

Study report:

'Does William Rose make faggots?'

Neighbourhoods seen through online timeslices

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

part of the
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group

Networked Neighbourhoods

The Networked Neighbourhoods group works with communities and organisations using technology-based approaches to strengthen neighbourhoods and create opportunities for the more efficient delivery of public services. We develop innovative projects that make a difference on the ground as well as providing leading edge research.

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'Does William Rose make faggots?'

Neighbourhoods seen through online timeslices

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

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‘Timeslices’

Introduction

This paper has been prepared as a supplement to the report of the Online Neighbourhood Networks Study. The intention is to illustrate the diversity of issues and information discussed on neighbourhood websites, by looking at material that was covered on three randomly-chosen occasions.

The ‘timeslices’

Our study looked at three local websites: Brockley Central (BC), East Dulwich Forum (EDF), and Harringay Online (HOL).¹ We chose three weekdays at random from the calendar during the period of our study, and for each a six hour period. We then checked to make sure these were not exceptional for any particular reason, such as severe weather, local festivals, significant political moments or other major news stories, which might have distorted the picture. The resulting timeslices are as follows:

18 February 2010, Thursday, 1700-2300

14 April 2010, Wednesday, 1430-2030

9 July 2010, Friday, 0845-1445.

This snapshot is necessarily based on a selection. There is an enormous amount of material to be trawled through; and it is not easy to identify everything posted on a given day because material is distributed in various different sections. Comments can be added days, weeks or months after the original post. Sometimes the platform (especially the Ning platform used by HOL) can be unhelpful for archive searching.

We have organised this material under a number of headings with examples to illustrate the great variety of topics discussed. All material quoted occurs within one of the specified timeslices unless otherwise noted – for example, an original post published previously.

1. See brockleycentral.blogspot.com, www.eastdulwichforum.co.uk and www.harringayonline.com.

Built and green environment: streets, fencing, vermin, litter and recycling

On Brockley Central there were twelve comments within the 18 February timeslice in response to this post from earlier in the day:

'Fresh drive for Coulgate Street part-pedestrianisation

The Brockley Cross Action Group have asked us to promote the Coulgate Street petition again.

The petition is in support of Coulgate Street being part-pedestrianised, to make the access to the station safer and more attractive....'

Around the same time, on EDF there was a consultation announcement about the removal of fencing on Goose Green, originally designed 'to restrict the area used by dog walkers'. There were also seven contributions to a discussion about rats and pest control, responding to a post from the previous day.

Also on the same day, HOL carried two contributions to a discussion which had begun six days earlier about 'a deep and clean sweep' of the streets in Harringay. One complained about:

'a plague of cigarette ends all over Haringey's² pavements, bus stops, restaurant and shop fronts. Most smokers think they have a right to casually toss their fag ends and wrappers on our pavements.'

Within the same timeslice on HOL there was also comment on an earlier post about protecting the area's heritage.

In the April timeslice on EDF there was a comment about the need for ID when using a local rubbish tip. And on the theme of recycling, one contributor said they had noticed that:

'we don't seem to have all of the recycling bags/bins that we should have, and I am not sure whether we put our stuff in the correct places! Before I contact the council I wanted to check if anyone knows what we should have, I have been on the website, but I can't seem to find anything concise and understandable!'

2. There are two spellings for this area of north London. *Harringay* is the neighbourhood focussed on in this study. *Haringey* is the borough within which this neighbourhood is located.

This received an informative response, including links to the council website, within two minutes, illustrating people's readiness to help and showing how local sites contribute to councils' objectives of 'avoidable contact'.

Transport and travel

Issues of transport and travel arose on the sites with reference to rail, buses and even recommendations for a motorcycle route from East Dulwich to the City of London (EDF, 14 April). On BC in February there was discussion about a consultation on the future of the 343 and N343 bus routes. One respondent wrote:

'if you stop double-decker buses (and lorries) going down one street, they won't just miraculously go away, they'll have to go down someone else's. It shouldn't be decided on the basis of who shouts loudest and takes the most impressive photos.'

This is a good example of a contributor showing awareness that decisions affecting a broad public are complex and nuanced.

Also on BC in February, there were three comments on a post from a few days earlier, about the inconvenience of shepherding people through the ticket office at Brockley station: a commuters' issue. One contributor said 'I think we should pass our views onto TfL' (Transport for London). As a consequence, this post appeared the following day:

Following concerns raised by Brockley Central readers on this thread , about potentially dangerous levels of overcrowding during the evening peak time at Brockley Station, TfL has confirmed that it will investigate the issue.

We sent them your comments and in response, a TfL spokesman said: "... our stations team is due to go on site at Brockley in the next few weeks to observe passenger flows and determine whether action is required there."

This illustrates the potential for neighbourhood sites to feed opinion and views into the work of agencies inexpensively and at short notice.

Local services, facilities and shops: monitoring & campaigning

On HOL in the April timeslice, there were two comments under the thread 'Anti-Betting Shop Clustering Commitment in National Labour Manifesto'. The theme was the subject of a HOL campaign in 2008-09 and the comments were concerned with the role of the House of Lords in affecting decisions that in turn affected the quality of life of people in Harringay. Also on HOL, a post provided a link and the words of a protest song by a group opposing the closure of a local hospital; along with information about a forthcoming protest march.

This illustrates how neighbourhood sites can be used as resources for local campaigns. Within the chosen timeslices, the campaigns were aimed at protecting local facilities and amenities. Beyond the timeslices, local sites have been used successfully as platforms for campaigns to shape neighbourhoods in other, perhaps more fundamental ways.

On BC there were eight comments in a discussion about the merits of a local cycle repair dealer. On EDF in February someone bemoaned a malfunctioning washing machine:

'I am looking for a company that would come to my place, pick up the washing load and bring it back all cleaned and ironed. Anyone knows such a company? I am not lazy 😞, just working full-time with a six-month-old baby and a stinking cold...'

There were two responses within two and a half hours. Over on HOL, a comment was added to a discussion about a new garden shop; there was one comment on a thread headed 'radiator advice required...for a ladder house front bay window'; and a post was published by someone seeking a cleaner. Elsewhere comments and recommendations were offered on coffee outlets, plumbers, ironmongers and cleaners.

On EDF in April the following question was posted and remains unanswered:

'William Rose Offal Selection

Posted by ellwood april 14, 06:38pm

Does anyone know if William Rose make faggots? And if so are they tasty?'

Homes and houses

Issues to do with homes and houses were perhaps not as prominent in the timeslices as might have been expected. On HOL a prospective house-purchaser had posted earlier in the day (18 February) and by evening had received numerous helpful contributions. Meanwhile, on EDF someone commented on a thread about buying a property in Poland.

On HOL (9 July) there were a number of comments on the theme of houses in multiple occupation, following a post a week earlier which had drawn attention to ‘a house being done up quite nicely’:

‘I was wondering if the 5 electric boxes et doorbells were normal... Somehow I dont see how they could fit 5 properties in this semi.’

The exchanges show the level of vigilant attention paid to their neighbourhood by many local people, which becomes mutualised by online correspondence.

The following question was posted on EDF (14 April) and received three responses within a couple of hours:

‘Cellar under water - again (on Underhill Road)

Posted by hat282 April 14, 06:24PM

We are on underhill road and since last september we have had problems with our cellar flooding. There seems to be no pattern to the flooding at all and it does not always coincide with bad weather - in fact we awoke this morning to find several inches of water even though no rain overnight. We have had our drains relined recently as it was suggested this was the cause - patently not though. I don't want to go down the tanking route as i think the water will just find a different point of entry into the house but i am now at a loss as to our next move to solve this. Anybody else having the same problem or, even better, found a solution?

Elsewhere, people asked for advice about radiators and window boxes.

Exchange, lost and found

Neighbourhood websites obviously have huge potential for people to exchange goods, seek help recovering lost items, find good homes for unwanted things, or borrow tools for some unanticipated occasional need. Within the timeslices on the three sites studied there were the following:

- a plea (unanswered) for help tracing a lost children's bike;
- a pair of shoes offered for sale;
- a pair of clogs ditto ['Pink betula clogs Size 5 (new)'];
- tickets available for a festival;
- a travel cot and baby bottle liners;
- a PC and DVD player ('free to good home');
- and some Seychelles rupees -

'Is anyone going to the Seychelles in the near future, and would like to buy £66 worth of Seychelles rupees from me for £50? I have just got back and realised this is a restricted currency'

Looking after children

The internet continues to prove its worth as a resource for parents to share information and concerns, both locally and more widely. Our review of content in the timeslices shows that EDF, which has a 'family room', was actively used in this way; but we found nothing on the topic on the other two sites within the selected timeslices.

Among the issues discussed on EDF were the following:

- Costs of starting a family;
- baby not growing;
- nappy and stroller choices;
- ideas for first birthday;
- 'find digger' – following up a two year old's request to see road digging machinery;
- childminders' costs;
- advice on flying with a baby;
- paying for a toddler at venue;
- and 'activities near Gatwick'.

Governance and politics

Our study has been concerned partly with people's connections to local governance. This snapshot of content from three sites on three occasions not only demonstrates how local political affairs are contextualised by the preoccupations of everyday life; it also confirms the level of commitment, vigilance and attention to detail that a healthy democracy needs.

At a basic level of involvement, there was evidence of connection with local groups, such as Brockley Action Group (18 February) and a post about supporting the local scouts (BC, 9 July).

Connections were also provided on BC to agencies with wider responsibilities, such as Transport for London (TfL) and the East London Line, including the informal consultation provided to TfL which we described in the section on transport and travel above. We have also referred above to the link made to a petition on pedestrianisation in Brockley. These initiatives taken together suggest a high level of attention to civic involvement. A similar example from HOL was offered on 9 July, but in this case raising questions about the local applicability of national policy on changes to police search powers.

There was correspondence with and between local councillors, and clear connections with local councils. Within the February timeslice on HOL, there was a post and seven comments about changing styles of local government and the causes of imminent public spending cuts. At the same time, in an ongoing discussion with a Haringey councillor, one participant made it clear that they are paying attention (ie taking seriously their responsibility as a citizen) and acknowledged the part played by HOL in changing the demands made of a council:

'One great thing you could do that would really help? Increase the number of planning enforcement officers... given the role of sites like HOL has no doubt considerably increased the number of contraventions reported, i find it hard to believe that 5 officers is a real commitment to planning enforcement. Can you please let us know the plans here? And whether the council really thinks that 5 planning enforcement officers is sufficient.'

On EDF (14 April) not long before the general election, an exchange between two councillors representing different political parties led to this intervention by the moderator:

'I'd rather this thread didn't turn into a bun-fight between Labour and the Libdems.

'James, Vikki.....i'm looking in your direction. Please conduct yourselves with some decorum and debate the issue at hand rather than trying to score cheap political points.

'as peckhamrose says, this is exactly the sort of stuff that turns people away from politics, even at a local level.

'this thread poses some interesting points about shared services and efficiencies of scale - why not start there?'

For those who bemoan the negative bias of much online debate, this expression of commonsense, directive moderation might be unexpected. We suggest that it can be seen as a tiny, distinct victory for detached citizen interest and the transparency of online systems.

Also on EDF, with an eye on the general election, on 11 April the moderator had announced 'a series of debates will take place within the confines of the drawing room that each prospective parliamentary candidate (PPC) will take part in...'. Within the timeslice three days later there were three comments refining the nature of the proposed debates. One person commented on a post about spelling and grammatical mistakes in political leaflets; and an administrator locked a thread about political bumpf. A link to the Southwark Labour party's manifesto was published by one of the candidates and two comments were posted within the timeslice.

On HOL on 14 April, two video interviews with councillor candidates were published. These were part of the website's coverage of the local elections.

On 9 July, Brockley Central and HOL carried announcements about council budget cuts. The BC article announced:

Lewisham budget cuts plan to be debated

On July 13th, the Council's Public Accounts Select Committee will discuss proposals to reduce the Council budget by £60 million, which will involve significant service reductions.

The article referred to the document outlining proposed cuts and quoted the mayor and a councillor. There were some 83 comments in total, 19 of which fell within the timeslice – testament to the potential of local websites as legitimate contexts for local political debate.

Haringey Council's budget cuts were also announced on 9 July and covered by HOL, but with no reference to 'proposals' or 'debate'. A link was provided to a full report to the council's cabinet, but the subject had been previously been vigorously debated on the site and the July announcement attracted no comments until some three weeks later.

Disturbances and irregularities: antisocial behaviour and violence

Neighbourhood websites are ideal resources for people to share information and express concerns about irregularities and disturbances in their locality. Of course, as with any medium of communication, there is the risk of alarmism, misinformation and the exercise of prejudice: but the transparency of the medium and differences in online behaviours are gradually having an effect on people's readiness to broadcast and respond to concerns without reflection.

Within the timeslices we had comments on threads about a 'shouty man' (HOL, 9 July) and 'banging every night' ('I still think it's someone drunk coming home', EDF 18 February). There was also one response to a thread about a 'dirty rude runner' (EDF 14 April). Car alarms were mentioned (EDF, 14 July).

On 18 February HOL reported what was at the time a third successive rape incident in the area, which had taken place some five weeks previously. There were several comments on HOL within the timeslice, following information posted by a police officer, including this plea:

'Would be good to know some details about what time/where these attacks are happening so we can be on our guard?'

This is an illustration of the perceived role of a local site as a communications channel where currency of information is critical.

Anti-social behaviour consistently generates contributions to neighbourhood websites. Many residents may never previously have had a satisfactory outlet for their discontent or for their sense of powerlessness.

As mentioned above, littering attracted some comments on HOL (18 February). Elsewhere (EDF, 18 February) there were comments on a thread about a ‘dangerous dog on Peckham Rye’ (original post 31 January). This developed into a rapid discussion about prejudice against different breeds of dog, an example of expressed opinion well beyond the local:

‘hundreds of staffies in rescue because of people breeding them and then realising it is a buyers market as there are hundreds to choose from...’

Also in this review of content on our three sites, we found discussion about recent shootings on both Brockley Central and HOL, and stabbings in East Dulwich.

On 17 February a post on HOL mentioned that a man had been shot during a local store robbery and was stable in hospital. Within the timeslice there were several responses, following the victim’s return to work within hours:

‘I called in on way home and he was standing outside chatting to other guys. I couldn’t believe it. I shook his hand he said he was glad to be alive! He feels fine. Gave me a demo of gun shooting. He had small bandage on left side of his neck. Quite cheerful really!’

There is a striking contrast here between the highly unusual nature of the event described and the conversational style of someone chatting to friends and neighbours.

Brockley Central carried a post on 14 April about two recent shootings:

‘on Friday, Brockley Cross was closed due to a shooting incident outside tickle me takeaway. Yesterday, much of the area around Brockley Station and Foxberry Road was taped-off due to a second shooting, confirmed by Cllr Walton, who spoke with the police safer neighbourhoods team today.’

While neither incident was fatal, the article called for an official response and headlined the ‘need for leadership’. Within our timeslice there were 43 comments, including for example this interpretation:

'These are shootings, which are likely gang related, which is likely drugs related. Drug dealers hang out in Brockley Cross because they can sit in their fat cars all day or leave their beamers on the pavement or in the road and no-one will bat an eyelid. Let enough dealers hang around each other long enough and something bad will happen'

- and this example of the assertion of majority view:

'demonstrating that we (the majority of non-violent Brockley residents) care and are interested in what happens in our locality is an important deterrence. Showing this through discussion with local government to get them to hear that they must make changes happen (through investment in public spaces) demonstrates that the majority are interested in making this sort of thing stop.'

The recommendations included more police presence, cctv, parking permits and parking patrollers, a march, and clearing cars from the streets.

On 9 July we find participants on East Dulwich Forum discussing the social causes and historical changes that might help to explain a recent stabbing (original post, 5 July). For example:

'the softly softly approach has failed to work in the past, and as much as being hard on these people will not prevent the crime from happening again, at least if we just disposed of them we would allow that to act as a deterrent against doing this sort of thing again. I am afraid I have run out of sympathy for these scum, i came from a working class background, we had it bloody tough when i was growing up, but everyone in my family worked, and if they were out of work they wouldnt rest until they were back in work because it was the only way to put bread on the table, simple as. It's not just about taking the benefits away from these people, it is about taking away the benefits culture which has grown up over the last 40 odd years in this country!'

Posts and comments on local crises of violence like this serve to illustrate the way in which neighbourhood websites can capture the sense of urgency that residents feel about sudden shocks of this kind. They also provide the opportunities for local people to express concern for one another and to collaborate to find solutions.

Entertainment and recreation

Turning now from violent crime to light-hearted announcements about local shows and festivals, the contrast serves to emphasise the range of material shared and discussed on these websites. People's interests come to the surface and the markers in their daily lives – tragic, farcical and all points between - are the subject of comment.

On 18 February, on Brockley Central, there were comments within the timeslice on a post from earlier in the day announcing that the producers of a show were 'looking for local talent'. On EDF there were three comments within the timeframe in response to a thread proposing a 'Miss. East Dulwich' competition.

On HOL (14 April) a post announced free skating as 'Ally Pally ice rink closes for summer-long refurbishment'. On 9 July *Lewisham People's Day*, an annual summer festival taking place the following day, was promoted on Brockley Central. HOL readers were also advised that a nearby garden was to be open to the public as part of a London-wide event.

Casual sport and group activities are also stimulated by neighbourhood sites. Mention was made on EDF of a group of 'over-30s dads' who encourage joiners for 'a casual, but competitive game each week'. They in turn have competition from other sports (also on EDF):

'would anyone be interested in playing touch rugby on Peckham Rye on a saturday morning around 11am?'

Local news, local people and local history

It is natural that any local communication channel brings news about local people. EDF offered two examples. The following thread was started on the afternoon of 17 February:

'Do you know the bloke who was locked in the portaloos at Dulwich Park on xmas eve?'

- resulting in three trite comments within the timeslice.

On 9 July there were three comments reflecting on the news that ‘Ken the barber has passed away’. The tributes present a sense of local companionship which might seem surprising on a site with often more than 4,500 unique visitors in a day.

Within the same timeslice on HOL, there was comment on an earlier post (2 July) which had asked whether other readers had experienced a minor earthquake:

‘Small earthquakes in the UK are not uncommon. Here’s a list of recent quakes reported by the British Geological Survey. Nothing there for our area on the 2nd though.’

Neighbourhood websites provide a lively resource for local history. HOL is a well-known example, and on 14 April carried a post entitled ‘Steam Train through Harringay Tonight [Wed. 14th April] - better than watching spurs!’ which received two comments within the timeslice. Within the 9 July period, there was a comment on the latest addition to HOL’s databank of more than 1,000 local history photos.

Wider world politics and current affairs

From time to time the content on local sites covers news and current affairs from the wider world. We have already seen that HOL correspondents were interested in how members of the House of Lords view the clustering of betting shops. Also on HOL within the February timeslice was a story from Hertfordshire about the perceived over-regulation of health and safety conditions in a community event. Within our April timeslice, on EDF, there were six contributions to a long thread about citizenship for Falkland Islanders.

Homespun philosophy: distractions that are not time-sensitive

On some local websites content occasionally gets strung along lines of easy-going conversation in much the same way as it does in pubs and clubs to pass the time. Word games and jokes are common examples, but the initial intention of these threads can be serious. On EDF in July, a parent asked for advice to give to a

young person going to university, headed 'If only I knew that then...'. One response during the timeslice was 'do not be the person who seems physically unable to wash a plate...'

Elsewhere on EDF at this time, people were playing an ongoing game about songs.

Meta-interactions and moderation

Our final category of material concerns posts and comments about commenting. Sometimes these can lead to fierce discussions as people sort out their different perspectives on appropriate online behaviour. On Brockley Central, within the April timeslice there were seven comments, most about thread-relevance, on a post announcing a postponement in the launch of the East London Line. And as already mentioned above, there were two occasions we are aware of when an administrator had to intervene on EDF within our April timeslice, once to lock a thread about political bumpf and once to admonish squabbling councillors.

Concluding remarks

Our main purpose in this exercise was to give some sense of the variety of material discussed and the issues raised by participants on our three case study sites. The method used is illustrative not comprehensive; but the thirteen categories of information we have found serve to demonstrate the diversity of interests and needs that preoccupy local people in everyday life, for which they find their local site to be an appropriate resource or outlet.

The significant implication of the content we have described above is that it is the diversity of material, more than any single area of interest, that makes these sites rewarding to participants. Each of the sites can claim to be a flourishing local communication ecology - an environment sensitively managed which encourages growth and diversity, and is always changing.

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
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- 10 Neighbourhoods seen through online timeslices
- 11 Local broadcast media

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