

the
online
neighbourhood
networks *study*

a study of the social impact of citizen-run online
neighbourhood networks and the implications for local
authorities

Section 2: Supportive and negative
behaviour in local online spaces

2010

Networked Neighbourhoods

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Online neighbourhood networks study

Section 2

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(See last page for complete listing of the *Online neighbourhood networks study* materials)

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Section 2 contents

- 1 Communication in local online spaces
- 3 Anonymity and pseudonymity
- 7 Negativity and balance
- 10 Criticism of other contributors
- 12 Moderating behaviour
- 13 Empathy and mutual support
- 15 Concluding remarks
- 16 References
- 17 Guide to materials in the *Online neighbourhood networks study*

Neighbourhood websites are generally a blend of the public and parochial realms.

Their characteristics include the transparency, universal visibility and relative permanence of the record of conversation.

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Supportive and negative behaviour in local online spaces

Communication in local online spaces

As an arena for social relationships, neighbourhood websites are a new type of space with certain characteristics not previously experienced. These characteristics include transparency, universal visibility and relative permanence of the record of conversation. It is unsurprising if people adjust to these new features of the local communication ecology at a different rate and in different ways. Our study reveals some aspects of behaviour which it is important to understand, if we are to be clear about the potential of these sites to contribute to local democracy and quality of life.

Neighbourhood websites are generally a blend of the public and parochial realms, to use the terminology developed by Lyn Lofland. According to Lofland, the public realm is made up of those spaces

'which tend to be inhabited by persons who are strangers to one another or who "know" one another only in terms of occupational or other nonpersonal identity categories (for example, bus driver-customer).'

(Lofland 1998, p9)

She defines the parochial realm as

'characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbors who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within "communities".'

(Ibid, p10)

Our case study sites have substantial constituencies, and people can be watching from most parts of the world. Yet participants get glimpses of parochial relationships being acted out before them, based around occasional face-to-face encounter or established familiarity. Further, these spaces have been set up and are

managed by private citizens, but with a social purpose, not profit, in mind. It seems that this is no simple replication of the local public realm, since relations are mediated, and furthermore the environment is new for many participants. One site founder told us:

'People using these sites get the 'in car' syndrome, when they're in a public space but they behave like they're in a private one.'

There are key differences to be acknowledged and taken into account:

'when our communication is mediated it is possible that the outcomes are likely to be quite different than in a similar encounter face to face.' (Joinson 2003, p3).

Thus for example, online both allows people to be more strategic in the way they present themselves, and encourages self-disclosure. It seems almost inevitable that local social relations will be affected by this new communication ecology.

In Section 1 above we saw how the effects can be largely beneficial: the case study sites stimulate pro-social connections among residents, and contribute to collective efficacy, sense of belonging, and pride in the area. But a degree of disquiet about negative online cultures is widespread and understandable: for example, 69 per cent of both council officers and elected members told us in our council survey that they were concerned about getting involved in protracted or discordant conversations (Flouch and Harris 2010c).

In this section we look more closely at some aspects of the behaviours that have arisen in our research, and which need to be appreciated if we are to understand the future development of neighbourhood websites. The following themes are discussed:

- anonymity and pseudonymity
- negativity and balance
- criticism of other contributors
- moderating behaviour
- and empathy and mutual support.

Anonymity and pseudonymity

Two of the sites allow viewing of 100 per cent of site content without registration. For the two forum-based sites, registration is a prerequisite to contributing. Registration includes providing a name together with other information. However, neither site requires the names to be genuine, and no checks are made. On Brockley Central users can comment without registering.

Alongside the practicalities of signing up or logging on, there is a widely held view that people's 'right' to anonymity is under threat and needs to be defended vigilantly.¹ In practice, anonymity may never have been easy to protect against concerted efforts in any form of society, and is certainly not guaranteed on the internet. Christopher Poole, founder of the largely-anonymous website 4chan (which includes the notoriously uninhibited 'Random' bulletin board) has described the case of an individual who posted a video in which he abused his cat. It seems 4chan members took exception to this, and through collective endeavour exposed him, ending his supposed anonymity and bringing about his arrest.²

A brief examination of some neighbourhood websites suggests a high level of apparent pseudonymity,³ in turn suggesting that people can be reluctant to reveal themselves completely in the online world. This seems perfectly natural: our experience as human beings teaches us to be initially circumspect when entering a new public space, since we may not know who is there and what are the niceties and nuances of behaviour. Seen in this light, declaring your name and any other details about yourself at the outset is quite a strange thing to expect people to do. However, without identifiers attached to content, meaning would quickly be lost and as a human communication system it would cease to work. Identification of some sort is needed, but it's unsurprising that many people opt for pseudonyms.

The apparent variation of pseudonymity between sites suggests that other factors may be at play. On Harringay Online the site founder estimates that 60% of members use their real full name.³

1. See for example Cook (2010).

2. See http://www.ted.com/talks/christopher_m00t_poole_the_case_for_anonymity_online.html

3. The founder of East Dulwich Forum estimates that perhaps 0.5 per cent of site users use their real name, 0.5 per cent use their real first name (with or without a surname initial) and about 98 per cent appear to be made up names. At Harringay Online, based on the most recent 100 joiners, the site founder estimates that 60 per cent appear to have given real full name, five per cent have used first names with the initial of their surname, 22 per cent have given their first name, 12 per cent appear to be using pseudonyms and one per cent are organisations.

The site reports that some members change their member name soon after joining, dropping their surname. This raises the question of whether a site's culture has a significant role to play in determining levels of anonymity.

However, making anonymity available as an option is important because it can protect people from reprisals, potentially allow the participation of people who experience oppression or specific discrimination, and encourage the diffident to participate. It is important for democracy to have public spaces where those less inclined to engage actively can still be comfortably present and not feel threatened.

Against that, being identifiable helps to build trust and understanding, giving credibility to the individual, to whatever discussion they are taking part in, and to the website. The reverse presumably applies: a high proportion of anonymity could erode trust and the perceived benefits of participation.

The title 'Anonymous' (and its variations like Ann O'Nymouse etc) is really just a widely used pseudonym. The more widely used, the greater the protection, in theory.

But as with the 4chan example noted above, this protection is still subject to what is known as mosaic theory, whereby scattered pieces of apparently unconnected information can be built up to provide identification. If someone applies themselves, an individual's identity can be pieced together from the unique data that is trailed across the site over time, as described by a Brockley participant:

'I refused to provide the street name due to a previous violent relationship I had been in and I did not want to be stalked by that person (although I did not post this information).'

'I felt bullied because I said politely I did not want to provide that information at which point every post I had ever written on this blog was searched through and a correct assumption was made based on the parts of Brockley I post most frequently about (although I have never said specifically where I live).'

The justification for pseudonymous site membership is clear. The question arises as to whether a surfeit of pseudonyms - particularly a surfeit of people using the same pseudonym - devalues the discussion and the site. On Brockley Central it is not uncommon to find two or more commenters identified as 'Anonymous' disagreeing with one another. This makes a thread hard to follow, so that some participants lose patience.

Recognising the problem, the following post was published on BC by founder Nick Barron in July 2010:

'When you post a comment, please give yourself a name, out of courtesy to the Brockley Central team and your fellow readers. It takes a couple of seconds to do, but makes conversations much easier to follow. There are people who've been posting here daily for years under pseudonyms, but we still don't know anything about their identity - so choosing a name doesn't compromise your privacy, it just a demonstration of good manners, which makes conversations easier to follow.'

Barron was not calling for any kind of self-disclosure - not 'tell us about yourself', but 'give yourself a name' - implying a degree of pre-commitment, on the grounds that it can make a significant difference to actual and perceived levels of trust on the site. There were 59 comments, including for example:

'you can still be anonymous, but really should at least use a unique moniker. To not want to even do this is the height of cowardice and disrespect.'

And, from one of those entitled 'Anonymous':

'I like being anonymous and remain utterly unconvinced by the display of false virtue shown here.'

It's also apparent that using a pseudonym can be a disadvantage in relations with people in office. Thus for example we find James Barber, a ward councillor whose presence on East Dulwich Forum is considered in more detail below (Section 4), making the point gently to a couple of correspondents:

*'Hi Gimme,
Obviously from your login I can't tell who you are and check my records...' (3 September 2009)*

*'Hi wonderwoman,
Obvisouly I wont have logged any casework under the pseudonym of wonderwoman. Could you please contact me direct...' (4 September 2009)*

Pseudonymity on local forums also permits a hidden diversity. In Section 1 above we considered the contribution of the sites to cohesion and inclusion, and their reflection of diversity. It used to be regarded by some as a strength of the online world that, in the old catch-phrase, ‘no-one knows you’re a dog’.⁴ On the internet, no-one knows you’re a black single-mother who drives a bus – which is precisely how one pseudonymous user on one of the case study sites was described to us. According to our informant, she never leaves any clues in her posts or comments to reveal this identity. Such determined anonymity may be constraining her contribution. Furthermore, people might feel that it violates what Adam Joinson (2003, p176) calls the ‘informality / equality norm on the internet’.

Unlike anywhere else in the public realm, the online environment allows people easily to adopt multiple identities within the same space. The Brockley discussion threw up the question of multi-pseudonymity, which was discussed light-heartedly although in theory it could have a destabilising effect:

‘I post under about five different names on here depending how contentious I am feeling that day.’

A final question concerns the potential for people in official positions to contribute pseudonymously. There are complex issues here that are largely beyond the scope of our work but to which we should draw attention. The research reported here followed a workshop run with council officers, elected members and others in September 2009, in which participants were emphatic that officers should not be anonymous or pseudonymous, because it could catalyse the erosion of trust in all sorts of ways. In our study we were told of officers having contributed to sites pseudonymously. One site founder told us with certainty that he is aware of officers who use the site pseudonymously.⁵

There seems no reason why officers should not lurk, although it was felt that if required to register they should do so under their official identity. One site founder pointed to the example of the local police, suggesting that residents want to see the response

4. For the original (1993) *New Yorker* cartoon, see <http://www.unc.edu/depts/jomc/academics/dri/idog.html>. As if to confirm the limitations of supposed anonymity, the page includes a ‘reality check’ version in which the screen message reads ‘Welcome Canine User 39, mutt, mostly black lab, enjoys pepperoni, fetching and sniffing other dogs’ heinies... Updating profile...’

5. They might do so because they are not permitted to register by their employers, if registration applies to the site. Or they might choose to in order to give themselves freedom to speak as residents and possibly even be critical of their employers.

provided by the police to events, and if they remain invisible it does not help build confidence and trust.

Again, there seems to be no reason why an off-duty officer should not participate under their own identity, especially if they happen to live in or close to the area in question: but they could not do so with the kind of freedom of expression enjoyed by other participants. Such dilemmas show the need for guidelines to help staff and elected members to appreciate the kinds of position in which they might find themselves.⁶

Negativity and balance

There does not seem to be a clear correlation between perceptions of the negative impact of anonymity and of negative commenting. In our survey we asked respondents if they agreed that ‘too many people comment anonymously’ on their site. The results vary: almost half of Brockley Central respondents agreed or agreed strongly with the statement, compared with only 15 per cent for EDF and just eight per cent for HOL.

We also asked if respondents agree that ‘people make negative comments about others’ on the site. The responses for these two questions are summarised in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Anonymity and negativity

Agree or agree strongly	BC %	EDF %	HOL %	All %
Too many people comment anonymously	48	15	8	21
n=	133	201	166	500
People make negative comments about others	48	63	27	47
n=	132	201	163	496

Compared with Brockley Central, far fewer participants on East Dulwich Forum appear to be concerned about anonymity, but about two thirds of them are bothered about negativity. Alongside these, the figures for Harringay Online here are striking: relatively few participants feel negatively about anonymity or the level of negative commenting.

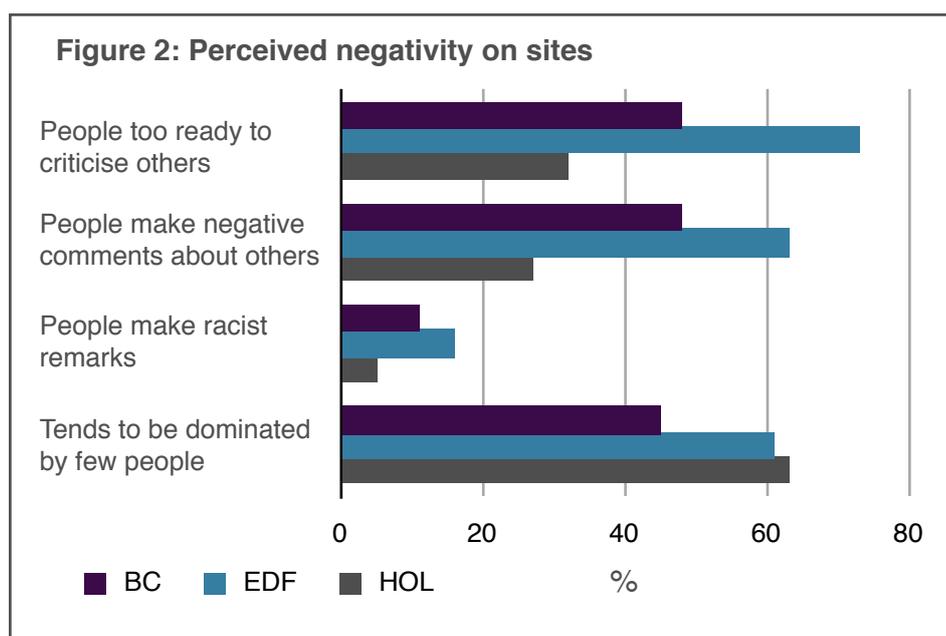
6. See *Online neighbourhood networks: a guide for councils*, Flouch and Harris (2010b)

Is the HOL result entirely down to the inclusive culture? Probably not, because respondents felt the other sites are also welcoming and our qualitative material confirms that. However there may be a link between these findings and the apparently much lower levels of anonymity on HOL. This in turn may be influenced to a degree by the Ning platform, use of member photos and profiles. And does BC's hierarchical blog format contribute to its disappointing results here?

We asked four questions designed to find out how negative people feel their site is. We asked whether respondents agreed with the following statements:

- People are too ready to criticise others on the website
- People make negative comments about others
- People sometimes make racist remarks
- Discussions get dominated by just a few people.

Figure 2 below shows how the sites compare.



Of course, this is not the whole story. Good sites may all have some negativity, but participants could nonetheless find that acceptable if they feel there is a degree of support from likeminded others around them. One respondent put it like this:

'yes, there's the occasional idiot, but they are normally shot down by the majority.'

This striving for balance is a familiar occurrence when the subject is anti-social behaviour and responses to it. An example comes from July 2010 when, responding to an EDF post about a perceived offence, someone commented:

'OF COURSE you must notify the police. I'm not quite sure why you're posing the question.

Actually, here's a thought: What about a "shame" section on the site - it's not hard to whip out your mobile and take a quick snap of someone behaving in an anti-social way. Then post it here with the date and time. Over time it might help to give the safer neighbourhood team more information about repeat offenders, local pains-in-the-ass and patterns of behaviour.'

Three or four people quickly supported this suggestion. But a few hours later one or two put in opposing views, which were reinforced the following morning.

Looking back at a year of offering online representative support to residents on EDF, Councillor James Barber has described his experience of this rebalancing:

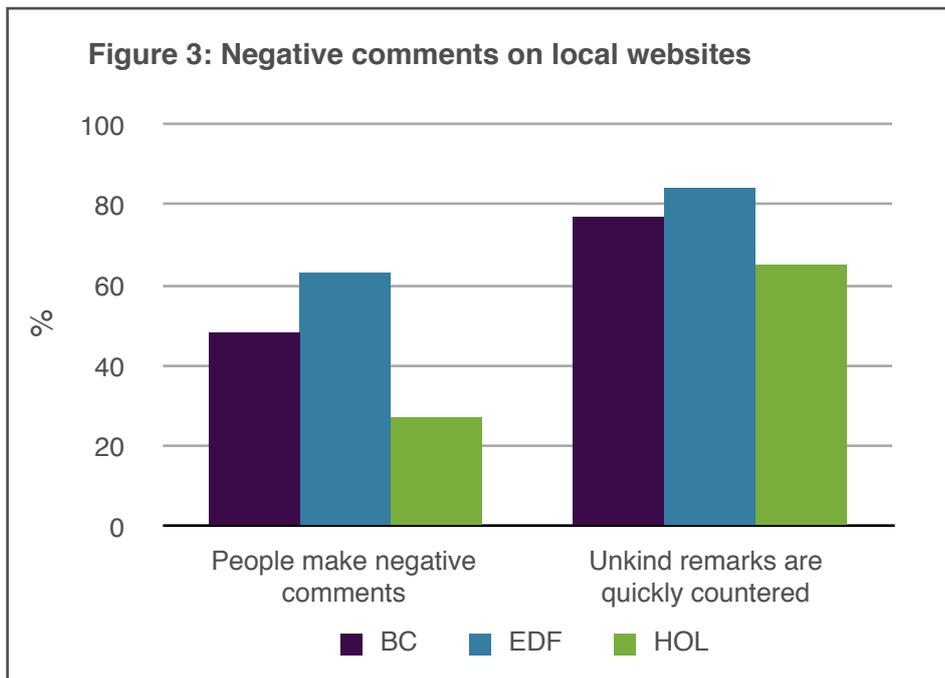
'If anyone was to look at the thread that we've had, they'll see that the first two or three months, a lot of contributors were very robust - some were downright rude. So if they just looked at that they'd say "oh I don't want that, that looks really harsh". But actually if you stick with it, and you honestly are just trying to deal with casework, and get responses and fix things, people will very quickly start to respect that you are offering a genuine service. And then I found that the people who were giving me a hard time were being shot down by other contributors saying "no, he's doing a good job, leave him to it".'⁷

Thus respondents in our survey clearly feel that EDF is a place where people are critical and make negative comments, but the site scored highly when we asked if unkind remarks are quickly countered: 84 per cent agreed or agreed strongly with that statement. The chart below shows how the sites compare in this respect.

Respondents seemed to feel that the level of negativity was largely contained and could be tolerated given the various

7. Source: [Online Networked Neighbourhoods; Council Guide, video, November 2010](#)

benefits that accrued from use of the sites. Nonetheless the opportunity was taken to offer criticism of other participants and of the site administrators.



Criticism of other contributors

Several comments in our survey reflected a general dissatisfaction with the online behaviour of others. It seems likely that our questionnaire gave some respondents a rare opportunity to vent their feelings about negative or aggressive behaviour on ‘their’ site. Often people seem to sense that the entire edifice could collapse if the rot sets in. We offer here a selection of the comments received:

‘it sometimes appears that the people on it think that they are the only people in the area.’

‘I am put off using it often by some of the more frequent posters, some of whom I find to be utterly self-absorbed (!) and unwilling to take others’ viewpoints into account. In effect, they end up wearing people down and diluting opinion. Their often accusatory, confrontational attitude makes others back down to avoid conflict, thereby making debate very one-sided.’

‘Some people tend to dominate it. I wonder if their time pontificating about all their outstanding expertise on all subjects might be better spent actually doing something in the real world.’

'There has been a clique for a while on the Forum but it has become better since so many more people joined. I'm constantly in awe of how well some of the members represent themselves and equally disappointed in a few.'

'there are a group of people on there who seem to think they own it and just shoot everyone down.'

'...find the main participants quite opinionated and at times, 'cliqey', which puts me off posting.'

'I do feel discussions get monopolised very quickly by the core members, and this can put people off contributing a bit.'

'I really dislike the atmosphere of the website, some people go on there looking for fault, waiting to pounce on someone's comment. For this reason I have never posted on the site, nor do I intend to unless there is a change in the mentality of some of the people who comment. I have never experienced such viciousness on a website before.'

'my one concern would be that almost all forum/discussion threads are jumped on by a small few who tend to use them as intellectual competitions to sounds the most knowledgeable and 'know the most'... This can be quite intimidating for some who may want to join in but feel that their comments may be criticised or deemed not 'clever' enough etc.. which is a big shame as the site is perfectly set-up to be very inclusive.'

These comments highlight the fact that even sites that attract plaudits, from local people and observers beyond, can still be vulnerable to online behaviour which is felt to be insufficiently tolerant or civil in style and manner. Three conclusions seem possible. It could be that this pattern simply reflects human nature generally, that similar amounts of off-putting behaviour would be found in other open settings like pubs, and there's not much more that can be done about it. Or it could be argued that administrators need to be more insistent and less easy-going about the style adopted by some regulars: this would meet with protest, could be counter-productive, and would obviously be very difficult to impose. Or finally, this might all be a reflection of how low we are on the learning curve of online behaviour: many of us have not been conversing in virtual space for very long and we will adjust our communication styles a little, in time.

Moderating behaviour

All three sites we studied seek to minimise moderation of member comment. Where possible they prefer to leave it to the group to moderate members who are deemed to be out of line. However there are times for all sites when administrators feel the need to step in, typically on behalf of another member.

Whilst it seems that members take a lead from the prevailing site culture about what is and what isn't acceptable, some local sites do post codes of conduct. Two of the three we studied offer terms or conduct codes of some sort.

With or without codes, the role of administrator can appear stressful and at times thankless. Site founders do not escape criticism: there were a couple of sharp remarks. Of one it was said that he

'pretends that he is impartial but is clever in his words. in fact he is very, very biased.'

Another observed:

'The moderators treat the members like naughty children, with regular comments telling people that they must keep on topic.'

Against that, there was far more praise for the sites generally and for the role of the moderators and administrators in particular:

'The moderators put a lot of time and effort into keeping the dialogue going and writing reports on what's happening.'

'great website - esp. the administrator who is balanced and conscientious.'

'I also think it is very well run and that the owner should receive some sort of award/formal recognition for the work that he does as, I suspect, that he doesn't get the recognition that he truly deserves.'

'they are wonderful at trying to keep an eye on the forums/ discussions and defusing situations if people start getting a little over zealous.'

As we have noted elsewhere, respondents in our national survey of council officers and elected members felt that the most significant barrier to engagement with local sites was concern about ‘getting involved in protracted or discordant conversations’. This points directly to the importance of the role of administrators and founders in establishing a sensitive, respectful online culture. There is nothing that says they have to do so: but where the online environment is negative and hostile, the potential of neighbourhood websites to contribute to collaborative governance is unlikely to be realised.

Empathy and mutual support

Many contributions to neighbourhood sites are a combination of empathy and information sharing. On all three sites there is a visible current of support for people who report some difficulty or need, whether it be practical (as for instance in exchanges around parenthood) or more emotional (such as responding to traumatic experiences). Our study was not designed to explore the contributions of the sites to generalised mental health and emotional well-being, but they may be significant.

For example, a member of Haringay Online posted a note following the death of her neighbour in April 2009.⁸

‘The police and ambulance were at the house next door last night and broke down the door to get in.... the old lady Dorha I visit from time to time, to keep an eye on... Clearly I didn’t keep enough of an eye on her. She’s been in there dead for weeks...

Finally her niece got worried after 3 weeks of not hearing from her and called in the police, last night.

I can’t believe I didn’t call them weeks ago as I could see it wasn’t alright! She was lying there alone dead and on the other side of my living room and all that time and I was carrying on my life... I am so very upset. And angry with myself for not taking responsibility for her.

I don’t think I want to live here anymore, I will keep looking in her garden and she won’t be there ever again...’

Over the next day or so, seven messages of sympathy came in and the person who posted the original message responded:

8. <http://www.haringayonline.com/profiles/blogs/death-of-a-neighbour>

'hello to everyone who has got back to me on this and a big heartfelt thank you.

The replies have all been very sensitive and supportive. I have just read them all again and feel very moved and lucky to have such good people around in Harringay.'

In July 2010, EDF users were told that 'Ken the barber has passed away'.⁹ The consequent range of tributes suggests a strong sense of local companionship, which might seem surprising on a site which regularly records more than 4,000 unique visitors daily. It seems that the medium affords an accumulation of social capital at a volume that would be very hard to achieve using conventional channels.

As mentioned in Section 1 above, our survey asked whether 'people show support for one another' on the websites. Overall, 79 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this; unsurprisingly, given the nature of the blog platform, the response for Brockley Central was lower (69 per cent) than for the other two sites.

We also asked if people agreed with the statement that 'the website feels very welcoming'. Overall, an average of 83 per cent of respondents agreed or agreed strongly with the statement. Three quarters of EDF respondents agreed or agreed strongly: for HOL respondents the figure was 83 per cent and for Brockley 92 per cent. Even allowing for the relative commitment of respondents in our sample, these figures are a powerful endorsement of the sites and serve to contextualise the opinions about negativity.

Responses to these two questions are summarised in the table below, illustrating the similarity across all three sites.

Figure 4. Are the sites supportive and welcoming?

	BC	EDF	HOL	All
Strongly agree or tend to agree	%	%	%	%
People show support for one another	69	86	82	79
n=	131	204	165	502
The website feels very welcoming	92	75	83	83
n=	134	204	170	508

9. Posted at www.eastdulwichforum.co.uk July 08, 10:32PM

Concluding remarks

The niceties of both negative and supportive online behaviour emerged strongly as themes in this study and are clearly of concern to people. We have spent some time discussing them because of this emphasis in the material; and because it is important to appreciate these nuances if functioning, pro-social online cultures are to be developed in a majority of localities.

Our case study sites are well-established, and we have tried to probe beneath their lauded success in order to throw some light on the difficulties of achieving a balanced culture in which people feel free to speak without negativity dominating and poisoning. It is possible that that their success disguises an extremely sensitive balance between an off-putting council-bashing free-for-all and an over-moderated, sanitised touchy-feely online support group. We revisit some of these issues in section 5 where we consider the future development of neighbourhood websites. Where the balance is achieved, it seems to us that local sites provide a strong platform for civic involvement, governance and co-production. We turn our attention to these possibilities in the next section.

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Guide to materials in the online neighbourhood networks study

- 1 *Online neighbourhood networks study* short summary (4 pages)
- 2 Introduction, background and extended summary
- 3 Online neighbourhood networks study (Main paper):
 - Section 1: Social capital and cohesion
 - Section 2: Supportive and negative online behaviour
 - Section 3: Empowerment, civic involvement and co-production
 - Section 4: Relations with councils
 - Section 5: The future for citizen-run neighbourhood websites.
- 4 Council survey report
- 5 Guide for councils to online neighbourhood networks
- 6 Videos (Part of the Guide for councils)
- 7 Network timeslices
- 8 Research context
- 9 Online neighbourhood networks typology
- 10 Neighbourhoods seen through online timeslices
- 11 Local broadcast media

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