills to deal with - or in a highly produced format which is hard to interrogate. Citizen advisory panels, such as a Safer Neighbourhood Panels or School Governors or even councillors, still have trouble getting effectively presented and interrogatable data sets. Citizens are unable to get effective data on matters as important as GP satisfaction rates and performance, which leaves them without the ability to make an informed choice.

Yet there is still optimism about the publication of more data sets, and well there should be. Open data and transparency are important for an effective democracy. Shared data between agencies, if used, means that service gaps can be identified and addressed or that duplication and waste can be minimised. But this is only where there is an effective strategy for capturing, sharing and using data.

1.3 Blockages to engagement and transparency

Attitudes to risk:
Public services are risk averse by nature. Opening up debate, allowing new actors to take part in decision making or feed back openly about services exposes both politicians and bureaucrats to risk. Local government may not always follow the same ideological lines as national politics, but it is still strongly political. Opposing politicians and those who aspire to office can and will take advantage of the openness about performance or difficult decisions that need to be made. That can make both officers and politicians who are doing the best they can feel exposed and vulnerable and for those who do need to own up to poor performance or poor outcomes can feel so uncomfortable that will seek to control any dialogue at any costs.

Does it even matter?
Citizens themselves may feel that their views don't matter or won't change anything. The public has a good sense of when their vote will count. People would rather vote for the Eurovision Song Contest than engage in a consultation exercise over a proscribed choice or service that's irrelevant to them. Much of local government in the UK is statutory delivery of services which are controlled by legislation and regulation. Finances are determined largely centrally. Councillors and councils do have discretion over some services and full discretion over their relationship with communities. Consultation and engagement need to be focused on issues that really matter to local people, to the future of public services in their area and areas where local agencies and local people can exercise control.

Skills and technology:
Social media can look easy because it's accessible. But running an effective multi-layered engagement strategy is beyond the skill set of most local government communicators. It's not always clear which tools people should be using for which populations. As this is still a relatively new area, there are few clear guidelines about what to do and when and in conjunction with which other methods.

The best use of social media is multi-media - images, text, video. Few people have the ability to write well, edit film and take visually interesting photos. These skills take time to build, but also require talent. Creative talent and skills which often haven't been highly valued in the world of public services.

But an even more important and undervalued skill is that of community management. Online community management is about harnessing the views, content and skills of people who are interested in your area or your product or service. Encouraging people to engage more deeply and more productively is currently more art than science and is an undervalued skill. Politicians tend to have these kind of core abilities, but most won't be able to apply them to online media straight away.

To make matters worse, because of risk aversion and need to control inside bureaucracy it's difficult for staff to experiment and find out what works well. Technology in much of UK local government is old and unsuitable for the social web. And in many places social media sites are still blocked and/or staff are banned from using the sites.

2. Changing How Councils do Business

We can no longer afford to do business as usual in government. Councils know that technology is part of the solution, but are unsure what's the most cost effective way driving innovation or how new technologies like social media

Even when looking at the simple mathematics of customer interface, social technologies make sense. The Society of Information Technology Management's recent analysis of customer service interactions lists web transaction costs at 27p on average, compare with phone transactions of £3.22, and face-to-face transactions of £6.56. The web is cheaper and quicker. Councils that find ways to shift their business online quickly will save money. But the really exciting cost-savings come from restructuring the existing processes entirely: social media allows far more people to contribute to solving a problem, which means potentially far greater efficiency overall, despite higher management and communication costs. Many councils are, in little ways, trying both , and there are enough early signs of success to suggest new models and point the way for how these tools might be used in a radically more efficient local government.

2.1 A culture of customer focus and collaboration

Too many people who are perfectly happy to buy e-books for their Kindle, shop online for groceries, book holidays online or watch a new show through on-demand tv based on what their Facebook friends have watched and favourited are still phoning in to local government to report problems or are visiting council offices to renew parking permits. They may not be aware of how they can do business with the council online. Simple and

inexpensive online marketing, founded on the basics of customer insight and market segmentation could deliver channel shift that would save councils money and citizens aggravation. The old way of business doesn't value public resources or citizens' time.

We've seen councils experiment with social customer relationship management - which is citizens answering questions and sharing information with each other. This is a model well-used by technology companies (like Apple) with passionate communities of technology users. But this requires a convening authority (like Apple) and a willingness to allow space for people to support each other, but step in if need be. So far, this approach hasn't been successful - but any parent will tell you that finding out about school applications or things-to-do is based much more on informal networks than formal information sources. But it doesn't have to be that way - and would be more efficient for information producers and consumers if this were a shared task - as well as achieving better and more equitable outcomes.

Councils are increasingly looking to citizens to report problems - such as environmental defects. But there is, as yet, little collaborative effort to crowdsource both information about problems and solutions. There are any number of web and smartphone apps which allow citizens to report what's broken, but few make any effort to engage citizens in how to fix it. Services are risk averse and worried about liability. And often existing community groups which are already working with parks or open spaces may be reluctant to open the space for 'the wrong kind of volunteers'. Some councils are working on a small scale to open up this space - such as the Technology Strategy Board funded project Casserole which uses technology to match isolated people who need nutritional support with people who are willing to provide their neighbours with meals. But this area is tricky, fraught with difficulty and unproven in a highly regulated culture of delivering public services.

Today, you can download six or seven apps from iTunes which would allow you to report broken streetlights and potholes to your local council. Few of the defect reporting apps have gained significant traction with the public. But few of them have had a lot of significant backing from a local authority - which means not only promoting the site but also providing a feedback loop on issue resolution. One of the most interesting approaches developed lately is on the back of a tied advertising campaign for Proctor & Gamble cleaning products. The Capital Cleanup is linked to the London 2012 Olympics and tidying up parts of London near Olympic venues. There's a smartphone app and it's backed by the Greater London Authority. But the smartphone app is merely one of many and it's curiously not backed by a social media campaign. Collaboration with corporations and citizens is a fabulous approach, but there is a curious lack of coordination with existing reporting systems and with social media. If the goal is to tidy London and encourage a sense of ownership in the place, it's sadly lacking. If the goal is sell soap, then they may be on to a winner.

2.2 Keeping citizens informed

Sometimes citizens and service providers need up-to-date and time-critical information about their area because they are dealing with extraordinary events. Social media allied with broadcast media provides the ideal solution. Many councils and emergency services have found that making public information notices available via social media channels can vastly increase reach with very little cost. Sometimes this is simply information that is 'of interest' but important- such as water quality. Other times this may be life and death information about natural disasters ranging from flooding to fire to snow.

Using social media channels has a number of particular advantages. Firstly, most of these tools are very easy to syndicate and republish to other sites, including a council website, meaning they can be used as a single, all-purpose newsfeed system which replaces all the existing channels. The social nature of the medium means that other people can forward those messages on - often through built in mechanisms which allow those messages to be shared with their online network or emailed to contacts and through off-line social networks. Vital information can be shared through simply phoning or visiting someone and telling them. This means that important news travels faster, and further, than any broadcast channel exploited by a council. And perhaps most importantly, this information can be two-way with citizens reporting badly affected areas or people in trouble. Queensland Police used social media incredibly effectively during the Queensland Floods and was able to capitalise on their wider audience to update people about other emergency and community safety in the aftermath.

In the UK, council PR teams have used social media effectively during extreme snow events. Letting people know where streets had been cleared or gritted and what areas to avoid and sharing information about school closures.

In an emergency, councils could almost start from scratch and that would be better than nothing. But better yet councils should be learning to share and listen to information now, establishing 'social' connections with broadcasters, newspapers and influential 'network nodes' in their communities. This is a relatively low cost strategy which has the potential to save time, money and lives. But as described in a previous section there are both cultural and technological barriers that need to be overcome. Emergencies strike day and night, so staff need to be empowered to work from their own homes and on their own devices and with a policy that encourages them and protects them.

3. Collaboration inside and outside the organisation

As the public sector faces massive challenges in terms of adapting to evolving citizen demand and financial pressures, there will be a steep learning curve. Social media inside the agency and between agencies for knowledge sharing offers a huge potential for sharing skills, but also represents a significant cultural shift.

The development of free and cheap blogging and multi-media tools such as pod-casting and video are bringing an immediacy to practice development which was never before affordable or available. Face-to-face conferences are often out of reach to many public servants, so capturing and sharing content is important to allow those who can not attend to share in the knowledge.

As councils cut back on staff, specialised skills particularly in discretionary services will be lost. Sharing those skills between organisations and across geographic areas can be part of the wider knowledge retention strategy for the sector.

Inside organisations, using the flat structure of social media to share ideas and information can promote a culture of knowledge sharing and innovation. But this too requires a culture of openness and a willingness to let go of hierarchical boundaries. It needs to be safe for people to share information and to speak out about what could change for the better in their organisations.

Public servants also need to be rewarded for sharing information with colleagues inside their own organisation and across others. There are a number of fabulous examples of

knowledge sharing among sets of practitioners - such as the Twenty-Three Things wiki which was written by librarians for librarians on how to use social media. This benefitted not only practitioners across the originating organisation but across the sector in the UK and beyond. This sharing approach needs to be recognised and rewarded in the sponsoring organisation, but the sponsoring organisation too needs to understand the benefits of having practice leaders in their midst. As a sector local public services need to explore the economic benefits of exchange in an open knowledge economy.

Conclusion:

The aspirations for social media and open data in local government were high. Despite some promising developments in some places the cultural and technological barriers to adopting social and open technologies in local government remains high. However, there is increasingly an acknowledgement that communication, engagement and transparency are inevitable, but perhaps not just yet. Those who wish to encourage the transformative power of the web and the benefits of social computing would do well to encourage practitioners, central policy makers and activists to share information about its cost-effectiveness and positive impact on outcomes while remaining realistic about the risks, challenges and downsides of the open web.

ICT and innovation

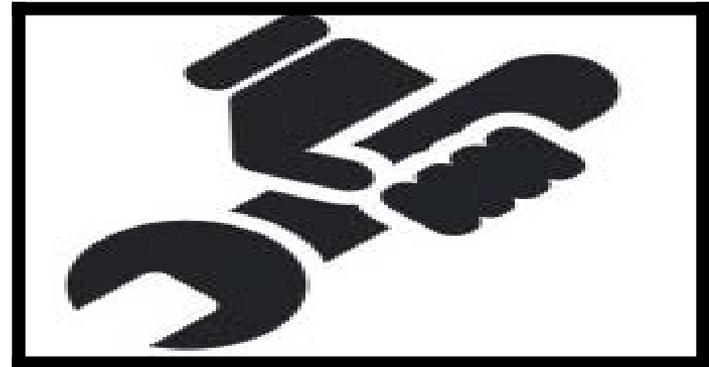Broadcast

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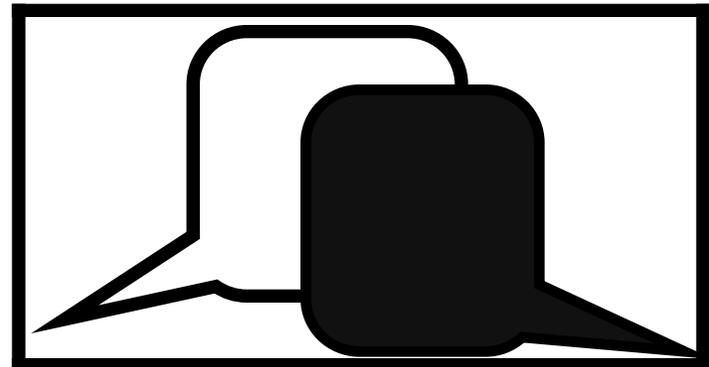

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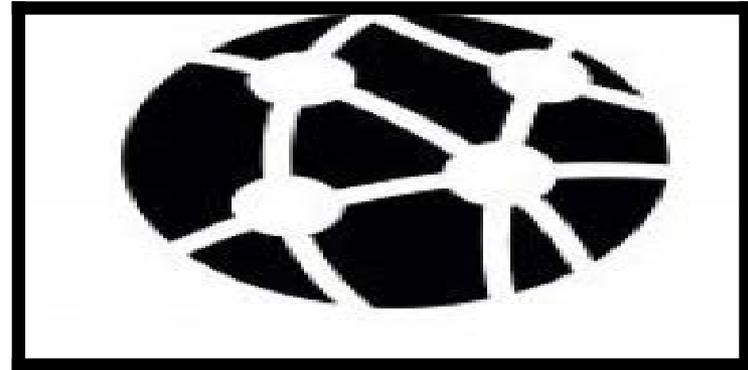
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ICT and innovation

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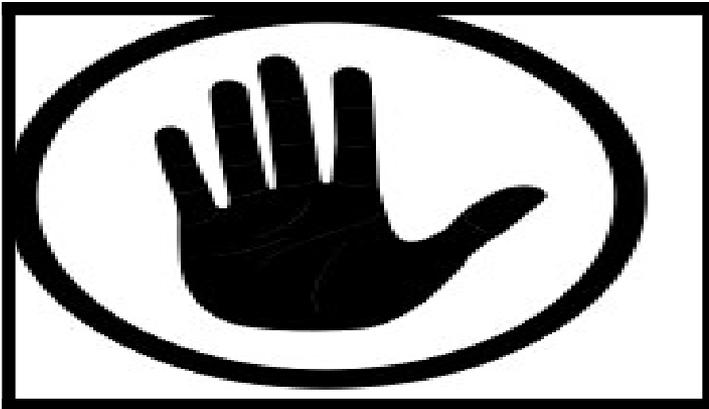

Supporting self-help, opening up

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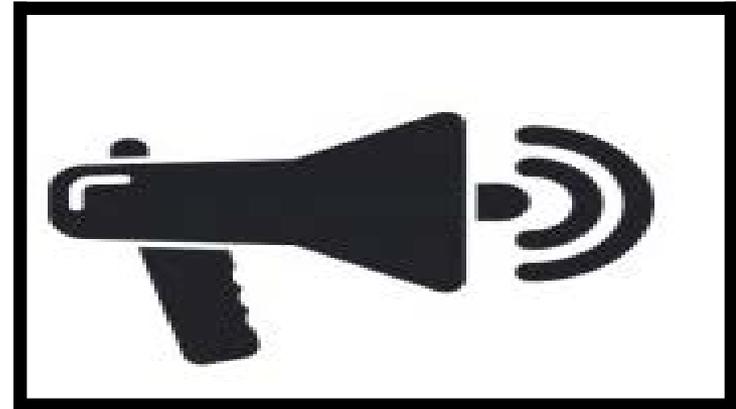Supporting new markets, social CRM and citizen led services
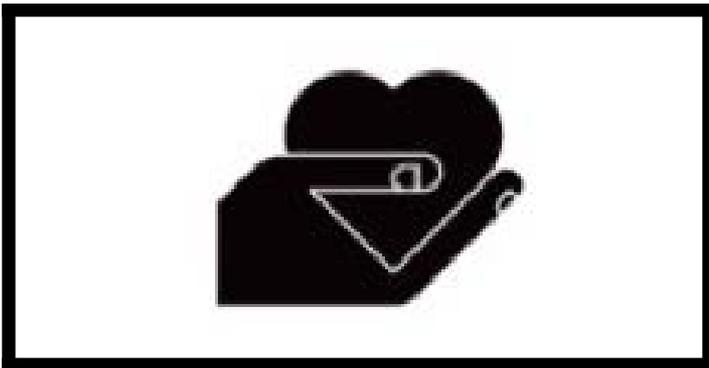

Community dialogue and mutuality

Roles in a tech-enabled society
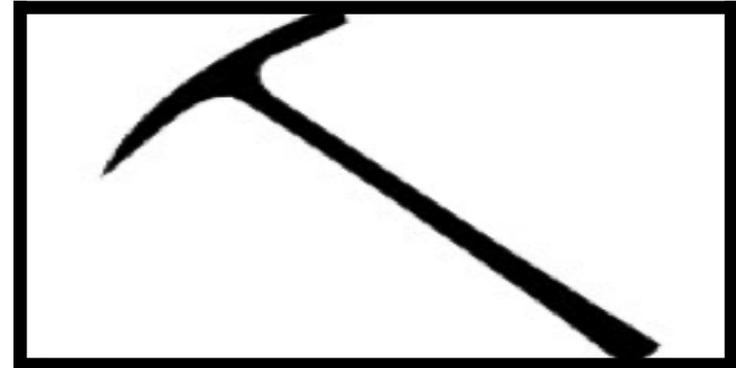
Swedish Association
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Gatekeepers

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Practical recommendations

Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions
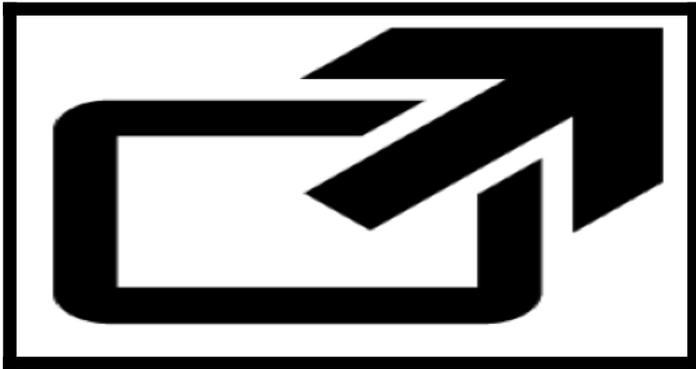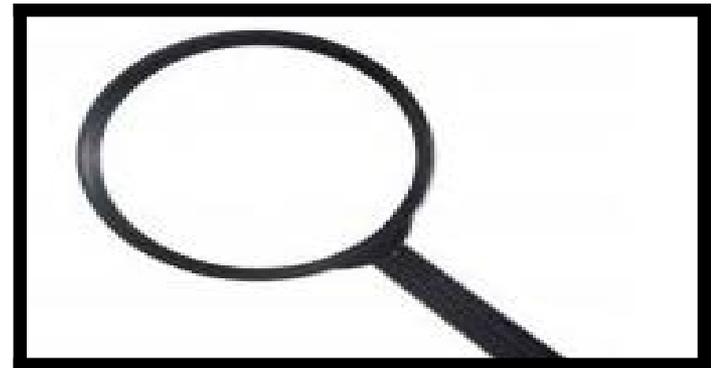

Open out
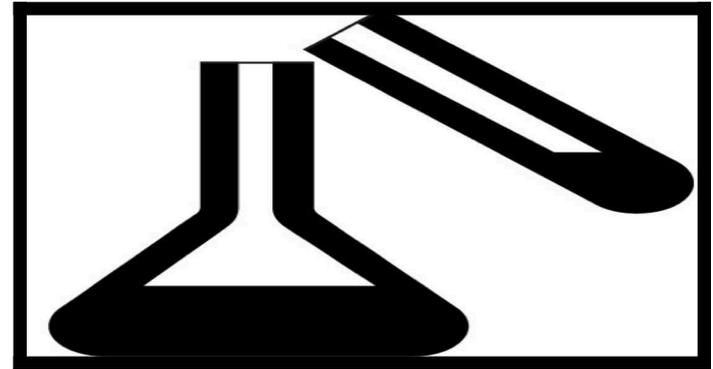
Experiment

Trust

Evidence

Ingrid Koehler: Tech and local governance