

Communities and social media: the Big Local experience

Sonia Bussu, Local Trust

'We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us' — M. McLuhan

Organisations are increasingly using social media as part of their communication and fundraising strategy. There is an assumption that social media can help organisations to engage their stakeholders and reach out to new audiences, enabling them to share, cooperate and mobilise supporters.

Big Local areas have been quick to understand the potential of social media to reach out to their communities and most of them already have a social media presence or are setting up their website and/ or Facebook and Twitter accounts and YouTube channels. Our research examined how Big Local communities are using social media to engage residents and could offer some insights on the challenges and opportunities that social media might raise for other small community groups run by volunteers.

What is Big Local?

Big Local is a resident-led place-based programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund and delivered by an independent charity, Local Trust. It involves 150 communities across England, with an average population of 7000. These were selected by the Big Lottery Fund because they had not previously benefitted from Lottery money and faced issues such as high levels of unemployment and general economic decline, often as a result of de-industrialisation processes. Each area receives at least £1m and a range of light-touch support over more than 10 years, but decisions are made by residents.

Information, community and action

A study¹ of the 100 largest charities in the US and their use of Twitter identified three key communicative functions: *information*, *community* and *action*.

- **Information** covers tweets about the organisation's activities, news, reports and publications.
- **Community** covers posts aiming to interact, share and converse with stakeholders to build an online community.
- **Action** includes messages that encourage followers to "do something e.g. donating money, attending events or engaging in activities.

We felt this framework was particularly useful to understand Big Local areas' online activity.

¹ Lovejoy, K., & Saxton, G. D. (2012). Information, community, and action: How non-profit organizations use social media. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17, 337353.

Overall our research appears to support prior studies on non-profit organisations showing how Facebook and Twitter are used more to broadcast *information* about events and activities, and less as community building and mobilisation tools.

It is important to acknowledge the limits of social media analysis in understanding online engagement. This is generally measured by number of likes, shares or replies, which do not necessarily indicate how strong the relationship between the user and the organisation is. In fact, we can assume that the reach of a given post is likely to be underestimated, as social media analysis fails to capture the role of “lurkers” - people that do not contribute or interact but rather consume content created by others and might use the information they access online in an offline setting.²

Big Local areas and social media: our findings

For our research on Big Local online, we asked three main questions:

1. How do Big Local areas use social media, and in particular Facebook and Twitter?
2. What factors influence greater reach on Facebook and Twitter?
 - 2.1 Do certain topics/ types of posts generate more or longer conversations with other users?
3. Are there specific differences in terms of engagement strategies on social media between the most active Big Local areas and the rest?

The analysis was threefold:

- A mapping of Big Local areas’ presence online to identify how many areas have their own webpage and/or accounts on social media platforms;
- Semi-quantitative content analysis of all Big Local Facebook and Twitter accounts, which are by far the two most popular social media platforms among Big Local areas, with the software for qualitative analysis NVivo;
- In-depth content and thematic analysis of how 13 Big Local areas active on social media and 10 randomly selected areas use Facebook and Twitter to identify differences among active areas and the rest.

Key findings

- BL areas mainly posts information about their activities and events, but interactions are less prevalent.
- Posts generating most interest are exchanges about more general community issues.
- Active areas are better at using the *community* function.
- Facebook groups generate more dialogue involving a wider range of users.
- Exchanges of information between members and posts from Big Local administrators’ personal accounts have more reach than information communicated through the Big Local area’s official account.

We found that Big Local areas tend to post about:

- community activities;
- Big Local events;
- volunteering opportunities.

² For any online community, around 90% of members would fall into the “lurkers” category.

People seem to like debating about community issues and welcome posts about local business, but there are limited opportunities for this type of conversations, as our analysis suggests most posts are mainly information on Big Local activities and events (*information* function).

Interactions that can help build an online community (*community* function) through conversations with members are more prevalent in those areas that are more active on social media. Their profiles show more variety in terms of both topics and contributions from different users. Conversations involving different users can generate a lot of attention (i.e. likes and comments) and tend to span beyond just Big Local activities, often focusing more generally on community life. They can be potentially more effective as part of long-term community building efforts.

Based on our thematic analysis of posts in active areas, Facebook groups would seem to provide more opportunities to engage in this type of two-way dialogue.³ However, given the very

An example of the *information* function

Come and see how your 'hub' [...] is coming along - also, we are supporting the Xmas Lights switch on day in the pop up shop opposite M&S where there will be face-painting, a photo booth, craft stalls etc etc. See you tomorrow!!

An example of the *community* function

Facebook Post

"after what I've just seen at the community centre, I'm so glad my son doesn't go to the youth club, totally unacceptable behaviour by lads climbing the tree and literally ripping the branches off and finding it funny so where's the organisers of the youth club? surely a few words need to be said, we have a fantastic new community centre which we all should be proud off but by the looks of what I've witnessed tonight it doesn't matter about all the hard work that's been put in to make it nice for us all all [sic] they want to do is wreck it"

Replies

"surely then its [sic] the responsibility of parents that when their children attend youth clubs that they remain at the youth club and make some effort to listen to staff but we work with a variety of young people and we are always more likely to work with those who are on the margins of our community for which i make no appology [sic] for those are the young people most in need."

"I think the positives to take from this are that we are sharing experiences of what we don't want to see - trees being damaged - and of how some of us feel when we see this - intimidated."

"Let's look for a positive solution. Great that XXX takes the time to read this page and comment. Hard for the youth workers to be in all places at all times but am sure they will do what they can now they are aware of this issue."

"Important too to let our local police know. They are in the centre now till midday and every Wednesday for a drop in. In the cafe area, with a sign, just sit and talk to them. I think XXX is doing this as I write. If they are aware of particular issues at particular times perhaps they can help."

"A longer term help can be to engage these kids outside positively. One of the ways we want to do this regularly is using music, and there are plans through XXX Big Local to explore this."

³ Out of only seven Facebook groups across all Big Local Facebook accounts, two had some of the highest memberships of all accounts.

small sample it is difficult to establish with certainty a correlation between the type of platform and the type of interaction between members. The higher degree of interaction could simply depend on the communities (and Big Local administrators) involved and how active they are offline as well as online. Generally, and particularly on Facebook, there appears to be a higher response to posts from Big Local administrators' personal profiles than to posts from Big Local official accounts.

The *action* function is about encouraging followers to “do something” or engaging in activities. We identified several posts that serve this purpose, but they appear to be slightly less popular than expected. It is hard to understand actual reach through this type of analysis, however, beyond likes, shares/ retweets and replies, and the effect of “lurkers”.

An example of the *action* function

Free ticket to XXX!!! We need some volunteers to help out at XXX this year. Anybody interested in helping out in return for free food and tickets - PM asap...

Only a handful of engagement tactics dominated; these mainly focused on informing and encouraging involvement – e.g. asking people to volunteer for specific events. Social media advocacy tends to be indirect and broad ranging: unlike emails which can be more selective and targeted at specific individuals, Twitter and Facebook pages require a *mass* approach, as Tweets and posts go out to everyone. This mass approach works better with indirect engagement tactics that aim at a diffused, broad-ranging public; it works less

well with other advocacy tactics such a lobbying, for instance, or addressing specific population groups, which demand a more targeted approach.

In the end, social media represent just one aspect of any engagement strategies; they can help reach out to new audiences but building stable relationships and long-term engagement necessarily relies on a combination of both online and face-to-face approaches. Online channels can be attractive to Big Local areas as well as other

The qualitative study of randomly selected Big Local areas and Big Local areas very active on social media shows that active areas do more community building online and are better able to create a safe space to have conversations on community life, not just about Big Local projects.

community groups, because they are perceived as low-cost. However, not everyone is online, particularly in Big Local areas, where in some case there are also issues with signal strength and connection speed. An understanding of online access patterns is important to decide how much to invest in online activity and to ensure that no one is being left behind.