

'Bowling Alone or Blogging Together'

How Neighbourhood Facebook Groups Are Reshaping Community Participation

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Abstract

'Bowling Alone or Blogging Together' is an empirical account of community, based in geographic reality but played out in the social media realm of neighbourhood Facebook groups. It is an account of how, in the face of decline of traditional forms of association, participation and community-building, people construct new avenues for engagement and participation. Furthermore, this study reveals how this community on the North East Coast of England has utilised social media to rebuild bonds of kinship and reciprocity where they have been eroded by forces of modernity and globalisation and where they have forged new virtual places of association and congregation in the face of disappearing amenities and services. Through several month's first hand empirical online ethnography and participant interviews the research establishes a number of key trends that document a disenfranchised community utilising the Facebook Groups Platform to find a voice and construct a space for meaningful participation, building and nurturing social bonds and blurring the boundaries of space and place as they do so. This research will be of importance for anyone working in the field of community participation whether in the Public or Voluntary Sectors or anyone with an interest in the impact of current and future technologies on the community building process.

Acknowledgements

To Maddie,

It has been commented that undertaking a PhD is a life-changing experience (Gabriel, 2012). In the eight years it has taken me to devise, research, analyse and ultimately to write this thesis my life has changed beyond all comprehension. The one thing that has remained constant was this thesis. To put this into perspective eight years ago I had not even met my wife Beata. My daughter Maddie was still in primary school. Now she is doing her GCSEs.

So eight years, four house moves, a failed relationship, a new marriage, two promotions at work and a global pandemic and this thesis is finally complete. To be honest I cannot wait to see the back of it. There are a few people who have helped me get this far. First and foremost my Supervisors Denise, Julia and Majid for spurring me on especially in those difficult last few months. Sophie and the residents of Grange Farm; Thank you for letting me into your world and allowing me to document your lives. Jo, Alex, Richard and Liz at Scarborough Borough Council for pulling the strings and making it possible for me to undertake the PhD part-time and finding the money to pay for it. Colin and Lindy for believing in me 18 years ago when I was fresh out of college armed with nothing other than a grin and an abundance of enthusiasm. To Beata, my dad Mike and my mum Angela for always believing in me and helping me out on this journey in whatever way they could. And finally, to Maddie for being a constant source of inspiration – you can achieve anything you want to, so long as you put your mind to it.

Matthew Joseph, October 2022.

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Preface - March 2020

As I sit at my computer to type this preface, I maintain half an eye on the ever updating Facebook feed on my iPad. A Facebook group simply named *Sharing* has been set up in my home town. In less than a week since the group has been established its membership has grown to nearly 2,000. Hundreds of these members are constantly active on it. *Sharing* has literally become a lifeline for many in my community affected by self-isolation, panic buying and uncertainty caused by the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic.

As UK society struggles with the effects of 'social distancing', 'self-isolation' and the looming spectre of ongoing 'lockdowns' my fellow residents have taken to Facebook to engender mutual assistance and acts of reciprocal kindness. Food sharing and distribution runs have been digitally organised, seamlessly blending interactions that play out in both digital and physical space. The utilitarian function of *Sharing* has grown beyond a tool to help our neighbours in their hour of need. As the community gravitated there it became the focal point of community contact, the place to share information, give and receive advice, discuss the current crisis and engage in light-hearted gallows humour.

I recently conducted a telephone interview with Donna, a local single parent who founded the *Sharing* group. She had witnessed first-hand the effect that panic buying and the stockpiling of food and household goods was having on the most vulnerable in her, our, community. For Donna, like the residents documented through this research, Facebook was the natural destination to organise a community-led response. Donna's involvement in organised community activity prior to setting up *Sharing* had been limited but she, like those documented in this research, had always considered herself a community-minded individual.

In contrast to the neighbourhood Facebook groups researched for this thesis the *Sharing* group has the benefit of an extra four years of community socialisation and familiarity with Facebook as a legitimate and mature form of community expression. Four years is a lifetime in the Internet Era. The Facebook groups documented in this research were still very much in their infancy with participants to be found making up the rules as they went along. *Sharing* exemplified a mature, more structured and pragmatic approach to digital community building.

Donna explained to me in some detail the process she had adopted in order to select an appropriate team of administrators to help her to moderate the group. Whereas the Facebook groups documented in this thesis were led by small friendship cliques selected primarily for their close relationship and therefore loyalty to the group founder, Donna had appointed group administrators not for the loyalty that they had to her but for the skills, values and experience they could bring to the group. She recruited as administrators a local supermarket worker, a pub landlord, a single parent, a carer and an individual known locally for his preference to 'tell it like it is'. Moreover, Donna explained the rationale behind her choices to the wider group membership from the outset, with benign consensus signalling a collective acquiescence to her decisions.

In my telephone interview with Donna she reflected on the ways in which her involvement with the Facebook group and the wider Covid-19 Pandemic in general had, in the short space of two weeks radically changed the way she viewed her community and fellow residents. She warmly recounted to me:

"I've been overwhelmed with donations of food from local people and local businesses, they have all seen what has been going on on the group and want to help. I had to put my address out there on the group so that people know where to drop stuff off. I leave my garage open so that people can leave

stuff in there. It's unlocked 24/7 for people for if I'm not there. I would never of dreamed of doing that before all this happened. I never had that trust in people. I saw a man speaking to a young child in the street the other day. It was obvious he was not related to her. In the past my initial instinct would have been to view the man as a potential, and I really hate the word, a potential paedophile. Now I just saw him as a friendly man being nice to a child.” (Interview with Donna, March 2020).

What Donna was explaining to me was that her involvement with *Sharing* and the community response to the wider Covid-19 situation had gone some way to helping her to trust. Her involvement had enabled her to trust in her community peers and to trust in society in general. What the Facebook Groups Platform has done, in forging a utility for accessible community participation, is thrust people who ordinarily would not have played an overly active part in their community setting into positions of community leadership. These groups, for all their faults, of which there are many, are providing a voice to the hitherto voiceless whilst simultaneously sending the sociological dynamics of community participation into flux.

What was once an oft-overlooked corner of the World's largest digital social network is creating community leaders out of everyday citizens, facilitating extraordinary achievements from ordinary individuals. As Donna wearily recounted to me in our phone interview:

“Sorry I'm a bit tired, I was up until two o'clock last night on my phone responding to messages that had been sent to the group. I had over 100.” (Interview with Donna, March 2020).

Even from the confines of a state enforced household ‘lockdown’ the medium of Facebook groups is giving people opportunity to ‘defend their sociability’ and participate through the screens of their mobile phones. It may take an international pandemic to help communities realise the fact but perhaps Putnam was wrong all along. Perhaps community never died, it just laid dormant waiting to rise again at a time when we needed it most. What is certain is that the renaissance of community outlined in this thesis, whilst still maintaining the defining

characteristics of shared identity, belonging and participatory action looks and feels a lot different to the community of days gone by.

The research documented in this thesis began in 2015 and focussed on a small Working class suburban community where residents had begun to use the Facebook Groups Platform to engage in aspects of social and civic participation that they hitherto would not have engaged with in ‘real life’, or not at all. I considered the research area to be niche and relatively unexplored at the time. In the few years since my field research was undertaken this subject area is no longer niche. This research presents new arguments in an increasingly explored field.

As social scientists and other academics seek to understand the sociology of augmented community participation through the Facebook Groups Platform they will no doubt contribute to the narrative reflected in this thesis. Recent events have exposed the findings of my research as scalable to reflect the recent mass adoption and mobilisation of Facebook groups as a viable community space. The findings of this research are beginning to be realised on a larger and more influential scale but at the same time they begin to pose more questions than they answer. Questions such as the influence social media platforms can exert on the community participation process and the opportunities that these present to state and non-state actors alike. These are questions that those of us interested in the sociology of community will need to address.

Last night I posted on *Sharing* for the first time. It was nothing serious I was just wanting to know if any of the local shops had any milk on the shelves as we were running low. Within minutes my Facebook feed was inundated with responses from local people providing information on the shops that had recently had deliveries and where I could maybe find

some milk on the shelves. One response in particular caught my attention, it was from a lady who lived in the house opposite me informing me that they had plenty of milk and if I needed any to pop across the road and give her a knock. I had very loosely known this lady for years but only to say hello to and nothing more. This morning as I was putting out my recycling bins I glanced across the road and noticed her returning home from taking her children to school. We struck up a conversation; how we were managing to work from home, what we are going to do when the schools are closed and if her husband is still able to get out to play golf! I cannot help but feel that once this crisis is over and normal life resumes my community will be a lot stronger, a lot more resilient and a better place to live.

Chapter One – Introduction: From Bowling Alone to Blogging Together

Prologue - Sophie's Story

As a middle-aged office cleaner and mother to two recently grown up children Sophie's story is as unremarkable as it is fascinating. She was not born or raised in Grange Farm but married into it both literally (her husband is Grange Farm 'born and bred') and metaphorically. Sophie is what politicians would like to call a community 'leader', 'activist', 'champion', 'pathfinder' or whatever the popular lexicon of the day happens to be. I have chosen Sophie's story to bookend this thesis because above all this thesis is the story of a community and the people who inhabit it. It is their stories that have populated the findings of this research and it is Sophie's story that is most closely linked to the questions the research is seeking to address.

As a former Parish Councillor and committed volunteer with various community projects Sophie is well known and well respected in Grange Farm. It is fair to say she has her finger on the pulse. As a researcher she was my much sought after 'foot in the door' who put me in touch with potential interview participants and helped me get to grips with the geography and nuances of the community. In 2009 Sophie, frustrated with what she saw as a lack of viable avenues for local residents to get involved in their community, founded what has come to become something of a modern day Grange Farm institution; the Grange Farm Past Present and Future Facebook group.

This Facebook group, along with the others that have been established locally in the years since, was a hotbed of community activity. It was the space to which residents gravitated to find out what is going on in their area and to solicit help from agencies as well as friends and

neighbours. It had become a space where social interaction could be nurtured and developed. At the time this research was conducted there were nearly 1,400 individual members within the Grange Farm Past Present and Future group representing approximately one quarter of Grange Farm’s population. At the time of writing that number had more than doubled. The significance of this is not lost on Sophie who was acutely aware of the power and influence of her creation. However, at the same time she reflected on her creation of the group as nothing out of the ordinary. She would proudly assert:

“I wanted people to share, that’s why I named it the name it was, Past Present and Future. So the future bit is advertising of future events. The past obviously is the photographs, memories. I mean I do believe that a few people have found old friends through it and the present bit is just discussion about local stuff.” (Interview with Sophie, March 2016)

As Grange Farm continued to evolve and navigate a path through a number of socio-economic and demographical challenges Sophie strived to place Grange Farm Past Present and Future at the heart of these debates. For Sophie her participation was not only about making her own voice heard but about helping others to find theirs. With Grange Farm Past Present and Future she had found a plausible way to achieve that.

Bowling Alone

This thesis engages a new discussion within what is an age old question; is community participation in decline? There is ample academic literature (Oldenburg 1989, Putnam 1995 and 2000, Bauman 2001, Putnam and Feldstein 2003) that laments on the eclipse of place-based community and participation within it as a social organising tool. The growing prominence of internet technologies present new hope for those of us concerned with the development of geographically constructed community. The invention of the internet and latterly social media platforms have evolved the ways in which humans associate,

communicate and interact with each other (Miller et al, 2016). This is the case at the global and hyper localised levels; social media presents new opportunities for localised communities to come together and collectively engage in shaping a shared destiny. To better understand the contemporary landscape of digitized community participation it is prudent to address some of the arguments put forward as to its decline in the analogue form.

Discussions on the participative nature of community have a tendency to rest on assumptions that portray community as belonging to a bygone era. The latter works of Bauman (2001, 2017) illustrate a view of community that has faded from relevance yet is distinctly rose-tinted. As characteristic of a time when involvement in one’s prescribed social circle involved neighbourly interactions on front porch ways and gardens whilst children played. Of street parties and social clubs. An era when the front door could be safely left unlocked, such was the effectiveness of neighbourhood vigilance. It is this fondness for an embracing and involved community that we collectively hark back to that Yar (2004) suggests maintains the prominence of the concept in an era of significant societal change; globalisation, identity politics and the increasing digitisation of the social-economic World. We seek to understand the impact of these changes through their relationship with one of the cornerstones of our social understanding: community.

Underpinning the arguments documented through this research is the theoretical perspective advanced at the turn of the Millennium by American Sociologist Robert D. Putnam. In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) Putnam argues that a generational shift has occurred towards disinclination to participate in both social and civic aspects of community life. Putnam proposes that a decrease in social and civic participation correlates directly with the decline in prominence of community as a social setting in Western Liberal Democracies. This results ultimately in a decreased output of community social capital. Bourdieu’s earlier (1986) work on the

differentiation of forms of capital argues that alongside economic and cultural capital, the prevalence of social capital within social a setting has tangible effects on societal inequalities. Bourdieu’s rationale identifies these tangible effects as ‘collections of resources’ such as social networks, interpersonal relationships and mutual recognition between individuals and groups that enable them to sustain and / or advance their own interests (1986). Simply put, the Bourdieusian understanding of social capital can be encapsulated by the phrase ‘it is not what you know, it is who you know’.

Social capital is identified as a measure of the bonds, networks and relationships that exist between individuals within a social setting (Bourdieu 1986, Coleman 1990, Portes 1998, Putnam 2000 and 2003) along with other less tangible identifiers such as trust. Putnam suggests that social capital is the metaphorical glue that binds individuals together. It brings about our shared destiny and through it a realisation that we can achieve far more together than we can as individuals. Every sphere of social life benefits when social capital is apparent rather than absent; health and wellbeing, crime and disorder, local economies, education and much more. This claim can be evidenced in general terms through the works of Wilmott (1986), Portes (1998) and Leung et al (2013). More specific studies such as Simons et al’s (2020) study into the wellbeing outcomes of aging identify some of the specific social, emotional and psychological wellbeing outcomes that accompany elderly individuals with strong bonding and bridging social capital. Finally, this study is not alone in finding the positive aspects of social capital through new technologies and digital spaces; Primarily of relevance to this research is the social media platform Facebook. Studies by Johnson et al (2009) and Borch et al (2020) have evidenced links between social media usage and wider social benefits. For example, Borch et al show how social media usage can assist communities in bringing about collective action, whilst Johnson et al focus on the improved quality of life benefits for the individual. Therefore, I propose at this early stage in this thesis

that an absence of social capital in a social setting should be the concern of all those interested in the wellbeing of community.

Arguments are made to suggest that the decline of social capital correlates with a reduction in social and civic participation rates (Putnam, 2000). Throughout this thesis I propose that through participation in their local community individuals engage themselves in activity that is of a wider consequence than home and family life. They are more likely to feel like they have a stake in society, as part of something bigger than just themselves - they are more likely to feel like a community (Wellman et al 2001, Hampton and Wellman 2003, Putnam 2003).

Scholars of community (De Tocqueville 1835, Jacobs 1965, Oldenburg 1989, Raine and Wellman 2012) have warned of the risks associated with the privatisation of the human condition. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg, writing of the second half 20th Century America suggests “Since World War II, Americans have become more affluent; they are also more separate from a community life than ever before.” (Oldenburg, 1989, loc:91%). It is a situation that, according to Putnam (1995, 2000) has evolved gradually throughout the latter half of the 20th Century and early part of the 21st. Hampton and Wellman (2003) identify that academic fears of the decline of community as a social organizing principle all revolve around one or more of three key factors; the weakening of private (interpersonal) community, disengagement from the physical neighbourhood and the decline of public community. The contextual backdrop to this thesis highlights a community that has succumbed to these three factors – social bonds are weakened, shared community space is scarce and the communal identity and culture is strained. My research findings document the proactive subconscious efforts of the community to reverse these trends.

Cause and Effect

The causes of the decline in participatory behaviour at a social and civic level have been suggested as multi-faceted (Putnam, 2000). Each cause singularly not sufficient to bring about societal change unless occurring collectively. Initially, and perhaps most obviously, there have been ever increasing demands and pressure placed on individuals by the modern Western capitalist economy. It is documented (Putnam 2000, McComas et al 2006) that individuals have increasingly less free time in which to participate in activity outside of the home and work environments. Advances in technology and mass media are also cited (Putnam, 2000) as a reason for declining levels of social participation. From the telephone and television to smartphones and the internet individuals can receive the information, and entertainment stimulus that they need in the comfort of their own home without having to associate in public or with others. Also the increased mobility of modern life and continuing urban sprawl, along with poor short-sighted and economically driven town planning (Jacobs, 1965) decisions, have rendered the community less central to the lives of the modern day individual. The above factors, compounded together through generational shift have led to a substantial decline in civic participation and as a result community social capital.

Building on previous work concerning the importance of shared communal space (Hanifan 1916, Habermas 1962) Oldenburg (1989) argues that occurring simultaneously to falling rates of participation is the loss of neutral community space, specifically referred to as 'third places'. These locations, beyond the home and work environments, provide neutral space for people to come together to engage in mutual association. The 'third place', be it the bar, the cafe, or the town square, is essential in providing the space in which social and civic participation can be experienced. Research by Kuo et al (1998) analysed neighbourhood common spaces within inner-city America and documents a direct correlation between usable community space and civic participation. Informal community space is argued to be

a cornerstone of engagement in the democratic process (de Tocqueville 1935, Habermas 1962) as well as an arena where social bonds, networks and connections can be built and nurtured. My analysis of community participation through the medium of neighbourhood Facebook groups in the subject community of Grange Farm clarifies how individuals experiencing this loss of informal community space can come together collectively to build and sustain new active community spaces.

The Rise of Internet-Mediated Participation and Social Media

Correlating with the documented decline in participation rates and the loss of community 'third spaces' is a rise to prominence in internet-mediated communication and more latterly social media. Hampton and Wellman (2003) pose the question of whether the rise in internet-mediated communication has furthered this decline. They state:

"The global reach of the internet has freed people from the restraints of place, but has it made place irrelevant? Is interaction and participation at the neighbourhood level withering as a result of technological change?" (Hampton and Wellman, 2003, p.277).

The above quote echoes the hypothesis put forward by Rhinegold (1995, 2000) that interest and identity would overtake proximity as the main organising factor of community. That as the internet has released us from the shackles of geography our social interactions and associations will be based upon choice rather than propinquity. This thesis challenges Rhinegold's assumption through the adoption of a technologically determined stance that suggests internet technologies can reinforce participation within the neighbourhood community.

'The Facebook Effect'

The advent of social media in the early years of the new Millennium marked a contextual shift in the arena of digitally mediated communication. Miller et al (2016) suggest social media differs from other traditional forms of media in that it is the collected content, posted by users, that defines the term social media rather than the platforms themselves.

This suggestion that content cannot be separated from the offline world and moreover that we have become socialised to accept this notion represents a more recent shift to a digital realm that is interconnected and augmented with the physical realm. The creation of new technology has necessitated a change in human behaviour needed to accommodate it. This thesis takes the position that social life is technologically determined and that at the geographic community level new social media spaces have engendered new forms of local community interaction.

Principle amongst the social media platforms of recent years is Facebook. Facebook gained an active user base on the college campuses of the United States before quickly becoming a staple communication tool for younger people. The platform's expansion beyond the college campuses to High Schools in September 2005, workplaces in April 2006 and finally the general public in September 2006 (Kirkpatrick, 2010) highlight an incremental roll out that, coupled with the gradual release of new features, has kept users engaged and active.

Facebook was, and still is, the largest social media platform on the internet (Statistica.com, 2020), evolving from fashionable networking tool of the dorm room Millennials to a global connection and information utility (Kirkpatrick, 2010). It continues to be the name many in the West think of first upon hearing the term social media or social networking.

The rise of Facebook brought about a shift in internet-mediated communications in a number of ways. The social networking / social media sites that emerged around the turn of the Millennium share three key defining differences from earlier incarnations (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). First, each platform requires the user to create a public profile of themselves which is shared with or viewable to other users. Second, users create a list of other users they share a connection with and finally, they are able to view and navigate these lists of connected profiles. Boyd and Ellison suggest that social networking / social media sites may vary but will by and large stick to within these defining principles.

In this thesis, and in relation to Facebook specifically, I propose two further differences; Facebook's core function was, and still is, a tool to connect individuals with people they already know (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Researchers in this field (Ellison et al 2007, Boyd and Ellison 2008, Quan-Haase and Young 2011) and earlier researchers of the pre-Facebook internet (Hampton and Wellman, 2003) also remark on this characteristic, stating that those who share profiles on social networking sites will share some sort of offline connection. To this day Facebook maintains its policy that users must register and use the platform under their real names. This is important as it allows for distinct opportunities for participatory behaviour to traverse both online and offline space.

Added to this, the core content that populates the Facebook platform revolves around real life events, activities and emotions. These constitute the main focus of social interaction on the platform and as such connecting individuals to events and others around them is placed firmly at the heart of its operational model. Again this is important in that it enables an augmented participatory experience but also it helps in promoting a common bond between users that is firmly placed in 'real-world' experience. My research findings from Grange Farm

support this, demonstrating how localised ‘real-world’ experiences can act as a catalyst for sustained of digital participation.

In the few years since its launch, Facebook has evolved a comprehensive suite of tools and functions. Upon inception the platform limited users to the sharing of short ‘status’ updates and photographs with their bespoke list of chosen contacts. Facebook in 2022 is a multi-use platform of socially based services that is able to host, amongst other things; information and photo sharing, gaming, instant messaging, buying and selling, dating services, pages for businesses and organisations and a ‘groups’ function to bring together like-minded individuals or those who share a particular interest or community. The rise of Facebook and social networking sites in general has facilitated a shift in perception of how society views the internet and the action of ‘being online’.

In the early days of the World Wide Web the dominant perception of internet use was as a solitary activity; an activity that drew distinct parallels with perceptions of TV viewing a few decades before. It was perceived to have de-socialising connotations. The present day dominance of Facebook and social networking sites has flipped this perception of internet use. It is now seen as a truly social activity. My analysis of Grange Farm clarifies how individuals experiencing this loss of informal community space can come together collectively to build and sustain new active community spaces. The work of Antoci et al supports my argument. They state:

“Today, the use of the internet is strongly related to being connected to social networking sites, which in turn entails forms of engagement in social activities.” (Antoci et al, 2014, p.1918).

My analysis illustrates how the Facebook groups representing Grange Farm come to represent both a digital reflection of real life as well as an associated expansion of it and at the same time enable collective rather than singular community actions and decisions.

The Evolution of the Facebook Platform – Facebook Groups

My research is a study of Facebook groups that are specifically created around the geographic locality of Grange Farm. Other than for historical or contextual reasons I shall not be making reference to any of the other functions that Facebook provide. The Facebook Groups Platform was introduced in 2006, (Loomer, 2012). In recent years it has been reprioritised as part of Facebook’s renewed focus to concentrate on connection between people (Sehl, 2018). The Platform brings together multiple users around a shared interest, issue, identity or location.

This thesis studies a particular type of Facebook group and one that is accessible to many Facebook users – neighbourhood Facebook groups. In a departure from a core feature of Facebook, members of Facebook groups do not necessarily know each other in real life. Since the inception of Facebook Groups in 2006 the vast majority of the over 1 billion Facebook users now use the Platform on at least a monthly basis (Guynn, 2016). Facebook’s familiarity and ubiquity means that in 2022 there is a Facebook group for just about everything; from fans and followers of music and fashion to survivors and self-help groups.

Although the functionality of the Facebook Groups Platform has evolved slightly over the years, one constant feature of the function is that there are three types of group a user can create or participate in:

Public Groups - where membership is open to any Facebook user, the group appears in searches and the content of group activity is open for all to view.

Closed Groups - where membership is permitted upon request and approval from the group administrator(s). Content of group activity is only viewable by group members however the group will appear in the search function.

Private Groups - Membership is by invitation and approval only. Group activity is not viewable by non-members and the group will not appear in the search function.

The groups documented in this research were either public or closed groups that represent and facilitate community life within the Grange Farm Community in North Yorkshire.

Grange Farm Neighbourhood Facebook groups represent a forum, established and administered by local people, whereby residents of a particular locality can discuss, debate and share ideas pertaining to their particular area. These groups are a place for local people to have their say on the local issues that matter to them. However, as I will outline in future chapters, they have become about much more. The local residents featured in this study demonstrated how they are using their neighbourhood Facebook groups in a range of pioneering and inventive ways that bring about social and community change offline. These appear to closely align with Facebook's corporate vision for its Groups Platform and its wider community-building ambitions.

Building upon Facebook's original stated mission of making the World more interconnected (Kirkpatrick, 2010) company CEO Mark Zuckerberg outlined at the first ever *Facebook Communities Summit* in June 2017 an ambitious vision of the future (YouTube Kanal, 2017).

The new mission for Facebook was to build upon their original intentions of making the world more interconnected into building and fostering community. The Summit's invited audience comprised almost entirely of group administrators from a wide range of Facebook groups bringing together individuals from various identities, interests and locations into a shared digital place (Romanyshyn, 2017). The implied proposals of the Summit were clear; the responsibilities of social media platforms must be to provide a 'helping hand', to nurture these interactions and enable them to be moulded into the established form of human cooperation that we recognise as community.

If Facebook is to deliver a vision of social connectedness it must position the platform as fundamental to debates on the future of community. In a public letter posted to Facebook Zuckerberg outlines the key areas of responsibility where Facebook will actively work to build communities. He states:

‘For the past decade, Facebook has focused on connecting friends and families. With that foundation, our next focus will be developing the social infrastructure for community’ (Zuckerberg, 2017).

Within this vision Zuckerberg outlines five key responsibilities they must undertake to achieve it. These are building; supportive communities, safe communities, informed communities, civically-engaged communities and inclusive communities. Although not directly referring to the platform as such Facebook as a corporate entity views itself as the *Great Facilitator* of contemporary community.

This research and analysis deals specifically with the significance of locality based Facebook groups within debates on community participation. Its findings contribute to the ongoing narrative on our understanding of how people individually and collectively participate within the community setting. Neighbourhood Facebook groups have come to

form part of the myriad of social and civic life for many towns, villages and neighbourhoods including Grange Farm. A quick and randomised scan of the Facebook search function reveals that out of ten towns or neighbourhoods picked at entirely at random, including from France, Germany and Poland as well as the UK, nine had associated active neighbourhood Facebook groups. Community in 2022, it would seem, is alive and well and has gone digital.

Aims and Objectives of the Research

This thesis builds upon 12 months of empirical research, both online and offline. It examines the extent to which neighbourhood Facebook groups have facilitated a new understanding of individual participation within place-based localities and how this affects the collective community experience. It documents the ubiquitous nature of Facebook at a hyper-local level and presents an analysis of its mitigating effects on the decline in social and civic participation.

There are two main historical trends influencing this question; decline in community participation and the rise in social media facilitated community. So far I have presented a brief outline of some of the key academic theories supporting the notion of participatory decline within the community setting. Further to that I have introduced internet mediated communications with an emphasis on the rise of social media and the Facebook ‘groups’ function. I will analyse these at greater length in the next Chapter. In later Chapters I will incorporate the findings of empirical research to analyse the extent to which locality-based neighbourhood Facebook groups are re-evaluating narratives of participatory decline and the Bowling Alone prognosis. This thesis addresses three key research questions:

1. To understand the extent to which neighbourhood Facebook groups have re-engaged people and communities at a local level and how this compares to and compliments ‘traditional’ participation methods.
2. To analyse the participation experience of those who engage through neighbourhood Facebook groups and evaluate how these experiences translate to social capital and community.
3. To understand the nature of community participation through neighbourhood Facebook groups and analyse the extent to which it impacts on local polity and influences established local power structures.

Underpinning these three key research questions is a desire to understand how the realities of space and place are challenged, developed or evolved by the migration of community participation into a localised social media realm.

Chapter Two – Literature Review: The Core Concepts of Community, Participation and Social Capital

Introduction

In developing this thesis there are a number of theoretical concepts and historical developments that need explanation and clarification. Not least because there is much academic debate surrounding definitions. In this chapter I will document the academic discourse surrounding the three core concepts of the research; *community*, *participation* and *social capital* and establish a sound theoretical framework around which this research will be documented. This framework has underpinned my field research, providing a contextual basis upon which its results can be analysed and an appropriate narrative constructed.

Key Concept - Community

Community is understood as a set of ideals, whether reachable or unreachable, that dominate the human psyche (Bauman, 2001). I concur with Bauman and propose that community is a utopian ideal that is striven for as individuals and as a collective. It is a collective construct whereby common good supersedes individual choices and freedoms.

Early social theorist Ferdinand Tonnies (1887) reflected upon utopian assumptions of community in the development of his influential theories of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gessellschaft*, promoting the notion of *Gemeinschaft* as a cooperative state of human existence characterised by strong social bonds and networks and a situation where the collective good outweighs individual endeavour. *Gessellschaft* on the other hand is the diametrically opposed state whereby interpersonal relationships are forgone in favour of utilitarian, functional or contractual ones that favour personal gain over collective. *Gemeinschaft* is a

society, Tonnies and others (Putnam, 1994 and 2000, Bauman 2001, Crow, 2002) argue, that is the ideal of community that has been diminished through the industrial and economic advances of free market capitalism. Latterly a dominant academic discourse has prevailed that has influenced the popular psyche that understands the concept of community as 'paradise lost', viewed primarily through rose tinted spectacles.

Community is a term which resonates within the social consciousness. It is a term that I propose here to hold power within its letters such is the idealism with which the term is imagined. However, establishing a recognised definition of community has proved problematic. To demonstrate the difficulties faced in defining the term it is fitting to illustrate with a quote, from George A. Hillery Jr whose 1955 study of ninety-four separate definitions of community spawned just one common factor, he states "All of the definitions deal with people. Beyond this common basis, there is no agreement" (Hillery Jr., 1955, quoted by Bell and Newby, 1971, p.27). In this section I will outline some of the main theoretical arguments within the community debate and present a definition of community that will underpin the analysis of my research findings.

Community as a Physical Place

Traditional discourse defines community within the context of physical place. Although perhaps the most simplistic understanding of the term, classic and important studies of community (Lynd and Lynd 1929, Bott 1957, Jacobs 1961, Young and Willmott 1957, Bell and Newby 1971) propose community as an integral part of the social fabric of human gatherings for example the village or the neighbourhood and still hold sway as a dominant idea in our contemporary understanding of the term. Bell and Newby clarify this point, stating:

"By customary usage community often means place...most of the social systems to which we would apply the concept are geographic entities of one sort or another" (Bell and Newby, 1971, p.16).

Being heavily influenced by the dominant sociological trend of the era, Structural-Functionalism, these early studies outline the importance of the shared ideals and values. They argue that it is these ideals and values that underpin and legitimise the social structures and institutions of the modern world (Crow and Allan, 1994). Crow (2002) documents the Structural-Functionalist approach to community studies that was prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s stating:

"traditional' community studies typically devoted more attention to the description of everyday life than to its explanation in terms of abstract theoretical ideas, although they were guided by implicit structural-functionalist assumptions about the interconnectedness of the various elements that contributed to the reproduction of community life" (Crow, 2002).

I propose that Crow is correct in his description of the Structural-Functionalist ideal of community. It is an ideal based on tangibles, of what can be immediately observed as real and physical, based upon immediate geographic surroundings. Other influential academics who have documented what they perceive to be a decline in community in the modern age (Putnam 1995 2000 and 2003, Bauman 2001) document their interpretation of community as one with distinct physical and geographical borders and boundaries. This remains the default contextualisation of the term and as such holds considerable weight as both an organising tool and as a political ideal.

The importance of the Structural-Functionalist doctrine is in the legitimacy that it attaches to societal structures and institutions, advocating that it is community that legitimises their function in society. I propose that structures and institutions are key factors in the processes of attachment and belonging and that they also serve to legitimise community at the same time that community legitimises them. My research findings from Grange Farm progress this

argument to document how digital space in the form of neighbourhood Facebook groups can provide a common destination for local people to engage around or associate with community structures and institutions. As such the common destination evolves into a common bond which enables individuals to attach themselves to community and feel a sense of belonging.

The Role of Networks and Kinship

I progress in the next few sections of this Chapter to elucidate how community is constructed. At the practical level, I suggest, it is through the amalgamation of interconnected networks of social bonds and kinship ties. Since the beginning of human history people have come together in groupings that have been wider than the initial biological family unit. We understand some of the basic reasons for this; Security, co-operation around hunting and domestic duties and not least the instinctual need to increase the available gene pool. Community in its crudest definition can be ascribed to be a grouping of individuals that is wider than family but not as all-encompassing as what we term *society*. Crow and Allan attest to this idea, stating:

“‘Community’ stands as a convenient shorthand term for the broad range of local social arrangements beyond the private sphere of the home and family but more familiar to us than the impersonal institutions of wider society” (Crow and Alan, 1994, p.1).

In developing this definition we should consider the role of social networks in the construction and realisation of community. Willmott (1986) emphasises the importance of social networks in people’s lives. He suggests that the extent to which an individual’s social networks extend influences how they conceive the boundaries of their community. The role of social networks in characterising community interaction was brought to the forefront of academic debate by Willmott and Young (1957) in their famous study of Working Class family and kinship in Bethnal Green suggesting that communities are made up of interlinking

networks of social connections. The Bethnal Green study documented how communities had learned to exploit their social connections to improve quality of life or to alleviate socio-economic problems; it portrayed community as a uniting 'safety net' that was able to curtail some of the negative effects of capitalism and wealth inequality.

Interlinking networks of social connections start primarily with the family, before extending to wider family and kinship relationships and then to friends and acquaintances and so on. I suggest individual networks weave together to form a multi-faceted web of social interaction and experience. The end result ultimately is a realisation of community. Bott's historical research (1957) into familial and social networks outlines that this web of social connectedness was welcomed and viewed very much as a positive force in bringing about pride in an area despite numerous social and economic problems experienced by the urban poor. There is a distinct feeling that comes through from Bott's study that suggests that through the process of weaving webs of individual social networks in an area together, a shared understanding begins to emerge and boundaries begin to be drawn.

Community of geography requires little qualification for membership. Primarily it is qualified through residency within its borders. However, I note here, and document through examples and case studies throughout this thesis, that individual membership needs to be recognised, or at the very least, acquiesced, by the wider collective. My findings from Grange Farm have outlined instances where individuals have had their community membership symbolically removed through the digital participation of others. There emerges a distinct demarcation of who is the 'us' in 'us and them' and from these boundaries social and cultural norms, values and expectations in turn are the result.

Conformity to these shared norms and values brings about the tangible benefits of belonging to a community. Benefits such as belonging, companionship and reciprocal assistance in times of need. These benefits are explained by Bott, she states "If one wants to reap the rewards of companionship and small acts of mutual aid, one must conform to local standards" (Bott, 1957, p.67). In this sense community can be interpreted as a social contract. Collectively held norms, values and traditions are rewarded with the security associated with belonging to the collective.

The existence of social networks act to cement the idea of belonging, or attachment, in the mind set of individuals; an aspiration to belong to something greater than the immediate family setting. They shape understandings of who is and who isn't part of the community - the 'us and them' alluded to by Bott (1957). They also serve to shape shared norms and values and preserve historical traditions and ensure the individual feels a part of something beyond his or her own personal sphere. My research from Grange Farm advances this historical debate by illustrating how people have constructed digital spaces online where these interactions and socialisations can be played out.

Symbolism and Meaning

It is argued that community is not only conceptualised through tangibles; lines on a map or structures and institutions but also through symbols and meaning. Cohen (1985) presents a narrative on community as a universal institution characterised by the individual feelings of belonging to a 'bonded whole'. For Cohen community is constructed symbolically through values, norms and moral codes which provide its membership with a sense of identity rather than a set of structural systems and organisations. Garcia (2018) updates the theoretical narratives of Cohen, documenting how low income communities have traditionally used

symbols and symbolism to claim public space that they have hitherto been disenfranchised from.

Cohen’s work emphasises communities as defined by boundaries, geographical or contextual, that define where a community begins and ends. He argues these are necessary as boundaries ultimately determine membership. Not all boundaries are so distinct and may only exist in the shared set of values and understandings held by its members meaning that boundaries are both permeable and changeable. A ‘consciousness of community’ (kinship, friendship, neighbouring, and rivalry) exists and is encapsulated by this observation and acknowledgement of its boundaries. This argument is supported by Driver and Martell who state:

*“Individuals are not asocial creatures but are shaped by their communities. They become what they are through their social experiences and relations.”
(Driver and Martell, 1997, p.27).*

This symbolic representation of community is where people learn to be social and thus concepts such as culture, tradition and heritage can be learned. This loosely structured vision of community accepts that community is acquired or selected rather than ascribed through birth or circumstance. It is in tune with modern society as it complements the mobile and transient nature of modern living. In this thesis I propose that the symbols and institutions of community are embraced by individuals to facilitate belonging and attachment and if one assumes membership of a community then one must also recognise the structures and institutions that are inherent within it. As I will document later in this thesis, my time spent with the Grange Farm Facebook groups pointed how many of their interactions in the social media space centred around the promotion of recognised, common symbols of their shared community identity.

The Role of Identity

An increased emphasis on the role that identity plays within human associations and interaction changes contextual debates around the importance of community within social relationships. Lichtherman (1999) ponders this question in his research which analyses the extent to which cultivated identities are projected at the expense of wider, pluralistic community attachment. I propose in this section that whilst identity politics has transformed how we collectively perceive notions of community it is also a vital component in its definition and construction. I contest that whilst identity has weakened the importance of community as a social setting it also acts as an integral factor in defining both a community and its membership. I observed the digital participation that characterised Grange Farm and how much of it would revolve around the promotion and strengthening of a shared communal identity.

The desire of individuals to classify themselves through identity can be seen as opposed to the ideal of *Gemeinschaft* promoted by Tonnies (1887). It allows for the provision of communities within communities. The rise of identity in the latter half of the Twentieth Century as a means of social organisation brought people together based on who they were rather than where they lived. Crow (2002) suggests that the rise of identity as a tool of social organisation is coupled with a decline in dependence on traditional social networks. Whilst, as I have suggested previously, research such as Willmott and Young's (1957) study into the Working class of Bethnal Green outlines how the mutual aid of community can alleviate against social problems I also I suggest that socio-economic policy doctrine in the latter half of the Twentieth Century has lessened the reliance on this safety net.

The individual is no longer reliant on community for the 'security' espoused by Bauman (2001). Individuals can now rely on identifying as part of any number of social groups to gain

mutual support and assistance. The rise in Western social democratic political systems, with their eagerness for big government, can deal with the rest. Social historian Hobsbawm (1994) notes the trend toward identity in the Western World stating:

"The rise of 'identity groups' - human ensembles to which a person could 'belong', unequivocally and beyond uncertainty and doubt, was noted from the 1960s by writers in the always self-observing USA" (Hobsbawm, 1994, p428).

As I noted earlier, much has been written about the importance of boundaries within understandings of community (Cohen 1985, Bauman 2001, Garcia 2018). We can observe with the rise of non-place-based community the black and white, in or out, us and them concepts of community are more difficult to imagine. The concept is much more fluid and free moving than that. I propose that within the classical definition, an individual's community was fixed, set in stone at birth and thus created a large part of an individual's identity. As the processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, mass transportation and increased communications have progressed we have witnessed an 'eclipse of community' (Crow, 2002).

Putnam (2000) recognises that, as a product of community, social capital and a healthy society must include an appropriate balance of 'bonding capital' to develop conformist versions of community and 'bridging capital' to recognise and embrace the diversity of community. I will proceed to clarify these definitions further into this Chapter. The key fundamental here is identity and its usage as a common bond to conform membership to a particular community. Common bonds facilitate membership; They could be anything from identifying as a resident of a particular housing estate to identification based on sexuality, ethnicity, religion or interest. Whereas in previous times a community would define an individual's identity it is just as likely in contemporary society that an individual's identity will define their community(ies).

Non Place-Based Community

As I have noted previously in this Chapter, community is traditionally linked with physical place. This next section provides a narrative of how the notion of community has changed to break from these physical constraints (Wellman, 2001). Understandings of community can include those that exist beyond geographical borders and boundaries. As our definitions of community have changed so too have our understandings of its characteristics.

At this stage we begin to understand how fluid the concept of community really is. It is no longer a rigid structure with individuals siloed within distinct community settings. Moreover, it is a series of groupings with individuals often belonging to more than one. The early studies of Bell and Newby (1971) reflect this as they put forward the notion that a number of working class or industrial communities were in fact experienced as two distinct communities for those involved. An example of this would be the traditional Fisherman - whilst he would be an integral member of his own geographical community, he would also belong, by virtue of his occupation, as a member of the fishing community. Both communities will hold different and similar cultures and values. There are of course various overlaps between the two and as Bell and Newby point out, often the community of place and the community of industry would overlap.

The global rise of the internet and modern technologies have aided the development of community landscape further, relegating the dominance of place-based community in favour of facilitating communities of identity or interest. The internet has enabled a breakaway from the shackles of geography facilitating communication and the establishing of social bonds beyond the restrictions of our own localities. Hampton and Wellman (2003) thought about this 20 years ago:

“To many, the ability of the Internet to leap instantly across continents opened up the possibility that community would fragment into new virtual realities of shared interest that negated the necessity, even the desirability, of shared corporeal existence” (Hampton and Wellman, 2003, p.277)

In recent years the emergence of social media have provided a non-physical realm where social interaction and the building of social bonds and social participation can take place.

Digitally enabled community is a community unrestricted by geographic boundaries. However, my research suggests that internet facilitated communities still maintain clearly understood boundaries that are of the imagined and symbolic kind.

Writing in a time before the digital revolution and before the internet had acquired utility as a social organising tool, Cohen’s (1985) theory of a *consciousness of community* resonates with social relationships that can be found within virtual communities. Cohen argues that consciousness of community can take many forms such as; kinship, friendship and rivalry, each of these are apparent in contemporary online communities. Brabazon (2001) takes this argument one step further suggesting that within online communities individuals will take on socialised roles just as they do within traditional community. Bardzell et al’s (2008) and Williams et al (2006) studies of social roles and responsibilities within the popular online game World of Warcraft have shown how the acquisition of these characteristics are valued just as much by members of virtual communities as by members of ‘Real World’ communities. As such we see social roles such as troll, lurker and newbie take shape within virtual communities and the development of shared norms and values that suggest there are clear understandings and expectations of behaviour. An argument I will present throughout this thesis is that community participation experiences undertaken digitally through neighbourhood Facebook groups have too, in many ways, come to mirror ‘Real World’ community participation. I point to how the functionality of online participation mirrors

the offline through what I have come to term as 'participation parallels'. Further to this I claim that residents who were involved in the Grange Farm Facebook groups assumed distinct roles that characterised their participation, for example; administrator, regular poster, issue-specific contributor or inactive lurker.

The doctrine prescribed earlier by Rhinegold (2000) is perhaps a little naive. At the time of his writing a prevailing and influential suggestion was that humans would begin to live their lives online – the internet becoming the place where most of our social interactions and connections would be played out. We now know this not to be the case. What we have come to realise is our online connections have become simultaneously complimentary to and different from our physical interactions and connections. On one hand we can build relationships across the globe with people we have never met in the physical form and on the other we use online communications to consolidate and cement our real life relationships.

There are arguments against this idealised vision. Turkle (2012) believes that our desire for communication through new technological mediums has diluted value and meaning from our social relationships and attachments. My research findings dispute this and I will progress in later Chapters to document how new social relationships and attachments were formed through resident participation in the Grange Farm Facebook groups and existing ones were strengthened. Whilst communication has become convenient, accessible, and instant, its value has declined and we expect more from technology and less from each other. I also suggest the need to consider the question posed by Fung (2006) in relation to who gets to participate. Memberships of virtual communities are not open to all. Consider those who live under oppressive regimes where access to the internet is restricted or limited. Consider those who do not possess the economic ability to purchase a computer or

smartphone. Consider those that for reasons of age or confidence lack the educational knowledge to operate the technology. Therefore, the notion proposed by Rhinegold (2000), that we can utilise online technology to construct and participate in communities of our choosing is weakened as this privilege is by no means universal and only open to those with the political, economic, and educational capital to do so.

If there is one phenomenon that has come to symbolise the realities of Web 2.0 then I suggest it to be the rise to prominence of social media. It is social media that has enabled internet *spaces* to become *places*. According to Gieryn (2000) the sociological understanding of place is of a space that has associated value and meaning attached to it. Whereas space is abstract, place has an identity. The increasing dominance of the internet on social life and social media itself has contributed to an understanding of place that takes on both physical and non-physical dimensions. In less than a generation the internet has evolved from being predominantly a huge information depository to a destination for social interaction. Contreras (2013) typifies the prominence that social media, and in particular Facebook, has within social life:

"In an age where couples meet, date and announce everything from marriage to pregnancy and divorce on Facebook, it is clear that social media has had a meaningful impact on how modern connected human beings live their lives. Facebook has become the de facto platform for sharing life's most meaningful milestones. It is where our announcements become official, and where we celebrate our biggest accomplishments" (Contreras, 2013).

With the rise of Facebook internet use has been incorporated into the daily social practices of many (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Where social media has been pioneering has been in the incorporation of pre-existing social relationships as the cornerstone of interaction. Whereas the social internet of the 1990s and early 2000s brought strangers together to establish new communities based upon shared interest the new social media platforms rely on existing real-life connections transported into and then played out in cyberspace.

There are of course variations on this theme but a number of characteristics are true of most online social media networks. I referred to the work of Boyd and Ellison (2008) in the previous Chapter. Their definition of social media platforms prescribes three distinct characteristics that allow users to:

“(1) Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.” (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, p.211).

At this point we see somewhat of a paradigm shift between the new social media and the social web before it. The internet was originally heralded as the great facilitator that would tear down the shackles of geographical circumstance. It would enable us to interact and form relationships with like-minded people wherever they may reside on the Globe. The rise of social media helps to bring about both, helping to further solidify and enhance pre-existing relationships and connections many of which will be geographical in nature but others not. It is this converging of two worlds, of physical and virtual place, into one combined space that dominates the augmented reality narrative.

As social media networks have grown and expanded, they have weaved their way into our social and community conscious (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). The way in which they operate and function and the user experience has evolved during their short history. Facebook, the default social network for many, has simultaneously become both the new Town Hall and the new bowling alley (Branstetter, 2014) a place where both civic and social participation can occur between networks and groups of people and place-based community can be reimagined.

At this point I propose a distinction between social media and social networking sites. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably there is a slight difference between the two that is of particular importance to my research. The key distinction between the two lies in the word ‘media’. By and large social media is a way of distributing information from one to many just as the print and broadcast media has done traditionally. The difference between social media and traditional media outlets is that social media allows for and encourages direct comment, opinion, and discussion on the content (Burke, 2015). It is the broadcast of ideas facilitated by internet technology that allows for a two-way dialogue. Social network sites are, on the other hand, participation and engagement tools, allowing groups of people with likeminded views or shared interests to come together socially via the web (Hartshorn, 2010). In practise of course, many social platforms incorporate elements of both, allowing the user to broadcast information, news, and opinion to a chosen network of people.

In this thesis, for reasons of practicality and continuity I shall be adopting the term ‘social media’ as the focus of the research centres on the role of the Facebook Groups Platform within a community setting. Facebook groups, as previously noted, are not individually bespoke and whilst a user has to opt in to membership, that membership also includes others who may or may not be known to them - bound together only by shared interest or identity. When a user posts to a Facebook group they are broadcasting information and ideas beyond their own network of family, friends and acquaintances. When a Facebook group is explicitly linked to a defined real life community the participatory utility of the group in the community building and social capital generating process can be analysed.

Networks not Groups

A narrative of community put forward by Wellman (2001) which references the increasingly hi-tech and digitally networked realities of modern life suggests that community no longer resides in collective groups but within individual personalised networks. Wellman expands the ideas put forward by Young and Willmott (1957) and Oldenburg (1989), suggesting that social networks of individuals often ignore traditional geographical boundaries and moreover can be facilitated by modern technologies. He argues social networks have replaced groups as the default social setting in modern society and therefore provide the contemporary default for community definition. Reflecting this assumption, Oldenburg describes the community setting as:

"not defined in terms of location but in terms of the accumulated associations of a single individual. One's friends, acquaintances, and contacts, however scattered," (Oldenburg, 1989, loc:82%).

Hampton and Wellman (2003) expand on this notion suggesting that:

"Communities consist of far-flung kinship, workplace, friendship, interest group, and neighbourhood ties that concatenate to form networks providing sociability, aid, support, and social control. Communities are usually not groups, but are social networks that are sparsely knit, loosely bounded, and far flung." (Hampton and Wellman, 2003, p.278)

My research builds on Wellman's theory in that it demonstrates how social media technologies can be used to increase and enhance the number of network ties individuals are able to develop whilst still enjoying the benefits of traditional place-based community. My research claims that social inclusion is not a zero-sum game, neither residing in all-encompassing community settings nor with individualised networks but rather as Gilchrist (2019) proposes that well-connected communities with tangible bonds and networks between individuals are a contributing factor to success community development. Rather the neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm serve to advance both. What Wellman fails to take into account is how networks are a personalised construct; bespoke to the

individual with no two people possessing the exact same network. An individual's social network will only include others that are known to themselves and whilst there can be certain symbols of attachment that bind networks together I propose it is unlikely that they will be bonded together through a shared common identity. I also pose the question of access and of who is able and who is not able to construct a personal network?

The traditional idealisations of community suggest a social setting which is, at its core, all-encompassing with membership both prescribed and assumed collectively. I propose that the problem with networks as a replacement for community, or even an evolution of it, is that not everyone has equal access to the range of interpersonal relationships (children, elderly, disabled, socially introverted, the less educated) or indeed the necessary tools (appropriate IT, affordable transportation) that are essential if one is to craft his or her own personal social network. Oldenburg (1989) laments on this dilemma:

“Networks are most available to the young-and middle-aged adult, the better-educated, the affluent, those who own new cars, and those most liberated from family responsibilities. The easy transportation, which the network enthusiasts admit is essential, does not exist for children, the elderly, and those who cannot afford decent cars.” (Oldenburg, 1989 loc:82%).

Social networks can form part of an individual identity as it is an individual's network of contacts and human resources to draw upon, bespoke only to them. Networks can generate individual capital and be exploited for individual gain. They will, however, struggle to generate collective social capital without the presence of a shared identity bond. Social networks are important in the overall construction of community but on their own cannot be considered worthy of the term.

The Networked Individual Theory (Wellman, 2001), that community resides in networks of individuals and not groups fails to provide a comprehensive picture. Networks of individuals, once developed beyond the realm of immediate and extended family are by and large

chosen. I propose Wellman's Network Theory to be very much a product of when it was written, June 2001, the very end of 'the End of History'. It is around this time we see the explosive rise of Web 2.0. Rhinegold's (1995) proclamations still ring loud, of new found abilities to choose our social contacts and construct our communities based on similarity and shared interest - with the internet the great facilitator. The personalised networks theory put forward by Wellman at this time is moulded within images of 'cyber-utopianism'. What Wellman neglects to consider is the important role that identity and socialised attachment play in the development of community as a social setting. For whilst some identities may be chosen, played out by lifestyle choices, occupation or interest, some may not, for example, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and so on. Transient and interchangeable networks of individuals are more likely to be void of or express weaker attachment than the socially realised collective of community.

A New Vision of Community

Upon consideration of the theoretical arguments presented in this section I have developed a theoretical framework of community that will be incorporated in the development of this thesis. I suggest that the notion of community has evolved and that its positioning within the social world is no longer bound by geography or place. Furthermore, identity has come to shape community as much as community can shape identity. Whilst membership of some communities may be ascribed by birth or circumstance, others may be chosen and it is suggested that contemporary society provides context and opportunity for individuals to belong to numerous communities at any one time. The context of this is outlined by Janowitz (1952) who advances the narrative that society is characterised by 'community of limited liability'. Participation and involvement is spread across multiple community settings and formats and the risks of falling foul of community opinion or the failures of community endeavour are spread.

I propose that the contemporary social world is made up of a plurality of communities, many of which will overlap. Whilst Putnam (2000) may be correct in suggesting that individual investment is spread thinly across various communities, the modern day plurality of community creates an environment whereby 'bridging' social capital can be more easily realised - as I will outline further later in this chapter.

I propose a theoretical framework of community based upon three core components:

Identity - whether fixed or chosen one must ascribe themselves as identifying with a particular community in order to be a part of it. Identity helps to define the boundaries of membership, of who is and who is not part of the community.

Attachment - factors that affix community membership and belonging into the individual and social consciousness. Attachment factors could include, shared values, traditions, customs, and symbols, shared histories, recognised institutions, and social bonds and connections.

Participation - communities are active entities. Participation is a contributory factor in the creation of community and the development of democracy (Schlozman et al 1999). Whilst I argue that individuals can belong to numerous communities simultaneously I also argue that community cannot be realised in isolation and to this end participation, both social and civic, is needed to weave the bonds of social contact together as well as breathing legitimacy into the institutions and distribution of power.

Alongside the definition of community that has been developed so far in this Chapter I will elaborate at this point on emerging theories of augmented space and place that influence

the vision of community reflected within this research. Emerging theories on augmented reality propose that the digital world and 'real life' no longer exist as separate entities rather the action and interaction within one space intrinsically influences outcomes in the other. Within the context of this thesis I propose that the utility of social media has been woven so deep into the fabric of modern society that it no longer resides as a separate entity but is an established part of the social world.

For many, modern social interaction is characterised by an interplay of physical and virtual action. Human interaction has evolved space and place into what is now manifest in both atoms and bits. Jurgenson (2012) proposes that within previous academic thinking there exists a *digital dualism*. Notions of *online place* and *offline place* are too simplistic an assumption in modern day society. Jurgenson instead suggests that notions of place in society incorporate what he refers to as an *augmented reality* of place whereby the physical and virtual, offline and online, exists in synergy as one, complementing each other as they do so.

This notion of augmented reality can be seen to build on previous academic thinking on technology and society (Morozov 2011, Turkle 2012) that outlines the ubiquitous nature of modern technology and the importance of its cultural impact. It could also be argued that the augmented reality theory aligns much with Wellman's (2001) work regarding Individual Network Theory as these same networks are transported into cyberspace thus enabling interaction within to occur in both online and offline contexts. Jurgenson cites four distinct categories to be considered when attempting to position place within the context of online and offline realities. They are:

Strong digital dualism - The digital and physical are different realities. They have different properties and do not interact or impact each other in any way. Jurgenson himself argues that strong digital dualism almost never occurs save for in science fiction and cyberpunk. The emotions, experiences and personality of the individual will almost certainly be transferable between online and offline realities.

Mild digital dualism - Again the physical and the virtual are different realities but there are minor elements of crossover between the two. This is the historic notion of the Internet, where platforms such as Second Life or Cybertown provide online experiences of place that are autonomous but allow for a small amount of crossover between realities. Sherry Turkle's (1984, 1995) and Rhinegold's (1995) work fits into this category as they proposed visions of a future whereby people would live a large part of their lives within the alternate reality of the Internet.

Mild augmented reality - Here the digital and the physical are part of one reality and interact with each other although they maintain different properties. This is the context that is most aligned with modern today reality. As Jurgenson puts it, "interaction on Facebook is different to that in a coffee shop, but both Facebook and the coffee shop inhabit the same reality" (Jurgenson, 2012). In this sense, the online compliments the offline maintaining similar, networks, histories, friendships and rivalries.

Strong augmented reality - The digital and the physical are part of the same reality and share the same properties. Both realities are one and the same. As with strong digital dualism, strong augmented reality is rare and exists mainly in theory. In this sense it is probably best to align strong augmented reality with the singularity theorists such as Kurzweil (2005) who suggest that the inevitable progression of human kind is merger with technology. Again, for

the time being this is the stuff of science fiction. Jurgenson himself nonchalantly claims that he was rooting for the protesters of Tahir Square themselves, not their phones!

This research tests the viability of the augmented reality claim as a model of community participation and a harbinger of social change. It analyses how participation on a hyper-local level is becoming ever augmented. Throughout this thesis I document how this has occurred, where it has brought about social benefit and likewise where it has failed. Skwarek (2018) proposes how social movements have garnered successes in recent years through the adoption of digital / physical augmented activism. In this thesis I will analyse how the online participation at a local level impacts and influences participation and wider social outcomes offline and vice versa ultimately concluding that the modern community context is evolving to a position where one cannot flourish without the other. My intention has been primarily to understand if community and participation can transcend both online and offline interactions and to forge a unique augmented reality.

Key Concept - Participation

I have begun to outline how definitions of community have been shaped in contemporary society. I argue the ideal of community is an active entity, shaped and understood by the action of participation. The very action of participation itself is a transformative concept with regard to the realisation of community. It is a way of life, ‘a way of seeing the world and a way of being in the world’ (Ledwith and Springett, 2022, pp19-20). In this section I will analyse the role of participation within contemporary community contexts and present an argument that places it at the heart of debates on the modern community ideal which this thesis seeks to address.

Structural-Functional Narratives

I suggest that participation is the 'lifeblood of community'. I borrow from the structural-functionalist playbook to explain the pivotal role that participation performs in connecting the individuals of Grange Farm, institutions, identity and meanings to breathe life into community as a realised organic entity. Structuralist thought proposes community is a way of solidifying the traditional institutions and structures of society. Whilst acquiescing to this narrative the theoretical position adopted in this thesis also notes that societal institutions and structures are used to build and consolidate attachment to community.

What remains consistent between the Structural-Functionalist approach and the argument outlined here is that participation is the key factor in binding both the structures and institutions and the individual together. It is the catalyst that forges community. Institutions and structures are identified as such things as; church, government, labour and family. Through pre-established social connections community is a tool to bind these institutions together and legitimise their status in society.

Participation as a concept is apparent in all levels of social interaction. At its most simplistic it can be observed in the everyday social actions of community life (social participation); shopping, employment, socialising etc. At its most complex it is observed in political action and involvement in decision-making processes (civic participation). As Putnam points out, both social and civic participation are needed to build and maintain community and to generate social capital.

From participation at the ballot box to involvement in community meetings and forums through to active involvement in the organisations of civil society, participation provides the legitimising link between institution and community. It binds the two together through shared

visions and aspirations. This is the case for communities of place, interest and identity although the form that institutions take may differ between them. Jacobs (1965) presents a critique of the American planning system that documents how disconnect between institutions and community can be a contributing factor in the breakdown of society. For example she documents how de-urbanising strategies and zoning restrictions have displaced populations from recognised and familiar services and amenities such as local shopping centres, parks or chains of production. In a similar vein Putnam (2000) espouses how the decline in social and civic participation in the lead up to the turn of the Millennium was responsible for a breakdown in community values and reduced social capital. For community as a social value to be retained and nurtured it must be exercised. It is through participation that this is realised as is illustrated in the Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook groups. At its base participation is an essential function of a healthy community. It helps to ensure the rationale for community life itself. The greater the level of participation the stronger the sense of community that is realised (Putnam, 2000).

One of the main arguments presented in this chapter is how early theories of community shaped by the Structural-Functionalist narrative argue that community and participation play a role and important function in ensuring that society remains cohesive and progressive. I suggest here that community, participation and social capital operate with each other in a very functional manner. That is to say that they each depend on the other two to function effectively. However, the early Structural-Functionalist work of the 1960s and 1970s cannot be realised in isolation. This is mainly because despite vast amounts of statistical data coupled with empirical accounts of daily life they provide little more than a description of a way of life and a testimony to the positive impact this has on societal cohesion (Crow and Allan, 1994). They neglect to sufficiently address the notions of meaning, identity or

attachment that shape participation and influence the complex and changing nature of community.

If it is to be recognised that the act of participation is itself a key component in the understanding of community, how it functions and impacts society, it is the duty of the social scientist to breakdown and detail this component to analyse how it operates within the contemporary community environment. My analysis of community participation in Grange Farm, participation that is played out across both offline and digital realms, has thus far come to realise that participation, along with identity and attachment as the key fundamentals apparent within representations of community. What differentiates participation from identity and attachment however is the degree to which human actions are required to maintain its existence and realisation.

Whilst it is true that an individual must undergo the act of identification in order to identify themselves with a particular community it is participation that I suggest as the ongoing life blood of community as a social entity. It is participation that must be exercised if a community is to maintain relevance within the mind-sets of those who inhabit it.

Clarifying Social and Civic Participation

In this section I will outline how participation is realised in a community setting. I will build upon the work of the social capitalists; (Portes 1998, Putnam 2000, Harper 2002, Green and Fletcher 2003, Babb 2005) who portray participation as dual-faceted and broken down into both social and civic participation. I clarify my position in this thesis for a classification of community participation that distinguishes both social participation (actions which serve to build and consolidate community from within) and civic participation (actions which seeks to

shape policy for the betterment of the community as a whole). However there will inevitably be some crossover between them.

In their works for the UK Office of National Statistics in defining and ascribing appropriate measurement indicators for social capital both Green and Fletcher (2003) and Babb (2005) outline social participation as primarily ‘involvement in groups and voluntary activity’. I suggest the realm of social participation involves not only people’s involvement through within groups and voluntary activity but also the everyday interplays and interactions between community members. Putnam (2000) outlines some of these seemingly insignificant yet socially important interactions in *Bowling Alone*, albeit he refers to them in relation to their decline.

Putnam specifies social participation as including activities such as entertaining friends for dinner, playing cards or visiting local bars or clubs. These activities Putnam refers to as *schmoozing*. It is these activities, along with involvement in organised activity, that develop and nurture social bonds between individuals and develops attachment between individual and community. They are the everyday social actions of individuals that cannot be quantified with any great accuracy but exist to maintain social bonds and the fabric of community life.

Participatory actions such as those referred to above have been highlighted in key influential studies by Young and Willmott (1957) and Lynd and Lynd (1929) as essential in the development of kinship. A more recent study by Akanle et al (2021) has documented the contemporary societal value of kinship in building social capital among Nigerian immigrant communities in Australia. Everyday social activities such as attending the village fete or popping round to a neighbour’s for a cup of coffee serve to promote a symbolic co-dependency between individual and community. These seemingly insignificant activities

reinforce the notion of community and the feeling of belonging into the mind set of individuals. They legitimise it with propinquity and positive feelings. Informal social participation is what is understood by Bauman (2001) when he writes of 'brotherliness' and of community as a 'feeling'. Perhaps the best way of documenting this particular form of involvement is through the words of Putnam when he describes the seemingly insignificant yet crucial role that social activities such as bowling have in the development of community.

He writes:

"The broader social significance, however, lies in the social interaction and even occasionally civic conversations over beer and pizza that solo bowlers forgo." (Putnam, 1995, p.69).

Here Putnam is implying that bowling alone has no wider social benefit. There is another, more tangible, side to social participation. It comes in the form of organised social involvement.

More organised forms of social participation constitute the actions of individuals that aim to bring about improvements to the lives of others or the community through formal activity or association. This could include formal activity such as being part of the management committee that organises the aforementioned village fete or working as part of a church group to organise a local coffee morning. This form of social participation implies the intention of the individual to get involved as these actions go over and above the routine of daily social and community life. Through their own informal and formalised actions individuals internally shape the wellbeing of their community. Whilst social participation encompasses the building of bonds and kinship within the community setting participatory behaviour can also seek to improve quality of life and bring about positive change within local social policy.

Much of the literature on the concept of community describes it as a passive concept, of having a 'warm, feel good feeling' (Bauman, 2001). Bauman's depiction of community, whilst undoubtedly a critique, resonates with the part of us that seeks solace in the protection it provides. For Bauman the 'meaning' and the 'feeling' of the word are positively interlinked; It shelters us from the harshness and dangers of society and provides a space to understand one another and to trust. Yet, whilst it provides 'safety in an insecure world' Bauman is very clear that community is socially understood as a lost phenomenon. Something that promises pleasures that are "more often than not the kind of pleasures we would like to experience but seem to miss (Bauman, 2001, loc:2%). I have explored previously how participation is instrumental as a key fundamental in the quest towards this ideal of community and how the act of social participation is integral in constructing social bonds and networks that are such an important part of the fabric of community life. I will now progress to presenting an understanding of how participation shapes the structures, institutions and governance of communities.

Civic participation is the form of community involvement that directly links individuals to decision-making processes and power distributions. Arnstein (1969) suggests that it is through direct citizen participation that citizens achieve power. The term 'citizen' implies that the individual maintains both rights and responsibilities moreover, as Kymlicka and Norman (1994) suggest, it implies attachment to a community infrastructure. It is civic participation that is concerned with the organisation of community itself, how it operates and functions and ultimately how it shall evolve.

It is civic participation that serves to connect individuals with the institutions and structures of society and therefore legitimises them. Fung supports this assertion stating:

"adult citizens living under such authority should be treated as equals who have, among other liberties, rights to participate in the decisions of that state" (Fung, 2013, p.236).

Fung's position is that institutions of local governance are synonymous with community and its citizenry as they are fundamentally shaped by participation at all levels of social life. As I will reflect upon later in the analysis of my research from Grange Farm when participatory flows within communities are not effective then the relationship between community institutions and citizenry can break down.

How then does civic participation manifest in the modern-day contemporary community? In order to analyse the concept of civic participation I will first address three key questions relating to the act itself with reference to the work of Fung (2006). Fung poses three key questions; who participates and at what level are they able to participate, what are the channels through which participation takes place, and finally what is the causal outcome of the act in relation to decision-making processes. This thesis will add a fourth equally valid question at this point, which is 'what are the values and meanings placed on the act for those who participate?

The question of who participates is a crucial one. Fung's use of the precursor 'citizen' implies universality however it is much too simplistic a notion to assume that this catch-all term will include everyone. What of those who do not, for whatever reason, fall under this banner - the dispossessed or the disenfranchised? It is naive to assume that every individual member of a community setting has equal access to participatory capital (Fagotto and Fung, 2006) or the desire to make use of what they have. In their appraisal of the citizen participation process Irvin and Stansbury document its inherent inequality, they write:

"Because citizen participants are not paid for their time, committees may be dominated by strongly partisan participants whose livelihood or values are strongly affected by the decisions being made, or by those who live

comfortably enough to allow them to participate regularly” (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004,p.59).

A study by Kassahun (2011) of community engagement in community development initiatives in Addis Ababa also suggests that involvement is not open to all and is limited by certain conditions such as prior involvement in community organisation, levels of trust in community institutions and any associated reciprocal benefits that may result from participation.

Both Irvin and Stansbury and Kassahun pose pertinent questions here. Firstly, that of motivation, placing the assumption that the motivation for citizen participation lies with vested interests in the outcomes of the process rather than a desire for collective benefit. Their Journal article for the *Public Administration Review* progresses to ponder the question:

“Implicit in some of the citizen-participation literature is a belief that participatory decision making will automatically lead to more altruistic concern for others. Others, however, see locally based decision making as an opportunity to influence policy for personal gain” (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004, p.60).

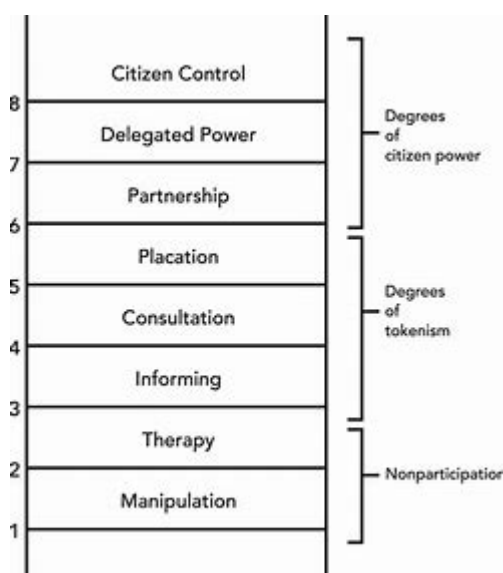
Secondly, they imply that it is those with better life outcomes; the well-educated, those in a secure financial situation and those with more social confidence that are more likely to engage in the citizen participation process. This is supported by Weber’s (1964) research which outlined the dominance of college graduates in various grassroots environmental movements.

Civic participation is conducted at various levels within the contemporary community setting. A prominent academic in this field, Sherry R Arnstein, (1969) greatly influenced the debate on the nature of civic participation establishing a quantifiable framework for which degrees of participatory action can be measured. In her influential article for the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* she states:

“It (participation) is a categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future” (Arnstein, 1969, p.216).

Arnstein documents participation as a series of stages, beginning with non-participation and forms of empty rhetoric and manipulation through to total participation within the decision-making process signified by delegated power models and citizen control. The objective, according to Arnstein, is to develop policies whereby citizen involvement is at the top of the ladder of participation. It is only then that citizens will be able to utilise this power to bring about positive social change. Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation is illustrated in *Fig 1* below:

Figure 1 Illustration of Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation (1969)



In this context Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation is more than a tool to bring about legitimisation and cohesion within communities, it has the potential to act as an instrument of social change. Silverman et al (2008) expand on Arnstein’s ladder approach. Whilst they recognise her work as instrumental in cementing grassroots participation models into the development of public policy they advocate the need to understand the varying degrees to which the participation process impacts other state and non-state actors and not just community members themselves. For Silverman et al, the ladder of participation is too

simplistic as it classifies citizens as one homogenous whole without recognising the existence of differing interest groups and identity groupings that exist within the citizenry. Silverman et al’s study of a high street regeneration initiative in a small industrial suburb of Buffalo, a town in New York State, outlines the complexities of the participation process that are lacking through Arnstein’s model. Furthermore, Silverman et al argue that whilst the policy makers may have a statutory obligation to involve this does not account for the fragmented reality of community and the difficulties of involving all groups within the participation process, especially when they may have competing priorities.

The above is an example of what I referenced in the previous section as the plurality of community and challenges to the hierarchical departmentalised vision of civic participation advanced by Arnstein. Silverman et al and Arnstein also differ on what they perceive as the ultimate end result of the participation process. It is a means to an end, a way of bringing about sustainable and effective development. Arnstein’s work also fails to adequately recognise the various factors that demotivate individuals from participating and how indeed this impacts on their feelings of belonging to their community and could easily lead to a vicious circle of disenfranchisement. For example, Arnstein’s ladder approach suggests nominal or tokenistic levels of participation are imposed by policy makers by the closing of certain paths. She fails to recognise some of the individual and societal factors that prevent participation, factors such as; socio-economic disadvantage, poor education and aspiration, apathy or prejudice.

One of the aims of this research is analysis of the desired outcomes of the participation process within the contemporary augmented community space. Arnstein’s Ladder, with its emphasis on power redistribution, contrasts with more practical reasoning such as the competing priorities of interest groups, the pressure of environmental factors on participatory

endeavours and the desire of some to dip in and out of involvement. Therefore, I have opted to develop a more rational understanding of civic participation based on the realities and pressures placed on local communities.

Civic participation, badged as resident participation, has become somewhat of a buzz phrase in social and economic policy circles in the last twenty years. It is an assumed standard of best practice (Schafft and Greenwood 2003, Eversole 2010). The assumed narrative being that no one knows better the problems (and solutions) of an area better than those who live there. Hence there has been a push for sustained resident involvement in some of the biggest regeneration schemes in the UK in recent years such as the New Deal for Communities and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. Irvin and Stansbury (2004) champion the approach stating:

"A central tenant of the enthusiasm accorded to citizen participation is the belief that citizen involvement in a Jeffersonian democracy will produce more public-preference decision making on the part of the administrators and a better appreciation of the larger community among the public" (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004, p56).

It is at this point that meaning can be explored within civic participation. If it is assumed that the desired outcomes of civic participation reach beyond the realm of improved and more efficient social policy then we must explore the meaning to those involved in the act itself.

A somewhat cynical assumption is suggested by Irvin and Stansbury (2004) who suggest civic participation is a tool used by authorities to bring about a more educated and agreeable community that is more likely to acquiesce to the dominant policy agenda as they feel that they have been part of the decision-making process. I propose that that civic participation can enable a further consolidation of attachment between the participant and their community. If individuals are actively involved in steering the decisions within their community I suggest they are more likely to feel a part of the process and a belonging to it.

Fagotto and Fung's (2006) study of the citizen participation process in a Minneapolis inner-city renewal programme supports the notion of participation equating to increased attachment. Their study found that alongside the desired outcome of improved public facilities in line with community needs and desires the participation process also helped to renovate social fabric and create a new sense of ownership that residents would feel for their neighbourhood and the city in general.

I have now outlined how active participation, both social and civic can build and foster community. In the next section I will progress to analyse how community participation is realised between both horizontal peer relationships and vertically within power structures.

Understanding Vertical and Horizontal Channels of Participation

Community participation occurs on a number of levels. Whilst participation can be denoted by social outcomes or an endeavour to influence power or policy outcomes in social settings, I propose that it is also characterised and delineated by channels or links that exist both horizontally between the community membership and vertically between the community and local power elites. Within my definition of community participation vertical channels of participation tend to reside exclusively within the realm of civic participation whereas horizontal channels of participation could be classified as either social or civic.

Horizontal participation exists amongst peer-to-peer relationships within community membership. Social interaction usually characterises these horizontal relationships however they can also be civic in nature when determined by activity such as peer-to-peer support, mutual aid or community altruism. Ryan et al (2008) and Ryan (2011) expand on earlier studies (Bott 1957, Young and Willmott 1957) to illustrate how intra-community horizontal

network links were able to bring out and foster reciprocal mutual aid interventions within the East London Polish Community as Bott and Young and Willmott’s studies had illustrated with familial ties and the working class communities of Bethnal Green decades prior.

Communities routinely exploit horizontal network ties to achieve social or civic outcomes. Previous works from Wellman (1979, 2001) emphasise the integrity of interspersed personalised networks in the construct of the community setting and how these networks characterise interactions within it. Participation along horizontal lines has been outlined as a major defining characteristic of community social capital (Putnam 2000, Ryan et al 2008) and as such a desirable and sought after quality in any community. Socially it can be identified through the exercising of network links for example socialising, attending local community events or activities or the formation of community groups along various interest or identity lines. Within the civic realm horizontal participation can be witnessed through a number of community-based actions. These could include; community members collaborating or organising to deliver local services or wellbeing initiatives, formally or informally banding together to donate money, resources or time to less fortunate peers or organising self-help initiatives or organisations. A prime example of civic-based horizontal participation would be the formation of self-help or patient-based support organisations for example alcoholics anonymous or a support group for cancer patients. On occasion I propose that civic participatory actions can be both horizontal and vertical in nature. This could occur typically when community members decide to organise around a specific issue and then attempt to engage with local power elites to bring about an identified solution.

Vertical channels of participation exist when communities, either formally or informally, engage with institutions, power elites or local service providers. The nature of vertical participation suggests a distinct power imbalance between each level and that they do not

typically interact on an equitable level. The relationship between participation and localised power is explored further in the next sub-section. Parvin (2020) develops this notion further, suggesting that truly equitable relations between power elites and communities can never be achieved due to the inherent inequalities associated with liberal democratic systems. These channels are not as easy or as natural to enable or facilitate and may require a level of determination by parties on both levels to be developed. Vertical channels of participation are fundamental to the development of a healthy community and, as Jhang (2021) suggests, is representative of healthy political participation within a community setting.

Skidmore et al (2006) suggest that securing effective vertical participation between a community and its institutions enables a wealth of community knowledge and understanding to be incorporated into service design, nurtures democratic principles and the development of local democracy and also helps build community capacity to bring about sustained community commitment. As vertical channels of participation need to be purposefully developed and are less likely to occur naturally they are more likely to fail, be underutilised or not be developed despite their recognised value at all levels. Putnam (2000) suggests that a degree of trust is needed between a community membership and its institutions for effective participation and communication between levels to be achieved. Benit-Gbaffou (2008) contributes to this narrative by highlighting a breakdown in trust and communication between authorities and urban residents in South Africa that has led to residents disengaging with officially recognised participation channels in favour of engagement with peers through purely horizontal links – most often with little result.

I propose that a healthy participatory environment where communities are able to effectively influence service provision and local policy outcomes requires a level of both civically determined and effective vertical participation alongside effective organisation and

participation along horizontal levels that enables democratic involvement and the exploitation of network and kinship bonds; I have referred to this previously as community commitment. Where participation is not apparent on a horizontal level there often lacks organisation or a critical mass to effect change and when vertical channels of participation are absent there is not effective direction of travel for utilised horizontal networks to be channelled in order to effect change.

Participation as Power

Linked to concepts of vertical, and to a lesser extent horizontal, participation, is the notion of power. It is how power is exercised and experienced through participatory activity that is of relevance to the research documented in this thesis. As I will advance to explain further, the neighbourhood Facebook groups researched for this thesis represented arenas of local power but the distribution of power within these spaces was far from egalitarian.

The concept of power and its position and influence within society has been a much considered phenomenon. Recent influential theory in this area is pioneered by Sociologist Steven Lukes (1974) who suggests that there are 'three faces' to societal power; decision making, non-decision making and ideology. To expand on this premise, decision making power is the most obvious and visible dimension to societal power – centered around control of policy, the political process and the means to affect change. Lukes argues that non decision-making power occurs more discreetly through processes such as 'agenda setting' and control over the framework within which participation and involvement can occur. Finally, Lukes proposes a third face of power, ideological, whereby prevailing societal ideas, norms and expectations influence the wishes or behaviours of individuals or groups, to the detriment of their own interests.

Lukes’ work in this area has been expanded on by other academics (see, for example, VeneKlasen and Miller 2002, Gaventa 2006, Dowding 2006) seeking to understand the pivotal role that the concept of power plays in society and within societal relations. Dowding expands Luke’s rationale for ideological power suggesting that there are a multitude of factors that come into play when ascertaining the reasons why dominated people do what they do; values, preferences, interests, beliefs and desires. These may both ‘naturally rationalised’ and unconscious. He suggests individuals can be willing actors in their own domination.

VeneKlasen and Miller present a rationale of power based on how it can be expressed, both positively and negatively. They state that societal power is “dynamic and multi-dimensional, changing according to context, circumstance and interest” (p.39). Moreover they recognize the importance of the private and intimate realm, as well as the public realm, in the distribution of power. A concept they credit to academic thought emerging through Women’s Liberation and Feminist Movements of the 20th Century. VeneKlasen and Miller propose that power can be expressed as the following:

Power over – the most commonly assumed expression of power, concerning the ability of individuals or groups to control, either through coercion or through less draconian means, the actions and behaviours of others.

Power with – the ability of individuals or groups to work alongside agents of power in partnership and / or collaboration with others to advance common, shared agendas.

Power to – individuals or groups possess the means and ability to wield any such power, exercise agency and shape their own outcomes.

Power within – represents the self-knowledge of individuals or groups to recognise their own capacity to affect change and to develop a vision to achieve this.

Perhaps, however, the narrative on power that is of most relevance to the subject of my research resides within the work of Gaventa (2006) and to a lesser extent Goetz and Gaventa (2001). Gaventa (2001) seeks to understand the concept of power and its influence on society not only through the three faces of power described by Lukes but also in terms of the spaces within which power and power relationships play out. Gaventa’s Power Cube hypothesis suggests that, as with Lukes, power is exerted through three distinct forms; Visible (decision making power), hidden (non-decision making power) and invisible (ideology). These forms of power play out at different levels; Global, national and local. And, importantly for understandings of power and participation reflected upon in this study, power occupies three types of space; Closed (spaces where citizens are denied participatory access), invited (spaces where the powerful allow citizens to engage for examples through co-production of policy and partnerships) and claimed / created (spaces whereby citizens carve out their own spaces within which to enact agency and exert power). It is the third of these three spaces that is of most importance to this research for it was the creation of shared digital spaces, at the local community level, and the potential power relationships that inhabit them that I was keen to analyze.

I will return to the above theoretical perspectives on societal power at three distinct points further in this thesis. Firstly, in presenting an explanation as to how the concept of power or ‘powerlessness’ has contributed to participatory decline within my research community of Grange Farm. Secondly, when outlining the results of my observational research concerning the online social media activity of Grange Farm residents and how these activities did and did not correspond with the conceptualisations of power noted above. Finally, I will address

how theoretical conceptualisations of power are understood within spheres of political influence identified through my research.

Within the sphere of participation, if conditions are right then the participation of the Citizenry is intertwined with the decision-making process. Likewise with Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969) the levels of participation on the higher rungs of the ladder represent degrees of decision-making power that are not apparent in the lower rungs. Underpinning both decision making power and non-decision making power is, according to Lukes, the concept of ideology. It is through ideology that individuals and communities are aware of their rights and abilities to possess power in the decision making process through their participation. If they are not aware of that their participation in civic and community matters will bring about change they are less likely to engage.

Participatory Decline

Given the importance attached to the act I suggest any documented decline in participation rates to be undesirable. Putnam (1995, 2000) pioneers the theory here. *Bowling Alone* outlines key causal factors, both social and civic, that have led to declining rates of participation and social decapitalisation in Western Democracies. He couples this with commentary on the negative social, economic and environmental consequences of the process. For example, declining rates of social interaction can have negative effects on individual health and wellbeing or a reduction in social ties and bonds between neighbours can lead to less vigilant communities and more opportunities for crime to occur. Putnam cites several reasons why rates of social and civic participation have reduced. These include; increased mobility, pressures of time and money, increased state welfare, home-based entertainment mediums, technology and the mass media and the loss of trust in authority and government. No one of these factors alone, he argues, is able to dismantle

the civic consciousness of the average person. However, put together and coupled with attitudinal change from generation to generation this has led to a perfect storm of selective social and civic disenfranchisement. A 2011 report from the UK National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) supports these claims providing statistical data across over 30 years that document a decline in both local social and local civic involvement.

It is one of the objectives of this research to challenge the theory and evidence presented by Putnam within a modern day context and to analyse whether new social driven internet technologies have reversed this decline in participation at a community level. I noted earlier Wellman et al (2001) argue that the internet has served to strengthen social ties and helped facilitate interactions between social networks. I also noted earlier Wellman's (1979) proclamation that community now resides within social networks rather than groups of people, his co-authored 2001 work certainly reflects such. Whilst he argues that the internet can help to cement social networks he neglects to comment on how or if the internet can play a role in citizen participation and the creation of social capital at a community level.

Key Concept - Social Capital

The final key concept that I will explore within this chapter is social capital. Social capital can best be described as the value of social connections, their existence, quality and how they are utilised within a community setting. Hancock (2001) expands on the work of Bourdieu (1984) to suggest that, along with economic capital, human capital and natural capital, social capital comprises community capital that can be used for the betterment of individual and collective wellbeing. Whilst Bourdieusian notions of social capital focus on its positive outcomes for the individuals and collectives that possess it they also reveal certain negative aspects around social capital as a tool of power. As with economic capital it can be used to the betterment of those who possess it while those who do not are disadvantaged

and, furthermore, social capital, as with other forms of capital, is often aligned with economic capital further deepening inequalities. This section will explore theoretical notions of social capital and how it is espoused as both a positive and negative societal force.

The accrued social benefits of social capital are enjoyed by both the individual, as proposed by Brehm and Rahn (1997), and the collective alike. Some academics (Putnam 1995 2000 and 2003, Portes 1998) argue that social capital has a productive value, used to bring about social good through social investment. I have proposed that it is the components of identity, attachment and participation that constitute the fabric of community. I also propose that a community that reinforces shared identity and attachment through active participation is best placed to accrue social capital. I argue that social capital is the natural progression of community should its membership maintain an active participation in the social and civic areas of community life.

Social Capital Indicators: Connection, Cohesion, Capacity and Commitment

From an analysis of historical literature (Coleman 1988, Lochner et al 1999, Onyx and Bullen 2000,) I propose that social capital is determined by a number of indicators which I will outline below:

- Connection - the extent to which individuals and groups are linked to each other through bonds of kinship and social networks.
- Cohesion - what is the nature and quality of these connections and do they serve to bring people together under a shared agenda?
- Capacity - does the community membership possess the skills, both individually and collectively, to enable it to bring about change and influence its own destiny.

- Commitment - how communities exploit connectivity and cohesion to bring about individual and collective improvements.

Again the emphasis here is upon community as an active entity and it is these community characteristics that were studied throughout this research.

Connection denotes the bonds and networks that exist between individuals and groups within a community setting; the personal and collective relationships that individuals hold with others within their community. These accrued networks of kinship bonds characterise social relationships. Bott (1957) notes the connection between kinship networks within the community setting. She states:

"When many of the people a person knows interact with one another, that is when the person's network is close knit, the members of his network tend to reach consensus on norms and they exert consistent informal pressure on one another to conform to the norms, to keep in touch with one another, and, if need be, to help one another." (Bott, 1957, p.60)

Connection between community members provides both conforming and altruistic qualities needed to realise a functioning community. A situation whereby shared norms and values are easily assimilated and reciprocal forms of assistance are easily facilitated. When an individual has connection with others they open the door to extra forms of help and assistance, new avenues for news and information dissemination and new opportunities for collaboration. Only when there is a functioning and established network of social bonds between individuals in a community can cohesion be realised.

Community cohesion is the absence of major conflict or division between intra-community groups along with shared visions and aspirations for the future. Furthermore, Putnam (2000) denotes the importance of trust within the context of community cohesion. Trust, and associated acts of reciprocity are, according to Putnam, suggestive of a community that

yields social capital. Putnam identifies two forms of social trust, 'thick trust' which is apparent within personal relationships and embedded within social networks and 'thin trust' which exists amongst the everyday interactions between community members. 'Thick trust' can and does occur anyway through family, friendship and kinship ties as a natural consequence of positive human relationship. 'Thin trust' however binds together those within communities that are not personally known to each other. It is 'thin trust' that is of importance to the notion of community developed here. It is 'thin trust' that exists between groups and networks within an identified community and occupies social space between the realm of friends and family and wider society. A cohesive community also maintains a shared pride felt by its members where a level of shared history, culture and values are apparent. All of which can be utilised to bring about positive collective gain.

I have presented a rationale of community and social capital that relies on active involvement through social and civic participation. However, a desire to participate is fruitless in achieving social capital in the absence of required knowledge, skills and experience of its members. Communities must harness a capacity to proactively participate in their own development. This may be through the presence or development of practical or educational skills of individuals that enable communities to better represent themselves, fight injustices or develop community-based solutions. Capacity can also be realised by the presence of collective traits held by the community as a whole such as the ability to effectively resolve intergroup conflicts or to promote shared traditions and understandings. Simpson et al (2003) analysed 'bottom up' community development initiatives in Australian Aboriginal communities and argued for the need for appropriate capacity building processes to ensure sustainable community development. They state that:

"If communities are to survive economic and social crises, the popular argument is that they can best do so by becoming empowered, by building their existing capacity and by using the skills they have to make their own futures." (Simpson et al, 2003, p.278).

An increasing rationale from governments and service providers to act as facilitators of development rather than instigators of it has ensured that the capacity of local communities to fully engage is ever more important. Whilst community capacity can be reflected by the bonds, trust and reciprocal arrangements that are present in a community setting it is just as apparent certain skill sets, acquired knowledge of life experiences are needed by its membership if said community is to be in command of its own destiny.

Finally, I propose the last indicator of social capital to be that of that of community commitment. Community commitment is a term coined by Wellman et al (2001) to define how the utilisation of social bonds and networks, trust and reciprocal arrangements and acquired capacity can bring about shared positive outcomes. I propose Community commitment denotes social capital as an active force that is characterised by evidence of further and continued civic participation. I argue that community commitment is the process whereby communities put the other characteristics of social capital (connection, cohesion, capacity) into action. It is where they capitalise on their collective strengths to bring about positive change for the community and complete the virtuous circle of participation. It is the commitment of the community that is needed for self-determination, void from the influence and control of external agencies so that communities may command their own destiny.

Bonding, Bridging and Linking Capital

Whilst on the surface the presence of social capital within the community setting appears to possess only positive value it is worth noting at this stage how some academics, including Putnam himself, have noted how the concept can be a double-edged sword, whereby strong social connection within a group can lead to conflict and division with those outside the

group. As I outlined at the beginning of this section, perhaps the most prominent critique has been developed by Bourdieu (1984) who notes the utility of social capital as a means of oppression whereby those higher up the social order utilise their networks and connections to maintain their status. Those without social capital are unlikely to advance up the social order as they do not have the right connections or know the right people. By its nature this state of affairs self perpetuates. However, Putnam (2000) and studies conducted more recently (Poortinga 2012, Claridge 2018, Page-Tan 2021) have stressed the importance of a plurality of forms of social capital necessary for communities to be cohesive and sustainable. Notably these forms are usually broken down into ‘bonding’, ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ capital.

Bonding capital is the presence of social ties and networks between people and is usually bound through common identity. Whilst this is to be commended, taken on its own, bonding capital can be a destabilising force as it creates bonds between individuals that can often exist at the expense of other groups or communities. Classic works from Portes (1998) and Putnam (2000) inform us how the act of ‘bonding’ by its definition excludes, disenfranchises and disadvantages those outside of the bond. More recent, and thematic, studies (Ryu 2015, Daykin et al 2021) attest similar conclusions. The phenomenon of ‘othering’ would come to characterise the observations of my ethnographic research in Grange Farm in relation to social capital; I would observe the community social media groups as a social capital resource, those who interacted in those spaces and observed the collective norms would reap benefit from this resource, those who could or would not were denied it. Put simply, too much bonding capital can lead to an ‘us and them’ mentality. I would observe this first-hand through the Grange Farm Facebook groups studied in my research. Whilst the groups were suitably placed to create and solidify social connections between the residents of

Grange Farm this would often occur at the expense of outsiders and trust relations with local power elites.

In order that harmonious relations can exist between groups and communities of people it is argued by Putnam (2000) that bridging capital is necessary. It is bridging capital that breaks down the barriers of ‘us and them’ and forges relations between similar groups. As this thesis will progress to identify in later discussion chapters the Grange Farm community Facebook groups did very little to forge such relations and as such outsiders were viewed with suspicion. I would observe this starkly, for example the attitudes and behaviours towards a local Gypsy Traveler camp and more subtly through residents’ reflections on how they believed Grange Farm was neglected in favour of other more affluent nearby communities.

Finally linking capital is the existence of cordial and mutually beneficial relationships between members of a community and their local power elites. Szreter and Woolcock (2004) state:

“In recent years the concept of ‘linking’ social capital has been developed. Linking social capital is defined as the ‘norms of respect and networks of trusting relationships between people who are interacting across explicit, formal or institutionalized power or authority gradients in society’” (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004)

I set out at length in Chapter 7 how these vertical channels of participation between residents and local institutions were virtually non-existent within the Grange Farm Facebook groups. Of particular note to this study is the work of Jordan (2015) whose study of disadvantaged communities in the USA stresses particular importance on the need for linking capital within more disadvantaged communities as a means of addressing social inequality. Throughout my ethnographic research I would be observing for identifiers of bonding, bringing and linking capital in both online and offline community life in Grange Farm

From Participation to Social Capital

I suggest that social capital is unlikely to appear from nowhere and needs to be produced. As financial capital is generated by economic activity (trading, manufacturing, farming etc), social capital is generated by community participation, both social and civic, formal and informal. This notion is strongly argued by Putnam (1995, 2000) when he addresses the decline of social capital. Putnam links the resulting social ills to a lack of participation in civil society. Putnam's argument was not entirely new. De Tocqueville (1835) suggested that Western Democracies, were built upon a sound realisation of civic engagement not too dissimilar to the notion of 'civitas' in Classical times. It is this formalised participation that brings about tangible collective benefits for community and society.

I propose social capital as a phenomenon that needs to be developed and nurtured within the community structure. A society of independent individuals, and their families, will struggle to realise the benefits of social capital. Through participating socially, by growing and consolidating kinship networks and a reciprocal trust, and civically by forging shared allegiance and aspirations a stable community platform can be built upon which social capital can emerge. Whilst as a phenomenon that is generated collectively social capital is experienced or realised differently at an individual level with some able to accrue or benefit from more than others.

The Importance of Social Capital?

Why is social capital so important? Putnam (2000) argues a number of reasons. Firstly he advocates that social capital assists citizens in developing collective solutions to collectively experienced problems. Secondly, he argues that when social capital is present there is more

of a propensity to trust other members of the community. This he argues helps 'grease the wheel' of social, economic and political development. He states:

"There is no need to spend time and money making sure others will uphold their end of the arrangement or penalising them if they don't" (Putnam, 2000, p288).

Finally, Putnam argues, social capital allows us to understand the many ways in which our individual fates are linked within the collective, as he puts it:

"People who have active and trusting connections to others - whether family members, friends or fellow bowlers - develop or maintain character traits that are good for the rest of society. Joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more apathetic to the misfortunes of others" (Putnam, 2000, p288).

Leung et al (2013) further stress the importance of social capital by reflecting on the benefits of having social capital for the individual. They suggest that the acquisition of personal happiness correlates with their experiences of social capital within the wider community setting. Wellman et al (2001) add a crucial extra important factor to Putnam's list. They argue that social capital is reflected through increased motivations to participate. Therefore, they suggest that a community with realised social capital will be more motivated to participate in its further development and improvement as its membership feel a sense of attachment and identity with the collective. Wellman et al refer to this as 'community commitment' and it is this commitment that helps community become self-fulfilling representing a 'virtuous circle'.

As community develops and identity and attachment factors are formed, individuals by design and decision will be more inclined to participate. Increased participation will also serve to further cement feelings of identity and attachment into the individual psyche promoting the importance of collective ambition and wellbeing - in doing so unlocking desires for further continued participation.

'Social Decapitalisation'

Putnam's work at the turn of the last Millennium created a sociological debate that strikes at the very heart of my research. The *Bowling Alone* prognosis states that various societal changes have caused a decrease in social and civic participation at all levels of society and have resulted in the decline in importance of community as a social setting and the reduction in accrued social capital. The latter being of detriment to a number of established quality of life indicators. How has what Putnam (2000) refers to as 'social decapitalisation' been brought about?

The assertion that there has been a significant decline of community is not a new one. Putnam himself acknowledges this in *Bowling Alone*, stating "debates about the waxing and waning of 'community' have been endemic for at least two centuries" (Putnam, 2000, p.24).

As I have earlier documented some of the early schools of thought on the concept of community had pitched the concept as belonging to a bygone age. To answer the question of how this situation has come about I propose a multi-lateral approach, starting first with family and kinship networks. I have referred to Willmott's (1986) work on social networks earlier in this chapter and shall now return to him here. Willmott suggested that community is constructed by the development of social networks between individuals and families and that attachment to community is strengthened by continued participation in these networks. He continues to proclaim that advancements in communications and transportation have brought about a more mobile and transient populace that will happily break kinship ties in order to seek employment elsewhere. The forces of Globalisation have taught us to become aware of events and issues beyond the boundaries of our traditional communities. These two elements, among others, have had a destabilising effect of the traditional community.

I point also to the changing nature of community itself as causal factor in the social decapitalisation process. Earlier in this chapter I concluded that community as a social institution is changing, becoming more fluid to fit the demands of an increasingly globalised and pluralist world. It is entirely plausible for participation to be split and shared amongst various communities thereby leading to a dilution rather than concentration of social capital. Janowitz (1952) reflects on this, espousing a 'community of limited liability', where individuals avoid putting all their social eggs into one basket the risks of non-conformity and estrangement are reduced at the cost of collective reward.

The question should be asked; is social capital in decline or has it simply changed? Can social capital be nurtured in other settings and institutions that have arisen in the few years since Putnam's prognosis? I mainly refer here to the ever increasing dominance of the internet upon social lives. Whilst it is true to say that the internet existed at the time of Putnam's writing it was still very much in its infancy. Social interactions were limited to electronic mail and the emergence of bespoke identity communities.

The internet has forged new 'places' for social interaction based on individual choice and interest (Chouchani and Abed, 2020) but has only recently become woven into the fabric of our everyday place-based communities. Hitherto avenues for citizen participation remained by and large as they always had done; attending community meetings, writing to the local paper, voting in elections etc... Is it possible that as social media has become more and more prominent in our daily lives and the fabric of interactions within our communities that new opportunities for social capital creation have been opened up? To what extent has social media 'enfranchised' community members into the citizen participation process - those who would ordinarily have avoided the drafty community centre meetings or not had

the confidence to speak out publicly? And does digital participation cross over into real life with experiences and interactions holding value and meaning in the ‘real world’ space. These are some of the questions at the heart of my research.

Contemporary Research on Facebook as a Platform for Community Participation

Within the last ten years a wealth of new research has begun to emerge through the social sciences that has documented the participatory utility of neighbourhood-based Facebook interaction within the community context (Kelly and Findlayson 2015, Tsatsou 2018, Eimhjellen 2019, Borch et al 2020, Clifford et al 2020, Metallo et al 2020, Witten et al 2020, Murayama and Sugawara 2021). As a growing area of research, particularly in respect of community interaction throughout the social restrictions imposed by governments during the Covid Pandemic and its aftermath, my research provides a continued narrative on the role that neighbourhood Facebook groups can play in contemporary community participation.

With regard to what I have classified as social participation in recent academic discourse a couple of studies are of particular interest to my research. Clifford et al’s (2020) study of localised Facebook groups in Northern Australia points to how they have been adopted by communities, often those where distance proximity of residents can be problematic, outlined how they utilise these groups as their pre-eminent source to gather local news. The same study also uncovered that the same groups were active as spaces where discussions on local issues could take place and community opinion could be formed. Recent work by Greidanus et al (2020) has evidenced how online activism not only yields offline rewards but also assists the community building process through the collation of individual experiences, norm formation and the development of shared realities. Later in this thesis I will outline how what I term as the ‘noticeboard function’ and the ‘agora function’ emulate these same outcomes in my host community of Grange Farm. A study by Borch et al (2020) goes one

step further by suggesting that one of the key purposes of modern day neighbourhood Facebook groups is to provide mutualised moral support between residents. This is further backed up by Witten et al’s (2020) study into Facebook groups operating within new urban residential builds. They do this by building and exploiting kinship between them and I shall be commenting further on this later in the thesis when I document what I have come to term the ‘bowling alley function’ of neighbourhood Facebook groups.

In the realm of civic participation, the same study by Borch et al proposes that one of the key aspects of the functionality of neighbourhood Facebook groups is their utility in enabling the organisation and co-ordination of local people. In a finding not too dissimilar to the results of my own research their study of anti-wind farm protest Facebook groups in Scandinavia they suggest that the ubiquity and ease of access to the platform places it in a prime position to act as enablers of organization and co-ordination between individuals mounting localised protests. Furthermore studies of online civic participation through social network sites in India by Kaur and Dangi (2021) have yielded similar results, suggesting that social media usage aids the development of behaviours that foster civic participation. There are parallels to be drawn here with my research from Grange Farm which also documents neighbourhood-based Facebook groups as a suitable community co-ordination tool. Likewise with my research in Grange Farm Borch et al point to the fact that the organisation and co-ordination utility of these groups is limited with regard to more sustained or in depth civic participation where it was more practicable to migrate people’s participation into the offline sphere.

The trend for online interactions through community Facebook groups to be complimented offline participation is continued through studies by Eimhjellen (2019) and Murayama and Sugawara (2021). Eimhjellen’s comparative study of digital and traditional forms of

volunteering suggests that various hybrid models of volunteering now exist with digital volunteering often fulfilling a complimentary role to more established forms. They also note how digital volunteering, in the community context, can act as a suitable stepping stone into longer term and more committed volunteering. The emerging theme of augmented participation across digital and analogue realities is a phenomenon that I will explore at length through this thesis. Finally Murayama and Sugawara’s recent study of Japanese neighbourhood-based social support networks outlines how Facebook groups were able to co-ordinate mutual aid and assistance for vulnerable people negatively impacted by socialising / movement restrictions. As I documented in the Preface to this thesis neighbourhood Facebook groups have been the default social space for communities looking to organise support systems during the Pandemic. As I will argue throughout this they have also fulfilled such a role in relation to other dissocializing factors.

Conclusions

This chapter has given an analysis of understandings of community and forged a new narrative that has evolved the structural-functionalist assumptions of the term to forge a new definition that reflects societal trends such as identity politics, individualism and pluralism. I have suggested a doctrine of community that is based upon three fundamentals; identity, attachment and participation. At the same time making a case for rejecting the argument that community resides now in individual networks I have also presented an understanding whereby these networks act as important attachment factors to community rather than as community itself. I have proposed that community cannot be experienced in isolation, moreover, it is an active entity based upon the participatory actions of its members. Participation, both social and civic, coupled with strong feelings of identity and attachment factors at sufficient levels within a community can lead to an arousal of social capital,

characterised by connection, cohesion, capacity and commitment and which in turn serves to strengthen the fundamentals of community itself.

I have progressed to document the modern context within which the notion of community resides, outlining it to be one in which multiple communities co-exist with each other. Individuals can and do claim membership of numerous communities both simultaneously and throughout the course of a life time. I have also documented the rise and characteristics of digital community including the more recent phenomenon of social media. Progressing finally to present an overview of some of the recent findings from sociological research into neighbourhood-based Facebook groups.

Forming this Chapter as a thesis literature review has enabled a clarification of a new of key definitions integral to the research topic. An analysis of the Structural-Functionalist narrative of the immediate Post-War decades along with a recognition of the importance of symbolism in community identity formation and the need identified by modern social capitalists for meaningful participation at all levels has enabled me to construct a bespoke understanding of the concept of community. It is an understanding that recognises the importance of identity as a common bond to bind individuals to the collective. In turn identity needs to be reinforced by attachment, symbols and meanings that reinforce the collective identity. Finally my understanding of community influenced by literature in this arena is active rather than passive. Both socially and civically, members of a community must engage and interact for the concept to fully realised and moreover there must be common areas of mutual attachment between the membership that fashions an overall common bond.

My study of the literature in the arena of participation has enabled me to develop an understanding of the concept that involves both everyday, informal social activity with

concerted formal and organised civic activity that seeks to redress power imbalance or to enact positive social change. Finally through an analysis of the works of the modern social capitalists I have crafted an understanding of social capital that places at its heart the four key determinants of connection, cohesion, commitment and capacity.

This literature review has also inspired a number of crucial questions that were crafted into the research narrative and explored through this thesis. These include areas such as; the achievability of community through social media, whether or not Grange Farm residents had held a conscious desire to reimagine community through their neighbourhood Facebook groups, the sphere and range of influence that neighbourhood Facebook groups can have on horizontal and vertical participation flows and how both online and offline representations of community can interact with each other.

In the next Chapter I progress to document a profile of the sample community of this research, Grange Farm. Along with providing a historical overview of the community and a breakdown of issues that its residents face I will outline how Grange Farm fits into the theoretical understandings of community, participation and social capital that I have now established.

Chapter Three – Community Profile: Grange Farm 1.0 and Grange Farm 1.1

Introduction

This Chapter will provide an outline introduction to the subject community within this research. As an ethnographical study the subject community was the main focus of the research and an analysis of the key research questions is presented through the events that unfolded throughout a 12 month period in 2015-16. I wanted to explore the community participation experience within the context of a wider community narrative that captures the history of the area and the relationships of those who inhabited it. In maintaining the research focus on one subject community rather than multiple communities this enabled me to bring into consideration wider socio-economic and cultural factors that influence community interaction. It provided the research with the context within which participation took place.

This Chapter will present a descriptive account of Grange Farm within the traditional context of geographic and place-based community (Grange Farm 1.0) as well as the modern day augmented community context where residents engage in aspects of social and civic participation through neighbourhood based Facebook groups as well as traditional channels (Grange Farm 1.1). In the course of this Chapter I will outline the relevant demographics of the community and surrounding area, present an appraisal of the issues and challenges faced by its inhabitants, an analysis of the local political context and the opportunities and challenges presented by proposed developments. It is not possible to present an understanding of contemporary community participation in Grange Farm without first presenting an explanative and historical account of the community as a whole.

Why Grange Farm?

In selecting Grange Farm consideration was given to its status as ordinary. In order to analyse the community participation experience I wanted to capture the normal everyday community experience. Whilst Grange Farm would be classed as a socio-economically disadvantaged community there was an absence of any major conflict or socially destabilising factors. Grange Farm was the typical White Working class housing estate – similar to countless others situated across the North of England, its residents getting by and making the best possible quality of life from their surroundings and situation.

Although unremarkable in many ways, one of the reasons I selected Grange Farm as the subject community for this research was because it represented a community undergoing a process of development and change. It represented the paradox of a traditional community in decline with the potential for renewal through development and investment potential. Over the course of a generation the community had lost a number of amenities and had experienced a disenfranchisement of the local population. The proposed development of thousands of extra homes at the Lower Grangeside Development had projected to more than double the geographic size of the community. The development was a double-edged sword for residents; whilst they opposed the extra influx of new residents to the area and shared concerns over the extra demands this would place on already overstretched services they recognised the potential investment windfalls that were associated with it. The local Borough Council estimated a financial windfall of circa £5 million through the sale of land and planning gain from the Lower Grangeside Development and had committed to allocating this money for the Grange Farm community. My observations in Grange Farm allowed for the potential of fascinating observations into how residents navigated these two scenarios within a changing landscape of community participation.

Grange Farm was not a new or undiscovered community for me. As a community development officer working for the local authority for the last 15 years I had spent short periods of time affectionately referring to Grange Farm as ‘my patch’. Although never spending enough time there as a community officer to influence my objectivity in the research process I had been able to build up a sufficient enough overview of the history, traditions and institutions of the locality to be of practical use to this study. I had also been able to amass a sufficient number of community contacts who were influential in providing the much sought after ‘foot in the door’ that is so valuable when conducting immersive ethnography. In the case of Grange Farm one community contact in particular – Sophie – was able to arrange contact for me with a number of her fellow residents who were actively involved in community life through the local Facebook groups. I had worked with Sophie some years prior on a social inclusion project; her local insight, community knowledge and wealth of contacts were invaluable during the research for this thesis.

There was however one decisive factor above all others that led me to choose Grange Farm as the subject community for this thesis. That factor was the vibrancy of their local neighbourhood Facebook groups and the importance they had come to play in individual and community life. As I have outlined in the Introductory Chapter, at the time this research was conducted, locality-based Facebook groups were not unique to Grange Farm. However at the beginning of this research journey I was unaware of any other community local to me where social media, in particular Facebook groups, had matured to such a point that they had the potential to facilitate demonstrable social and civic participatory functionality. Grange Farm presented an opportunity to explore a contemporary community narrative within the context of a tangible augmented participatory space.

Grange Farm 1.0

Situated five miles south of Bryerton, a major Yorkshire coastal town, Grange Farm was built in the 1950s and 60s primarily to rehouse families dispersed by the final round of slum clearances in the nearby fishing community (Binns, 2001). At the time my research was conducted the population of the area, denoted by the boundaries of the local authority ward, was nearly 5,800. In many ways it was a typical, mainly White, social housing estate, akin to others that can be observed across many an urban sprawl in the of North of England. Grange Farm was not without its share of problems. Classified by civil servants and professionals as a disadvantaged community; However daily life on the estate was by and large uncomplicated by other factors. My ongoing conversations with residents revealed that whilst they acknowledged the faults with the area they too recognised that there were far worse places to live. There was no major ethnic or religious unrest, no real risk of violent crime and no real risk from external environment factors.

The community expanded in the decades following the Second World War as the local economies (primarily fishing and tourism) experienced a golden age and the population increase of the Baby Boom began to be realised. Many of the families that resettled in Grange Farm laid down roots that continue to be apparent today. For many these roots would remain strong as the decades passed, with bonds of family, friendship and kin as well as the workplace remaining within comfortable geographical reach. As local resident Maggie who was interviewed for this research recalled:

"Ok I was born in a house in Grange Farm that was my Mums, which I sold last year, so I've always lived in Grange Farm. I lived away for three years when I trained locally, for a local company. I have got two (children), one is 23 and lives in the next village..... and a 19 year old daughter. My husband works for a local company as well and the majority of people know me because I've lived here for 49 years." (Interview with Maggie, February 2016).

Maggie's recollections were not atypical of the experiences of many living in Grange Farm. The traditionally close-knit kinship bonds and social networks within the community could make it difficult for outsiders to gain acceptance at first. An experience witnessed first-hand by Cllr George Frost, one of the Borough Councillors and County Councillor for the area. He explained to me:

"When I first became a councillor, because I was an outsider as it were, there was a degree of suspicion, but thankfully over the last 3 years I'd like to think I've built up a reasonable amount of respect, you know doing what I said I'd try to do." (Cllr, George Frost, March 2016).

Whilst for some the traditional bonds of kith and kin would remain strong over the years, for others they would weaken. Significant housing development over the decades enlarged the estate to the point where the Parish Council reclassified the community as a Town.

With increased development came an influx of newcomers to the community. Many, if not most, arriving without any familial or kinship attachments to those already living there. Influential and historical critiques of modern planning practices (Putnam 2000, Jacobs 1965) have documented the failings of urban planners to recognise the value of sustained historical social bonds within communities when considering future developments. I suggest this too has been the case with Grange Farm as mixed tenure developments enforced no local connection criteria on the sale of new housing on the open market, nor did new housing acquired for the private rental market. Quota enforced social housing within any new development allows for an element of local connection criteria but this was calculated on a Borough-wide basis rather than any specific local connection to Grange Farm. It is with this in mind that I present an overview of Grange Farm as a mixed community with strong social ties enjoyed by some but not by others. However, as evidenced through comments from residents throughout this thesis there existed an underlying feeling of togetherness and

community although these would be much less apparent than they were perceived to be in previous years.

Grange Farm was large and spacious. In keeping with the traditions of social housing development of the Post-War age it was planned this way. There were many green areas for families to enjoy. Houses in Grange Farm traditionally had large gardens, enough space to plant a sizeable vegetable plot should one desire. Physical space was abundant with a public realm scattered with communal green areas and children’s play areas. Whilst green space was abundant it is seldom maintained or up kept meaning it did not exist as an attractive destination for community interaction. A large expanse of park land to the North of the Estate connects Grange Farm with Bryerton. It is known locally as *the Dell*. A number of attempts had been made over the years by the local Borough Council and other agencies to revitalize and develop the Dell (Groundwork North Yorkshire, 2012) however these had mostly failed due to a lack of sustained financial investment and the failure of local residents to participate and take the lead with any initiatives that were suggested.

In more recent years the policy of ‘Right to Buy’ and further private development decreased the level of social housing stock on the Estate to around 50% and in 2003 the remaining Council stock was transferred to a newly created housing association – *Coastal Homes*. Residents routinely claimed that Grange Farm was the largest council estate in Europe although this remains to be proven. With easy access to schools, shops, places of worship, a library, a community centre, a doctor’s surgery, play parks and employment at the various factories on the nearby Industrial Estate it would have been classed as largely self-contained.

Geographically Grange Farm was detached from its main urban service centre, the Town of Bryerton. Legally the Estate held the title of Parish, and later during my research period, town. Many of those without their own car would have to resort to relying on sporadic public transport to travel to Bryerton as it is too far to walk for most and there is no adequate footpath access. Historically, and in response to this isolation, town planning had afforded Grange Farm a number of amenities. A former regeneration plan (Grange Farm Investment Plan) produced by the local Borough Council (2009) outlined the key investments in community resources that had historically been provided. These included; a public library, a high street for retail, a community centre, two churches, a GP surgery, two public houses and a supermarket. These amenities, whilst they may not seem much compared to most other towns, have, in the past, allowed the Estate to achieve a certain degree of autonomy. It was the debates around this feeling of autonomy that sparked one of the biggest local issues of the last few years. It was an issue that will be documented throughout this research; whether or not Grange Farm should become a Town in its own right.¹

Grange Farm, at the time of my research, was a different story. Many of the local shops had gone, replaced by charity shops or takeaways. Local services and amenities were under threat and many of the skilled employment opportunities were no longer there. Since this research was conducted dependence on state benefits has remained high - 24.1% of the working age population rely on some form of DWP benefit compared to 10.7% nationally (OCSI, 2019). The decline of viable third place was apparent and visible in Grange Farm. There was a recognised and very real threat to public, or community, space. The High Street was fast becoming abandoned through, amongst other things, irrelevance. The Library was under constant threat of closure and during the period of my research the last public house,

¹ During the research Grange Farm was officially designated a town. There being no legal difference between a parish and a town in terms of devolved local authority powers however the designation would change how the area was officially referred to. For the sake of clarity in this thesis I have opted, wherever possible, to avoid referring to Grange Farm as either a parish or town and also to refer to the local council as the ‘Parish / Town Council’.

serving a community of nearly 6,000, was closed. The situation in Grange Farm with regard to shared space and public realm reflected a growing trend in contemporary society. Studies (Parlette and Cowen 2011, Yuen and Johnson 2017) have documented the decline of neutral community spaces, associating this trend with declining rates of participation and association – Grange Farm too followed this trend.

Along with other comparable communities the loss of community space in Grange Farm had contributed to the decline in traditional forms of social participation necessitating a migration to a recognised and accessible online space. This research, whilst recognising that much of the traditional bricks and mortar infrastructure of participatory space in Grange Farm was in a period of flux, has sought to establish if, for many residents, their core function was migrating elsewhere. For the residents of Grange Farm this would primarily be the online space of their locally based neighbourhood Facebook groups.

The Issues People Faced

A brief weekday morning stroll through Grange Farm could tell you just as much about life for ordinary residents than any Council or Government statistic. In many ways the area’s physical appearance lacked vibrancy; The pedestrianised High Street precinct of 1960s aplomb was characterised by empty units. The charity shops and takeaways that seemed to dominate the High Street emitted an aura of pessimism that was delicately balanced by the character of its inhabitants.

The community was strategically planned so as to supply sufficient labour to the newly developed Grange Farm Industrial Estate. Low, semi and higher skilled employment was always available with a major frozen foods manufacturer, a large coach manufacturer and three large scale print companies all on the doorstep (Bryerton Borough Council, 2009).

However, the economic downturns of the 1970s and 80s resulted in the downsizing, restructuring and in some cases closing of local businesses and with it the employment opportunities the community relied upon.

At the time of my research Grange Farm was the second most disadvantaged ward overall in North Yorkshire (Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2015). The local church-based St Mary’s Social Action Centre was regularly inundated with requests to its volunteer-run food bank as well as with residents accessing charitable crisis support. As is a dominant theme throughout the community, however, the overwhelming majority of Trustees and Volunteers at the Centre lived outside of the community. Whilst the area received support from outside agencies it was often the case that Grange Farm had support provided to it from outside rather than developing its own community-led solutions.

Local government investment plans and masterplans for the area also painted a sufficiently grim picture of life on the Estate. The 2009 Grange Farm Investment Plan claimed:

“The area also has other socio-economic issues, including low car ownership, high eligibility for free school meals, children and young people with special educational needs and high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime, particularly burglaries, criminal damage and violence” (Bryerton Borough Council, 2009).

In relation to most other parts of the Borough crime and anti-social behaviour in Grange Farm was, and remains, high. Between September 2018 and August 2019 there were 188 crimes per 1,000 of population in Grange Farm compared to 107 per 1,000 nationally. Levels of anti-social behaviour did not fare any better with 82 reported incidents of anti-social behaviour per 1,000 of population compared to 22 per 1,000 nationally for the same time period (OCSI, 2019). From speaking to residents on the ground in Grange Farm the perception locally was that Grange Farm was a high crime area although many recognised

that crime and anti-social behaviour levels were still substantially lower than in inner city areas. The close-knit nature of the community meant that news of local crimes and instances of anti-social behaviour travelled fast, a phenomenon further facilitated by the advent of social media.

In the area of local health outcomes Grange Farm again did not fare well compared to both other parts of the Borough and nationally. Data compiled by research company Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) claimed in 2019 that 24% of the population of Grange Farm were living with a limiting long-term illness compared to just 18% nationally. Similarly unhealthy lifestyle indicators such as smoking and obesity levels were higher in Grange Farm than elsewhere locally and national averages (OCSI, 2019). Whilst Grange Farm was served with a local NHS medical centre it is recognised that this was overstretched and local fears permeated that the influx of new residents to the area with the Lower Grangeside Development would stretch the provision even further. Added to this Grange Farm had been, and remains to this day, without any local NHS (or Private) dentistry services for a number of years. A situation that led local councillors to lobby the local Member of Parliament but unfortunately to no avail.

There was nothing special about Grange Farm. The issues, the torridness and tribulations that its residents experienced were no different, in many respects, to what is experienced on any predominantly White social housing estate in the country. It is not the aim of this research to dissect and disseminate these issues but instead to understand the participatory approach that residents adopted in their attempts to highlight, tackle and overcome them.

The Lower Grangeside Development

During the 12 month period of research fieldwork the residential make up of Grange Farm was embarking on a major change. The Lower Grangeside Development, which had been planned in the twilight years of the last Millennium, was finally under construction. When completed (as of 2022 the final build stage is underway) the new Development will double the number of homes in Grange Farm and bring with it significant changes in infrastructure and demography. However, many of these changes were beginning to take effect during my research. In contrast to many recent housing developments in Grange Farm and the wider-Borough area the new houses are characterised by mixed tenure - previous large scale housing projects in Grange Farm had been almost exclusively social housing. With the new development has come new opportunity. Through the sale of land to developers and planning gain windfalls garnered through Section 106 agreements capital receipts of circa £5 million have been realised by the local Borough Council. The Council has committed to allocating these funds back into the community of Grange Farm through the delivery of a regeneration masterplan for the area. At the time of my research residents remained sceptical about these plans.

The Lower Grangeside Development was met with mixed opinion by the existing Grange Farm residents. On one hand they recognised the potential benefits referred to above that would come from locating the Borough's biggest housing development in a generation within their boundaries; the associated infrastructure improvements and regeneration investment that would come with it. On the other there was a deep-rooted suspicion and fear that the development would lead to a fractured community with new residents keen to disassociate themselves from the stigma of a Grange Farm postcode. This fear was not unsubstantiated as the following experience described by student Alice confirms:

"Me and my partner went to look at the houses at Lower Grangeside and we went to look around because we are planning on buying a property in a few years but we just wanted to have a nosy round really. And we were talking to the women and she was horrible she was, a proper snob, and she's saying 'oh don't worry, this community it's gonna be a lovely community it will all be working people because all the social housing will be at the other end' so they'll all be segregated off sort of thing and she was like 'don't worry about it being so close to Grange Farm, because nobody likes Grange Farm, it's not a nice place but it's completely separate' and we both just looked at her and then she said 'so where are you from?' And we were both just like 'yeah we're from Grange Farm' and I couldn't believe she had said that. It just really made me laugh because there was lots of stuff on social media and things like that and all these people saying 'Lower Grangeside it's gonna make Grange Farm so much better and it's all gonna be like one big community' and I was thinking that I've just been told by the women that's selling the houses that it has got nothing to do with us but the way she was saying it was like 'these horrible Grange Farm people aren't gonna get you' I literally couldn't believe it. I really see it as separate to Grange Farm just because of that one experience." (Interview with Alice, May 2016)

In the previous Chapter I commented on the nature of boundaries and symbolism within the construct of community, bringing some of the ideas advanced by Cohen (1985) into the narrative on community that runs through this thesis. If community is self-defining and self-selecting Alice's anecdote represented a significant cohesion issue that would not be resolved by the stroke of a town planner's pen. Similar comments were received from all the other residents I interviewed for this research when asked to define the geographical boundaries of their community – not one advocated the Lower Grangeside Development to be considered part of Grange Farm. It is safe to say that the community of Grange Farm has undergone a major transition; the long term effects of this transition cannot be accurately predicted.

The Political Make Up of Grange Farm

Politically, Grange Farm one of the largest wards within the Bryerton Borough. It was served by three elected Councillors and formed part of the Grange Farm and Godthorpe (the Estate's Middle Class neighbouring parish) Division within the wider County area. At the

time this research was conducted the sitting County Councillor was Cllr George Frost, a former trades unionist and local Labour stalwart. He also held one of the three seats on the Borough Council along with a Labour Colleague who played a less active role in community matters than Cllr Frost and was also not active within the social media space. The third Borough Councillor was the United Kingdom Independence Party’s Cllr Simon Tasker who was also interviewed as part of this research due to his participation within the social media space and through his role as an administrator for the Grange Farm Past Present and Future group.

The ‘grassroots’ tier of local government serving Grange Farm was the Parish (later Town) Council. It was a largely non-party political organisation with limited service delivery responsibilities and powers. Nevertheless, it was more often than not the subject of much local debate and discussion. Theoretically the Parish / Town Council was to be the first port of call for local grievance to be brought and answers to local questions sought. Grange Farm Parish / Town Council had become detached in recent years. The last ten years in particular had seen divisions, splits and power struggles within the Council and a growing disengagement from the parishioners it served. Anecdotally, residents informed me of a couple of occasions where new councillors had been co-opted onto the Council and proceeded to challenge it on procedural, policy or transparency matters. Both times Councillors had closed ranks in order to fend off these challenges resulting in the ostracizing or marginalisation of the new councillors who would shortly leave through frustration.

Similarly, residents informed me of how they had experienced numerous occasions where their representations to the Parish / Town Council had been ignored or side-lined. The result for the community of Grange Farm was the increased apathy of local residents and a belief that it was pointless to engage with their first tier of local government as either nothing would

get done or they would not be taken seriously. During my fieldwork this disengagement with the Parish / Town Council would grow as the decision to reclassify the Estate as a Town met with strong opposition from residents. A decision, it was, felt was not made in the interests of local residents and without full and proper consultation with them.

Participatory Decline in Grange Farm

At this stage it is necessary to first provide some local context on declining rates of community participation and social decapitalisation within Grange Farm 1.0. Docherty et al (2001) suggest that participation levels are generally lower in less affluent areas citing factors such as lower levels of educational attainment, reduced citizen confidence and decreased awareness of appropriate engagement channels. This was certainly the case with Grange Farm where local authorities had invested heavily in engagement and participation development over the previous generation. Much of the evidence for perceived low rates of community participation in Grange Farm was to be gathered through statements and anecdotes of those who live there. However, there are a small number of datasets that suggest that Grange Farm, a community positioned in the bottom 10% most deprived nationally (Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2015) fared worse than national averages on participation and social capital indicators such as; feelings of belonging to the neighbourhood, involvement in local decision making processes and provision of informal voluntary work.

The personal experiences of Grange Farm residents themselves gave a good indication to some of the reasons why community involvement was at such a low level in their community. In their interviews with me they themselves had identified many of the traits of participatory decline and social decapitalisation that I have outlined earlier in this thesis. This is illustrated by the quotes from residents Sandy and Ozzie below:

"I remember my childhood and it were me and my next door neighbour and one across the road and while our children were out playing we were on our doorsteps talking" (Interview with Sandy, March 2016)

"I think it's just that a lot of people just can't be bothered and I think the community spirit in Grange Farm isn't really there. A lot of the stuff that happens happens after the fact. It's like for example the Grange Farm Hotel closing." (Interview with Ozzie, March 2016).

Residents also, however, held on to a realisation that they enjoyed a feeling of community, albeit diminished, that is denied to others. When asked what in particular they liked about living in Grange Farm they were more likely to give an answer referring to people and their connections to others than they were about the environment, institutions, services or infrastructure - a situation reverberating with a number of the findings from Young and Willmott's (1957) influential study of East End Working class life.

Residents displayed a deep affection to local social bonds and kinship networks. In her interview with me Alice, a recent graduate who had just returned to Grange Farm after studying in a big city for the last three years recounted a recent local community social event and how it had outlined to her the importance of local people getting involved:

"I think at the birthday party a few weeks ago (Grange Farm Community Centre's 50th Birthday Party) there was so many people helping out I think the community really comes together. It's certain people, like you see the same faces and they're really happy to be involved but I do think the community works well and people do do things." (Interview with Alice, May 2016)

This recognition of community capital was also highlighted during my interview with Ozzy. He described to me the importance of family and friendship networks in his decision to remain and settle in Grange Farm:

“I like it (Grange Farm) because I’ve got all many Friends here and I’ve grown up here..... On the flip side of the coin, if I knew no one here I don’t know if I’d want to live here to be honest” (Interview with Ozzy, March 2016).

This conflicting notion of *paradise lost* and *paradise remained* is an important factor in understanding why the neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm had taken up such prominence within the community. There was a desire to bring back the socially connected and idealistic vision of old-fashioned community and at the same time enough of a nucleus of said community to be able to do.

Feelings of community and pride in one’s locality are one thing but engaging in active participation is another. It is the latter that I argue is needed if a community is to be strong and sustainable and social capital to be realised. Oliver (1999) suggests an opposing view to that of Docherty (2001), that disadvantaged suburban communities such as Grange Farm are more likely to garner civic participation from their memberships due to the presence of more socio-economic ‘problems’ that require collective community action.

A tangible and quantifiable, yet very specific, measurement of civic participation within a particular locality is voter turnout in both local and national elections (Putnam 1994 and 2000, Harper 2002, Babb 2005). According to local authority records Grange Farm Ward consistently returns the lowest turnout of all the wards in the Borough in local, general and other elections (Bryerton Borough Council, 2020). Those who I spoke to for this research who had previously stood as candidates in local elections for the Grange Farm Ward had conflicting views on why this was the case. For Cllr George Frost it was around disillusionment with the contemporary democratic system. When asked how much he believed local people engage in the local democratic process, he explained:

"Their view (local people) is that irrespective of what their views may or may not be that they are not listened to, you know, not only just by the Parish Council but by the Borough Council and County Council." (Interview with Cllr George Frost, March 2016)

For rival candidate Ozzy it was an apathy borne out of disinterest. He succinctly stated:

"I think there is a degree of people who are involved in the community but I think that's it really and I don't think there is a lot you can do to turf them (voters) out" (Interview with Ozzy, March 2016).

Civic participation in the democratic process is not limited to representative democracy through the ballot box. I propose that community is not developed through the absolving of responsibility that comes through voter participation and must be supplemented by effective participatory democracy at various levels. Fung and Wright (2003) suggest that the notion of democracy has become intertwined with the idea of territorially based competitive elections and that representative democracy and the practice of voting is somewhat ineffective in accomplishing the central idea of democratic policies such as the active involvement of citizens and the forging of political consensus. Civic participation, as I explored in the previous chapter involves community members engaging in all manner of activity which seeks to inform how local policies are decided and how power is distributed.

Traditionally, however, initiatives by power elites such as local authorities to involve and engage local residents in local policy development had fallen short of transferring any real or meaningful power and, as such, over the space of a generation local people had lost all faith in their abilities to bring about change within their own community. At best prior development or regeneration initiatives in Grange Farm had been characterised by 'degrees of tokenism' such as informing, consultation and placation (Arnstein, 1969). To apply Lukes' (1974) rationale of power, Residents had traditionally been denied actual decision-making power, and were somewhat disenfranchised through their lack of non decision-making power and were, in many cases, unaware of any potential they may have had to exert

societal power or influence due to prevailing and socialised norms (ideology). Engagement spaces in Grange Farm 1.0 were what Gaventa (2006) terms ‘invited spaces’ yet even if they were to accept their invitation their ability to influence decision-making was limited. At best, previous attempts, whether well-meaning or otherwise, of power elites to engage Grange Farm residents in the decision-making process amount to what VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) have referred to as ‘power with’ rather than ‘power to’ or indeed ‘power over’.

It is within this localised culture of apathy and powerlessness that this research has taken place. A community whereby a generation of (often well intended) initiatives to involve residents of the community in local policy formation had yielded no tangible results. For example, the percentage of Grange Farm residents who believed they have influence over decisions that affect their area was substantially lower than the national average (OCSI, 2019). As such the residents of Grange Farm did not feel as if they have any legitimate space within which they could exert agency or power. To borrow from the work of Gaventa (2006) the spaces within which local power was exercised were either closed off to them, or when they were invited into them residents quickly realised that such attempts at involving them were tokenistic and therefore ultimately fruitless. When such a situation exists, Gaventa suggests that people will look to create their own spaces where they can exercise agency and exert power. As this thesis will progress to outline, this, whether consciously or unconsciously, is what the residents of Grange Farm would attempt to do with the creation of their neighbourhood Facebook groups.

When addressing participatory decline in Grange Farm it can be observed how residents were able to participate in community affairs but for whatever reason did not. An easy indicator of this would be attendance at open community meetings, the most obvious and visible of these being Parish / Town Council meetings. Information from the minutes of

Grange Farm Parish / Town Council meetings available from their website shows that on average over the 24 month period that covered the 2014 and 2015 calendar years only 2.5 members attended their open meetings. In a community of over 5,000 it is obvious to even the most casual of onlookers that when only around one in every 2,500 people were attending the only public forum solely dedicated to their community that this has worrying connotations for civic participation and local democracy.

Civic participation within Grange Farm 1.0 can also be gauged through response rates to questionnaires and surveys conducted on local issues. Parish / Town Council sanctioned consultation on the proposals to change the status of Grange Farm from parish to town was primarily conducted via a survey which was delivered to every household in the Parish². The survey outlined the Parish Council’s reasons for considering the change in status along with an outline of the main arguments against a change in status. Considering the approximate number of dwellings in the Parish at the time was 2,400 the response rate of 41 or 1.71% is low by any standards.

In the arena of volunteering, my conversations with managers and trustees from a range of local voluntary sector organisations and service providers in Grange Farm uncovered a worrying trend in respect of the active involvement of local community residents. These organisations included the community run library, a social action and welfare centre and a local sports club. Whilst the overwhelming majority of the beneficiaries of these services were Grange Farm residents these Third Sector organisations, save for few notable exceptions, were struggling to adequately deliver their services due to a lack of local volunteers offering their time. Furthermore the volunteers they did manage to attract mainly resided outside of Grange Farm, usually in the more affluent Parish of Godthorpe.

² This is disputed by a number of Grange Farm residents either through comments made during research interviews or through posts made on the Grange Farm Facebook groups.

A situation had arisen whereby forms of assistance, either through the state intervention of the Public Sector or through Voluntary Sector provision were delivered to the community rather than by the community. There is little indication from my discussions with local residents and organisations that Grange Farm 1.0 was in command of its own destiny. This situation was most starkly realised at the St Mary's Social Action Centre, a Christian-led facility that provided crisis services for those in significant need. Whilst its services such as the food and clothing bank were oversubscribed by local Grange Farm residents their management and volunteer base was exclusively from outside of the Estate - usually committed Church members with a strong sense of Christian Mission.

There were a small number of examples of local community organisations that were led and facilitated by local Grange Farm residents. The Grange Farm Community Centre, for example, which celebrated its 50th birthday during my observational research period, was managed by a group of Trustees who were all local to the Estate. The same was true of their small but committed volunteer base. The Board of Trustees and the Volunteers consisted of a close-knit kinship group that revolved around one extended family and their close friends. Whilst this is encouraging in so much that it demonstrates local ownership of community services it was also seen as exclusive and a 'closed shop' by some local residents.

Finally, disengagement from the participatory process in Grange Farm could be attributed to the failure of local government to adequately engage with its residents. For those residents I spoke to and observed through their Facebook posts the main culprit was the Parish / Town Council, although the Borough and County Councils did not escape criticism in this respect. My observations of the workings of the Parish / Town Council concluded that

they maintained an informal policy of benign hostility towards community engagement. Whilst they recognised their legal and moral duties as the primary tier of local government to engage with their constituents, they understood that by doing so they would inevitably attract criticism.

Through my discussions with them I ascertained that Parish / Town Councillors felt resident criticism was unwarranted considering they were giving their time as unpaid public servants out of a feeling of community duty and civic pride. As a result of this aforementioned benign hostility open Parish / Town meetings were held with the legal minimum of promotion. Standing Orders were used as a means of limiting public questioning and shutting down debate on uncomfortable issues. Local resident Maggie described to me how she felt when she used to attend Parish Council meetings to represent her local environmental action group:

“The glares you get when you go in and the fact that you are made to look stupid when you are not. I’ve got better things to do on a Monday than be belittled.” (Interview with Maggie, February 2016)

A situation had arisen in Grange Farm 1.0 whereby the Parish / Town Council had actively avoided local challenge. In doing so it discouraged participation from local residents which in turn served to increase the ill-feeling towards them. It was a vicious circle within which civic apathy was an unfortunate consequence.

It was not just the Parish / Town Council that failed to engage effectively with local residents. The Borough Council was based five miles away in Bryerton and had little presence on the ground in the community. The County Council was even more remote, its services were administered in a Town at the other end of the County - an hour and a half journey away by car, even longer by public transport. Grange Farm residents I spoke to complained they were the ‘forgotten estate’ with decisions that impacted on their daily lives being made

elsewhere by officers and councillors that seldom, if ever, set foot in their community. Nowhere was this more apparent than with a local planning decision to remove a covenant on the Grange Farm Hotel site to allow for change of use.

The decision, which is documented as a case study later in this thesis, led to the only Public House on the Estate being turned into a supermarket. It was made by a councillor from another Town in the Borough and Town Hall Officers with little to no consultation with the people of Grange Farm. The default position had evolved to a point whereby resident interactions with County and District tiers of local government were facilitated exclusively by Ward Councillors acting as go-betweens - a role to which they admittedly excelled.

There existed a participatory void in Grange Farm. Community identity remained strong but socio-economic factors and uninviting or uninspiring engagement policies had brought about a situation whereby residents felt unable or unwilling to participate. It was a situation within which the neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 emerged to fill the vacuum.

Grange Farm 1.1

Social media usage in the wider Borough area had increased significantly over the years immediately prior to my research. Communities with large proportions of social housing such as Grange Farm were no exception. Data collected by a local social landlord (2012, 2015) indicated that usage of social media by their tenants increased to 61% from 34% between 2012 and 2015. This near double increase in social media usage can be explained in part through the rise and ubiquity of the smartphone as a dominant internet platform - the smartphone was the preferred method of accessing the internet for Coastal Homes’ Tenants in 2015, rising from a mere 8% in 2012.

Using the social landlord’s Survey as an appropriate indicator of trends for the Grange Farm Community - no confidential bespoke data exists regarding contemporary internet statistical trends at postcode or Ward level - it is apparent that Facebook was the dominant social media platform with 60% of Tenants surveyed using the platform on a regular basis. The second most used social media platform of social landlord Tenants was Twitter with a mere 8% of respondents active on the platform. The upward trend in these statistics suggest that by 2022 levels of social media use are most likely higher. This was reflected through comments made by residents during my conversations with them. Comments such as the one below from Alice reflects how she used Facebook to find out what was going on in her community:

“If I’ve heard rumours that something is going on and I am very nosy I do like to know, I do think that I’m quite good at finding things on Facebook. If something is going on or I wanna have a nosey at something I’ll have a look. It all depends if something is going on.” (Interview with Alice, May 2016).

Or this comment from local resident Kevin outlining the general nature of his Facebook usage:

“I’m on Facebook nearly every day checking notifications and seeing what’s going on. Sometimes I will read what’s going on and if it doesn’t concern me then I won’t bother commenting.” (Interview with Kevin, March 2016)

As is the global trend, the residents of Grange Farm found new ways to express themselves and interact with each other using locally managed Facebook groups as their primary means of expression.

The Grange Farm Neighbourhood Facebook Groups

This thesis focusses on the participatory functionality of five neighbourhood Facebook groups that were active within the Grange Farm community. Out of the five, two of the groups were the most active and contained the most members and regular users; Grange Farm

Past Present and Future (GPPF) and Grange Farm For Real (GFR). A third group, Grange Farm Town or Estate You Decide (GTE) was established by local resident Dave primarily as a consultation forum on a single issue, the proposal to change the official status of the Estate from a Parish to a Town. It quickly evolved into a protest group against the proposals. Of lesser note for this study, but still worthy of inclusion, are two other neighbourhood Facebook groups that represented the people of Grange Farm; Grange Farm For Us All (GFUA) had a significantly smaller membership and was set up by local Liberal Democrat activists in response to perceptions that the main two Neighbourhood Facebook Groups were party politically motivated. And, Grange Farm Community Group (GCG), again with a smaller, but growing, membership this group was the online presence for the real life community group that evolved out of online protests against Town status. These five groups provided a new digital space within which residents could make their voices heard.

The ubiquitous presence of Facebook in the social lives of Grange Farm residents meant it was the obvious place to turn for residents wishing to rekindle participatory desires. My lengthy conversations with Sophie uncovered how Facebook was the natural location for a place where local people could discuss local issues, share stories of the past and plan for a better future. Sophie expressed to me in that plain matter of fact manner that is characteristic of her North East accent that everyone these days has a computer in their house or a smartphone in their pocket. They are all on Facebook because that is where their friends and family are. It is where they get to find out what is going on. For Sophie it was a natural progression to formalise this pre-existing participation so that it could be harnessed for the good of the community. With that in mind she created the *Grange Farm Past Present and Future* (GPPF) Facebook Group in 2009 with her youngest daughter Alice as the other group admin and her husband tasked with digging out all his old photos of the Estate so they could be posted to the group to set the ball rolling.

At the time of my research there were five neighbourhood Facebook groups that concern themselves with the day to day community life of Grange Farm. GPPF was the oldest and largest with nearly 1,400 members at the end of the 12 month research period. Like the other groups GPPF was administered by local volunteer residents and served as a generic place where community discussion could flourish and activities and events could be organised and promoted.

GPPF's status as the 'go to place' for Grange Farm on the internet was rivalled only by *Grange Farm For Real* (GFR). With slightly over 1,000 members at the end of the 12 month research period GFR also served as a generic forum where local issues and events could be discussed. Whilst there were some residents who maintained a membership of both GPPF and GFR, the active membership of GFR was primarily a different group of individuals to those who were most active in GPPF. Some residents expressed to me how they felt an obligation to 'pick a side' with which to concentrate their participation. It is fair to say that both groups did not see eye to eye 100% of the time although there were notable instances where they would put their differences aside and work together for the common good of the community. Alongside these two main groups there were also three smaller groups which also contributed to the social media community landscape of Grange Farm. One of which was the single issue GTE group. With over 700 members it seldom involved itself in other community business and as such was all but defunct by the time my research came to an end once the final decision had been on the status had been made by the Parish / Town Council.

The demise of GTE led to the creation of a new Facebook group for the community named *Grange Farm Community Group* (GCG). As the group was still in its infancy as my

observational research came to an end GCG does not feature heavily in this thesis. It differed from the other groups in this study as it was established first and foremost as an offline entity, a real life community group albeit with a concerted social media presence. GCG was formed to capitalise on a resurgence of community participation brought about by the town status debate and sought to provide a forum for collective community action augmented across digital and real world realities.

The fifth and final Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook group was *Grange Farm For Us All* (GFUA). GFUA was significantly smaller than the other groups with a membership of just 259 by the end of the research period. Save for a couple of instances, participation on GFUA was limited to the posting of promotional flyers and adverts for local services. Indeed of those 259 members, the number of active members (those who contributed at least one original post or follow up comment to the group) was just 23, or 9% of the group's membership. GFUA was established by the local Liberal Democrats primarily as a response to the success of local UKIP and Labour Councillors in harnessing the Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook groups to advance their political agendas. It has since become defunct.

The five Grange Farm Facebook groups included in this study reflected a varied range of utility and a spectrum of differing characteristics and personality. Whereas GPPF and GFR acted as all-encompassing forums within which a range of social activity could and did take place, GTE acted very much as a focus point for a single issue discussion. With the creation of the Grange Farm Community Group, in both on and offline forms the community had come to recognise some of the restrictions that a social media centric focus on community participation would have and thus they attempted to marry online activism with offline action. Although by the end of the research period this had yet to be properly tested.

Observation of these the groups through the course of 12 months quickly clarified that each group had its own distinct feel and character. Whilst there were some crossovers in membership each group maintained a core group of active users whose regular postings were an important part of their social and civic expression. Both GPPF and GFR would have core community issues that they would base their participation efforts around. For GPPF the ongoing crisis with the community library, speeding traffic concerns, vandalism and environmental concerns featured prominently. For GFR the ongoing saga of the closure of the local public house featured in a lot of the group discussions. For other aspects of community concern such as the ongoing town status saga both GPPF and GFR would come together, joining their participatory efforts for the greater good of the community.

The Neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 also provided an accessible social space. In a community experiencing a marked decline in 'third places' these digital spaces provided a meeting place for social interaction. As well as providing a forum for discussion on local topics residents would use their Facebook groups to engage in light-hearted activities such as photography competitions or reminiscence sessions on local past times or community characters. Later in this thesis I will present a case study of Sandy, a local care worker whose unsociable shift patterns left her little appropriate time to socialise with other members of her community. For Sandy GFR was the perfect substitute for 'real life' interaction, enabling her to interact in social participation with her peers at times convenient for her.

For most of the residents interviewed as part of this research the reasons they joined their respective Facebook groups were many; accessibility, staying informed, bespoke commitment requirements. One reason shared by most interview participants was a

recognition that there was now a critical mass of residents involved in the various Facebook groups. They were where their friends, family and peers were present and interacting. In this respect the experiences of Grange Farm Residents confirm Backstrom et al’s (2006) research which presents a rationale for community participation that suggests that individuals will be more inclined to engage when others from their peer group are already committed. If others are already involved a collective security will follow. Oldenburg (1989) suggests that for community settings to be effective they need to be small enough to prevent serious divisions but also large enough for an interlinked network of social bonds to be purposeful and effective. The neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 served this purpose. As a ‘community within a community’ they were small enough that there was recognition between members – members knew of each other through an online context even if they do not know each other the offline realm.

Conclusions

Grange Farm as the sample community for this study paradoxically represented both a typical example of working class disenfranchisement and a community in the process of change. The demographic and economic effects of this change would have an effect on all who currently live there. Whereas on the one hand Grange Farm residents felt powerless to affect change and saw little point in engaging in the traditional models of civic participation. On the other hand, the changes that were occurring in the community were such that community involvement was more important than ever if the residents of Grange Farm were to be a driving force for its own destiny.

An Analysis of Grange Farm 1.0 Evaluated Against Proposed Theories of Community, Participation and Social Capital

The discussion advanced in this sub-section has helped to shape an understanding of Grange Farm 1.0 as a community in the traditional sense of the word. In this final sub-section I will outline how this discussion corresponds with the theoretical concepts of community, participation and social capital.

This Chapter has identified Grange Farm, historically and in present day, as possessing both strengths and weaknesses within the arena of community identity. The reader will recall how I pointed to a number of the classic studies in the previous Chapter (Willmott and Young 1957, Cohen 1985, Putnam 2000, Bauman 2001) that highlight identity formation as a key component of the concept of community. For many in Grange Farm, especially those with long standing familial and kinship ties in the locality, research studies such as these evidence the importance of identity to local people.

I do however also reflect in this Chapter on how Grange Farm was a community 'in flux', as the creation of the Lower Grangeside Development had brought many to the community who did not share the same identity attachments – or indeed actively disidentified with Grange Farm as their community. I have previously cited literature such as Crow (2002) and Hobsbawm (1994) as identifying a number of factors such as the rise of social welfare policies, identity politics and advancements in transportation and communications as to why certain individuals refuse to align themselves with the identity of their immediate geography. This thesis will progress to document that this phenomenon was a reality for many newcomers to Grange Farm. In relation theories of social capital advanced by Putnam (2000) Grange Farm 1.0 contained a number of sections of the community where 'bonding capital' (strong familial and kinship networks between 'established' residents, a desire for mutual reciprocal assistance where this could be provided and a definite 'pride of place') was apparent and indeed strong yet 'bridging capital' (acceptance of incomers, trust of external authorities and tolerance of a diversity of views) between sections of the community would prove to be weak.

In the previous Chapter, as part of the conceptual construction of community that I have adopted towards this research, I note how individual attachment to the collective

compliments, and indeed strengthens, identity formation. The overview of Grange Farm 1.0 that I have presented in this Chapter, and will revisit periodically throughout this thesis, outlines how certain ‘attachment factors’, both actual and symbolic, were present within Grange Farm, albeit sometimes limited, or, in the consciousness of some residents, weakened. I will shortly progress to explain how some of the key tangible assets and infrastructure of Grange Farm 1.0 have, or have not, aided in attaching the individual to the collective.

Firstly, however, I will briefly comment on how my conceptualisation of symbolic attachment documented in the previous Chapter, primarily through the works of Cohen (1985) and more recently Garcia (2018) have contributed to my understanding of Grange Farm 1.0 as a community setting. From my interviews with local residents and relevant desk research I have come to identify a number of symbolic factors that residents would assume signifies the Grange Farm identity. These include, primarily, some of the deeper woven familial and kinship networks that existed but also certain local rituals, shared histories or local characters. Grange Farm 1.0 aligns with Garcia’s (2018) study which specifically notes how localised symbols are used by low-income communities to combat gentrification – in relation to this study this would be reflected by how ‘traditional’ Grange Farm residents would attempt to hold onto symbols of their collective histories an example being the perceived importance of the local High Street and the determination of local people to reinvigorate its relevance as a means of combatting influence from outside in the form of the new Lower Grangeside Development.

I reflected at some length in Chapter 2 upon how the Structural-Functional sociological traditions had come to influence the more conventional conceptualisations of community as a social setting. In particular, I have absorbed into the theoretical understandings of community utilised throughout this research the tradition’s assertion of community’s function in binding societal institutions together with both the individual and each other. I note here that these traditions feature heavily in the community profile of Grange Farm 1.0 that has been developed throughout this Chapter. For example, classical texts (Lynd and Lynd 1929, Crow and Allen 1994, Crow 2002) have highlighted importance of localised ‘institutions’ and a semblance of civic infrastructure. Whilst I document these in my historical descriptions of Grange Farm I also highlight either the disappearance or disengagement with such institutions in more recent times.

The same could be said about the lack of / decline of physical communal infrastructure apparent in Grange Farm 1.0. I have previously noted the importance of community ‘third places’ in the community building process highlighting historical studies such as Hanifan (1916) and Oldenburg (1989). Whilst the Grange Farm of yesterday was planned, and originally conceived, with such amenities in mind and in existence the loss of accessible community spaces was a troubling feature of modern-day Grange Farm 1.0. With no neutral spaces within to interact and attaching community to identity and vice versa becomes less possible.

I have proposed that it is participation, in both social and civic forms, that transforms community from benign entity to active social setting. With regard to the literature reviewed in the last Chapter and how it related to the situation observed in this research I have come to reflect on participation, or indeed the lack of it, as characteristic of community life in Grange Farm 1.0. Civic Engagement on a vertical level, one of the cornerstones of the participatory experience, is scarce and in some cases non-existent. Grange Farm 1.0 lacked any tangible or meaningful two-way flow of vertical participation between residents and power elites, outlined in the last Chapter as ‘linking capital’. I have previously referenced Jhang (2021) as claiming these mutual information flows and linking capital to be vital for the prevalence of local democracy. Based on subsequent qualitative research and background knowledge of the community, if we refer back to Arnsteins’s (1969) ‘Ladder of Citizen Participation’ I would suggest that the level of citizen participation apparent for residents of Grange Farm 1.0 does not exceed the third rung – ‘informing’. Based upon my community review, and subsequent field, research of Grange Farm 1.0 I would hesitate to advance citizen participation there to Arnstein’s next rung ‘consultation’ as I would seldom witness, nor be informed of through my conversations with residents, occasions where those in power actually made tangible attempts to consult with the local community. Indeed, it was often the case that residents themselves would have to mobilise themselves to secure consultation along vertical lines.

In this Chapter I have presented a description of Grange Farm 1.0 as a community beset by disenfranchisement and apathy. The reasons for this are numerous and link with theories of participation and social decapitalisation presented in the previous Chapter. In my view this has come about through active disengagement from the top, as mentioned above, but is also apparent at grassroots level where local residents lack the confidence, skills, motivation and time to engage in civic processes as reflected upon in the last Chapter with reference

to the studies by Irwin and Stansbury (2004) and Kassahun (2011). Aligned to this is the pivotal work of Fung (2006) that was reviewed in the preceding Chapter. Fung poses three fundamental questions pertaining to the study of citizen participation; who participates, why they participate and what are the causal outcomes of said participation. In relation to Grange Farm 1.0 the answer to Fung’s fundamental questions are unfortunate; very few participate either through choice or impotence, motivation to participation is little to nil and the result is a disenfranchised community that is influenced primarily by external elites and holds little charge of its own destiny.

With regard to community participation the situation in Grange Farm 1.0 was not all ‘doom and gloom’. Aforementioned pre-existing familial and kinship ties helped to foster a feeling of community for some, in particular those who had long-standing histories with the community. For some the rosy view of ‘brotherliness’, the ideal of community as noted in the previous Chapter through references to the works of Bauman (2001), Green and Fletcher, (2003), Babb (2005) and Akane et al (2021) was very real and apparent. However, for other it had withered and waned or was simply not present at all.

The following discussion Chapters in this thesis will test these same concepts, outlined above, against the model of community participation observed in Grange Farm 1.1 to analyse the extent to which the advent of social media facilitated community participation through the community’s various neighbourhood Facebook groups has made any significant changed to this status quo.

Chapter Four – Methodology: Living Life Online

Introduction and Methodological Rationale

In this Chapter I will document the research methodologies that I have adopted and employed in the development of this thesis. I will outline the rationale behind the decision to exploit ethnographic practise and qualitative research techniques to address the core research objectives. As well as providing this outline I highlight some of the inherent difficulties associated with online primary research and the exploration of such a subjective phenomena as community participation. The research methodology underpinning this thesis traverses both online and offline realities within a local community context and this Chapter explores how my research methodology compliments the augmented nature of the subject matter.

According to Panneerselvam (2014, p.2) research methodology is, “A system of models, procedures and techniques used to find the results of a research problem”. In the first Chapter of this thesis I clearly set out my research problem in the form of three tangible aims and objectives. Through the course of this Chapter I will explain the procedures and techniques I employed by which to address said aims and objectives. In preparing to undertake my research in Grange Farm I would ensure I had developed a robust and effective methodology which I would peruse as vital to my research for a number of reasons. Firstly, developing and utilising an effective research methodology would ensure, as far as is possible, that any data or information I obtained was reliable. Secondly such a process would legitimise not only that data or information that I collected but also the research study as a whole. It would enable me to keep a tight focus on my research questions, the aims

and objectives I was attempting to address, acting as a guide to return to whenever the threat of ‘mission drift’ reared its head.

Adopting a research methodology would enable me to anticipate the types of data and information I would be gathering and thus enable me to proactively develop systems to analyse it. Finally, I understood that a clearly outlined research methodology would aid the reader of this thesis, and anyone wishing to academically reflect on this study in the future, in understanding the process I undertook to arrive at the results and conclusions that I did. As I will progress to explain through this Chapter the research methodology I developed for my research in Grange Farm had been done so as to reflect the context of the research; I was investigating theoretical concepts such as community, participation and social capital and thus I deemed prioritising a nuanced qualitative methodology preferable in order to account for societal and environmental factors. My research questions demanded that I gather data from both digital and physical and interactions and thus it would undertaken both on and offline.

Online ethnography underpins the base methodology of this research and primarily revolves around non-participant observation of Grange Farm 1.1. This non-participant observation was supplemented through detailed research interviews conducted with a number of active participants within one or more of the Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook groups. This research methodology built upon the research practices of both classical and historical studies (Hampton and Wellman, 2016, p.479) that emphasised the need to capture the “totality of community ties” from both online and offline settings as well as a more recent study into online / offline social relationships (Torres, 2016) that called for a holistic methodological approach combining online observation with online content analysis and in-person interaction. Research interviews were conducted at the mid-point stage of the 12

month observation period allowing for an in-depth exploration of a number of the emerging themes and trends with those involved. Conducting the interviews at the mid-point stage also enabled a consideration of resident perspectives and perceptions of Grange Farm 1.1 that would better inform my continued observations in the second half of the research period.

I have previously outlined how the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 were fundamentally attached to the geographic community they represent. The nature of content and subject matter of community participation within these spaces revolved around real life issues. A geographical profile ultimately defines participatory activities; Moreover, membership of these groups is drawn from within these geographical boundaries. In these terms, whilst this thesis is not written from a substantive Ontological position, whereby analysis is provided mostly through meanings attributed to observed interactions, reference to such position is reflected within the overall methodology. Whilst division and discord are, from time to time, reflected upon it is generally assumed that the residents of Grange Farm constitute a single defined group brought together by shared tradition, co-dependent relationships and sometimes even necessity.

As a reflection of place the Facebook groups were ultimately defined by offline events and activity that determined and characterised the participation that occurred online. For these reasons the research for this thesis could not have been conducted exclusively online and a complimentary programme of offline research was integral to achieving the research objectives. As I will elaborate later in this Chapter a substantial element of offline non-participatory observation complimented the primarily online methodology and included attendance at local community events and meetings as well as informal conversations held with local residents, service providers and power elites.

For these reasons my study has utilised an ethnographic approach as the cornerstone to research data collection. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) characterise ethnographic research practise as including; participant and non-participant observation, a focus on a natural setting, a use of participant constructs to structure the research. In order to address the research objectives in relation to the community of Grange Farm one needed to be able to live and breathe community life and in this case through both offline and online settings.

In conjunction with the ingrained online / offline ethnographical approach taken in this thesis and in common with prevailing community development practice I adopted an epistemological position to my field research. Central to this position was the commonly held belief amongst community development professionals that a relatively comprehensive knowledge of any given community setting is best held by members of it rather than ‘outsiders’; this knowledge primarily acquired through perception, memories and shared beliefs. This rationale is perhaps best illustrated by a quote by Audi, who states:

“Epistemic grounding goes with ‘how do you know this?’ Once again, saying that I see it will commonly answer it.” (Audi, 2010, p.8)

Why Facebook Groups

In establishing a robust methodology for my research I would need to establish a firm rationale for why Facebook, and in particular neighbourhood Facebook groups, were chosen as the setting for my online research. This decision was made with consideration to a number of other online platforms (and indeed Facebook itself as a whole rather than just the groups platform) had not been the chosen digital setting for my ethnography. At the time of my research had been a considerable boom period for online social media or networking platforms. Ortiz-Ospina (2019) documents how trends in social media usage had seen Facebook attract over 2 and a quarter billion users by 2019 however a range of other social

media / networking alternatives such as; Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter and Reddit had emerged onto the scene. According to local data (Costal Homes, 2015) and anecdotal information gathered through my research interviews it was Facebook that was the medium of choice for Grange Farm residents.

In selecting the Facebook groups platform I was mindful of three major contributing factors towards making this decision. Firstly, as alluded to above locally there was more of a critical mass of active users in Grange Farm on Facebook than any other platform. A (2015) study into digital exclusion in the area outlined that considerably less than half of the active users on Facebook were users of its nearest competitor Twitter. Secondly the Facebook groups platform provided a significantly more holistic range of functionality to enable digital community participation and moreover for that participation to be augmented within in the offline realm. This functionality included; the ability to post photographs, comment, like and share content as well as the ability to receive in time and bespoke notifications. Finally I felt that as I was able to use my existing personal Facebook account, carefully curated to ensure no information was being shared that I did not want to share, this would give my, albeit non-active, observation more legitimacy and transparency to the community I was researching. Should they wish residents could view my profile to assure them I was who I said I was as well as portray as a real person and not some 'scary researcher'.

Methodological Challenges

In undertaking the research for this thesis I was presented with a number of challenges that shaped the nature of the methodology employed. Some of these challenges would relate directly to issues associated with the research methods themselves whilst others would relate to the inherent difficulties of analysing some of the more abstract and less tangible aspects of the subject matter. Hammersley (2006) outlines a number of challenges in the

adoption of ethnographic practice in social research. Challenges outlined by Hammersley pertinent to this thesis include how researchers determine the context of observations and the political or practical backdrops field ethnography. My methodology echoed the views of Hammersley in that the most apparent methodological challenges of this research arose from the inherent difficulties of conducting non-participant ethnography online such as; a lack of contextual information behind online posts and comments, the limitations of relying on textual comments without ethnographic observations of wider environmental factors and the inability to interact with research subjects for further probing and clarifications.

Previous academic research has documented the difficulties encountered by the internet researcher in conducting online ethnography (Markham 1998, Hine 2000, Steinmetz 2012). Ethnographic research relies on an understanding of the wider social and environmental contexts that influence the actions and behaviours of the research subjects. Hammersley (1998) denotes ethnographic practice as the study of “People’s behaviour studied in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher, such as in experiments” (Hammersley, 1998, p.2). Within the confines of digital space wider contexts are fundamentally harder to attribute. Wider situational narratives are often absent and the researcher is often left observing participation and interaction from one particular viewpoint without a wider understanding of environmental and other factors. In this sense online ethnography shares similar issues to other online activities which also can be impacted from a lack of situational or environmental context; It is a fundamental feature of interaction online and is thus inherently characteristic of this research.

Internet facilitated ethnography also lacks the nuances of face-to-face observation. Markham (2005) suggests that part of the problem lies with the tendency to dwell on the language used in written word as the medium. Whilst the recent adoption of emojis to

represent an emotional subtext to the written word has assisted with this situation there is still a level of subjectivity and assumption on the part of the researcher when observing text-based interactions on a screen. There are also inconsistencies regarding the usage of emojis; some people use them freely and often others, for a number of reasons do not. Where classical ethnography can rely on tone of voice, body language and environmental clues to understand language, digital ethnography that relies primarily on text-based interactions will struggle to afford this luxury.

My research methodology also presented challenges regarding the timings that interaction within the Facebook groups occurred. Although some interaction was played out in real time with residents commenting on situations and issues as they occurred (two such instances; the Town / Parish Council Meetings and the Police Chase are illustrated as case studies later in the thesis) much of it was asynchronous and sporadic. Residents would post to one of the groups and that post may not be interacted with until hours or even days later by which time situations may have changed or more information may be present. Participation occurs at the convenience of the participant rather than ‘in the moment’. This also allows residents to review and edit their textual interactions. With offline, in person conversations, the participants seldom think about what they are going to say before they say it (Turkle, 2012). Social media interactions allow participants more time to reflect on what they are saying, perhaps, with the intention of modifying their interactions to ensure they are viewed more favourably or are in keeping with the dominant viewpoints of the wider collective.

To attempt to address the issues identified above I would supplement online observations by maintaining a physical presence in Grange Farm. Using the themes and issues as a basis I would visit Grange Farm from time to time, visiting locations or areas that had been discussed through in the Facebook groups, attending events that had been advertised there

or being present at local community meetings such as Parish / Town Council meetings. In order to analyse how community participation occurred through the online space of Facebook groups I wanted to compare and contrast how it played out in physical space – and indeed how these two spaces would link with each other.

Another challenge that would await me upon the embarkation of my field research was securing the trust of local residents. Not only for them to agree for me to carry out the research but also to ensure that they would not change their behaviour knowing that their every comment and action was being observed by the watchful eye of a researcher. Sixsmith et al (2003) stress the importance of not being viewed as an 'outsider' by the host community – a problem compounded in the case of my research as I was conducting it as a non-participant. To combat this potential problem I gained the acceptance of a number of key individuals prior to beginning my research. Most notably Sophie, whom I had worked with on community projects beforehand but also Alice, Maggie and Cllrs Frost and Tasker whom I had had trusted working relationships with prior through my role as a local authority community development worker.

As my 'foot in the door' Sophie not only introduced me to other potential interview participants but her influence in the community meant that it was relatively easy for me to be accepted as an observer by the memberships of GPPF (where she was an administrator) and GTE and GCG (where she was also a contributor). As I had predicted, once the administrators of the other two Facebook groups (GFR and GFUA) were aware of my presence within the other groups they would invite me to observe their groups. The ongoing competition between the Grange Farm Facebook groups will be a recurrent theme throughout this thesis.

Finally, my chosen methodology presented a number of issues with regard to measurement and quantification of the key themes of the research, community, participation and social capital. I have outlined the difficulties around the ambiguity of concept with regard to differing classifications of community in Chapter 2; within the context of this research community participation is equally defined on an individual basis. As an undergraduate social sciences student I once heard a lecturer refer to social capital, a new and interesting concept to me at the time, as, and I paraphrase here, as ‘something that is very hard to explain and quantify but is best described as the glue that binds us all together’. This phrase is given academic credence by Scrivens and Smith (2013) who point out the uniqueness of social capital as opposed to other forms of societal capital such as economic, human or natural in that it is notoriously difficult to quantify. Social capital is bound within human experience and personalities, two determining factors which obey no set parameters or benchmarks. I suggest that quantitative analysis can go some way to determining social capital presence, but the subjectivity of experience and perception ensures that qualitative analysis must also be utilised.

Clarifying the Insider / Outsider Role

I should, at this stage, however, comment on the methodological decision to conduct the primarily research as an ‘observing outsider’ whilst still maintaining some of the benefits of an ‘inside actor’ due to my previous professional work in Grange Farm. As I have noted in the previous Chapter Grange Farm was a community with which I had long been familiar. This was due to spending short tenures in previous years as a community development worker for the area or from detailed conversations with colleagues working the community at the time. As such I was privy to an array of community knowledge as well as already being

aware of, and in some cases having previous met, some of the key community players. My 'foot in the door' Sophie was a prime example of this.

The insider / outsider paradox did generate some minor problems that needed to be addressed, however, both theoretically through methodological design and in research practice. Firstly, I became aware of how my status of 'former community worker' for Grange Farm and indeed as a local authority officer may influence the responses to my semi-structured interviews with residents. My field research would be conducted from within what Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) term the 'space between insider and outsider researcher'. It turned out that to a minor, but not insurmountable extent, this was in fact the case. Both Councillors I interviewed, Cllrs Frost and Tasker, as well as some of the more politically active residents, would assume that due to my role I would be aware of certain issues, policies or situations. Whilst not superficially an obvious issue it did present a situation whereby they had acted or spoke differently to how they would a more 'neutral' researcher. Their responses would often include assumed knowledge or inside information. In analysing their responses too, my 'insider-outsider' status would lead me to be better informed on the issues they faced or their frustrations with the local political system. Could my interpretations of their comments still be subjective? The paradox between the extra knowledge and experience of the insider and the subjectivity of the researcher was first identified by Kirk (1984) who rewrote the 2nd Edition of his book into relationships between adopted children and adopter parents following his own personalised experience of becoming an adopter parent following the publication of the books first edition. The acquired knowledge and experience of his own situation had enabled a new consideration of his research results.

Ultimately, I would come to the conclusion that the benefits of possessing localised knowledge whilst not remaining 'active' in my participation afforded me the best opportunity

to acquire rich data. I would possess extra understanding of the issues that Grange Farm residents faced yet would not engage with them in such a manner as to dilute my objectivity. My skills as a community development professional would prove to be very useful here.

Research Strategy

In this section I will outline the strategy that I employed in delivering my overall research methodology. Whilst my desired methodology would outline *what* I would do, my research strategy would outline *how* I would do it. First, I needed to draw upon a number of transferable skills I had acquired in my professional life as a community development worker. The previous Chapter documented Grange Farm as an average socio-economically disadvantaged White Working Class housing estate; I already understood that engaging with its local residents would be problematic due to the mistrust with which many viewed the ‘outsider’ and that an open yet empathetic approach would need to be adopted. Previous academic studies of similar communities (Wilmott and Young 1957, Gillborn and Kirton 2000, Stahl 2016) suggested that this methodological issue was not unique to my research.

I would combat this mistrust initially by working through a local resident, Sophie, whom I had previously worked with and shared a mutual trust and respect with. As I recalled in the Preface to this thesis, Sophie was my ‘foot in the door’ to ordinary Grange Farm Folk. It was through Sophie I would acquire access to the digital and physical spaces that I needed to observe and to the residents of Grange Farm that would tell their stories through this research. I was trusted by Sophie and in respect of her fellow residents that was enough to prove that I was ‘safe’. I would also have to give consideration to some of the more practical elements of delivering my research methodology; I always ensured that I conducted any conversations with local people in informal, safe and accessible locations, was considerate

of their wishes in such conversations and always disclosed to true nature and intent of my presence within their World.

As part of my research strategy I would adopt a robust set of procedures for capturing the data I acquired. As I will progress to expand on shortly this included keeping a daily research diary of noted observations, but also ensuring to capture digital data through screenshots and collating quantitative data such as number and themes of original posts to the Grange Farm Facebook groups and counts of follow-on ‘engagements’ incrementally as I progressed through the research period. This approach of collecting quantitative data and analyzing it through a qualitative and thematic approach would enable me to target and structure the ethnographic research that I was conducting in parallel.

Academics from a number of disciplines that commonly utilise ethnographic practice (Nadin and Cassell 2006, Browne 2013, Hall 2020) have highlighted the utility in keeping a daily record of research observations. For my ethnographic research in Grange Farm I would build upon good practice that had preceded me. This would include maintaining a daily research diary for a number of reasons. Firstly, it would aid me in identifying key emerging themes and trends within the research. Secondly, it would ensure that I was able to easily reflect back on prominent community issues that were being engaged with by local residents. For example, some of the ongoing issues in Grange Farm such as the closure of the Grange Farm Hotel, the campaign to save the Library and the opposition to Town Status were longstanding issues with which residents had participated over a number of months; Keeping a research diary enabled me to identify any patterns, trends or changes to their participatory behaviour over a sustained period of time. Thirdly, maintaining a research diary during the first six months of my observational research assisted me in identifying who the Community’s ‘key players’ were within the local community Facebook groups – those who

engaged most and would be valuable candidates for follow up interviews. Finally, I adopted the principle of ‘reflexivity’ (Nadin and Cassell, 2006) which would enable me to amend the approach of my research depending on environmental factors and adapting circumstances.

Due to the long-term timescale of my research (12 months) I drafted a research timeline as part of my overall strategy. Whilst I was prepared to be flexible with timescales so as to be able to be responsive to any unexpected events that occurred or unexpected information gathered, I knew it was important to establish a few key ‘milestones’ that would enable me to track the progress of my research journey and prevent ‘mission drift’. Fundamental to this was how I chose to order the observational and interview-based research. The pragmatic approach I took to this was to undertake the first six months of observational research prior to engaging any residents in the semi-structured interviews. This would allow me, first, to gain a broad understanding of local issues and social structures as well as knowledge of who the ‘key players’ within the digital space were and who would be best suited to interview. As such my interviews with residents were contextual in that we were able to discuss the events and interactions of the previous six months. Holding the research interviews in the middle of the 12 month observational research period also enabled me to more clearly identify any trends or interesting perspectives that I had picked up through my conversations in the latter half of my research.

Finally, in bringing together a research strategy, I needed to return back to the original aims and objectives of this thesis; The research questions I was longing to answer:

1. To understand the extent to which neighbourhood Facebook groups have re-engaged people and communities at a local level and how this compares to and compliments ‘traditional’ participation methods.

2. To analyse the participation experience of those who engage through neighbourhood Facebook groups and evaluate how these experiences translate to social capital and community.
3. To understand the nature of community participation through neighbourhood Facebook groups and analyse the extent to which it impacts on local polity and influences established local power structures.

I came to understand that the answers to these questions would become apparent through the actions, interactions and personal stories of those who lived in Grange Farm and who participated in the local Facebook groups. Once I had recognised this fact, an ethnographic approach to data collection became an obvious choice.

Utilising an Ethnographic Approach

A qualitative ethnographic approach was favoured over the quantitative alternative and builds upon the importance of the meanings and perceptions behind participation hitherto suggested (Putnam and Feldstein 2003, Fung 2006). Whilst statistical data can provide an overview of the community participation experience in Grange Farm Facebook 1.1 they are less effective at analysing the nature, experience and outcomes of the endeavour. As I referenced in Chapter 2, Fung (2006) describes the civic participation process as centring around three key questions; who participates? How do they participate? And what are the outcomes of their participation? These questions form part of a story - a story which needs to be observed in the fullest possible sense rather than the snapshot alternative offered by quantitative approaches.

Fieldwork - Non-Participant Offline and Online Observation

It was my intention from the outset to be targeted and specific regarding the sample groups selected for this research. My research centred on the action of active community participation and to that end the Facebook groups included in the study were all groups which specifically existed to discuss issues relevant to the community of Grange Farm. I have discounted interaction on community affairs that took place on the standard Facebook platform (not within Facebook groups) and other social media platforms (Twitter, Google Plus, Instagram, blogs) for logistical and practical reasons. As the Grange Farm Facebook groups were inextricably linked to Real World community events and activity it was necessary to not only conduct an online ethnography but also to compliment this with offline observations as well.

Hine (2017) references the increasingly complex nature of connections between online and offline spaces and how the relationships between these need to given due consideration in the preparation of online ethnographic methodologies. Dong poses the question "What are locally specific meanings of the online communicative practices? And how do offline contexts shape online activities?" (Dong, 2017) suggesting as other theorists of augmented reality (Jurgenson 2012 and 2012a) have done "that online and offline spaces are growing into one lived reality". In the context of this research it was becoming clear that what occurred online could, and did, influence what occurred offline just as much as events that took place in the Real World influenced the digital interactions of local residents.

Initial approaches were made to key individuals, namely group founders or administrators, from each of the subject Facebook groups via email, or when appropriate instant messaging. Similar approaches would also be made to the leaders or organisers of various community

meetings (tenants and residents associations, neighbourhood watch schemes, Parish / Town Council etc...) and events. Developed from this a 'snowballing' sampling method was employed. Initial contact focussed on introducing the research and key themes I was wishing to explore. This was followed up by a face-to-face meeting where the research proposal was explained and outlined, complete with disclosure of ethical requirements, and a request put forward to observe the group, meetings or event. Although ethnography was non-participant in nature I did however make one introductory post to each of the groups to ensure appropriate ethical behaviour and full disclosure. I would also ask the group administrators to ensure it would remain 'pinned' to the top of the group for a few weeks to ensure all group members had a chance to see it. If any group indicated that they did not wish to be involved in the research then this request was respected. In cases where individuals had indicated their wish to not participate in the research but the rest of their group had given approval all attempts were made to exclude the actions, words and in some cases influences of said individual from group discourse.

I would observe community life play out through both online and offline channels for 12 months, setting notification alerts on my smartphone and tablet to notify me of any activity in any of the subject Facebook groups. I would take observational notes throughout the day before writing up key findings of the day's activity in a research diary at the end of each day. Similarly I would arrange to attend community meetings, forums and events as a non-participant observer, making notes to be written up into the research diary at the end of the day.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The initial observation phase of the research allowed for contexts to be set and for an understanding of the groups and community issues to be shaped. Not least, however, the

observation phase allowed for key individuals to be identified - as explained, the methodology of this research calls for its objectives to be met through the gathering of human experiences.

The observation phase was followed up with a series of interviews, purposefully designed to expand and probe into a number of important issues that had been generated through observation. The interview schedule devised prompted questions around three key areas; the background and social and civic engagement habits of the subject, their online involvement with one or more of the subject Facebook Groups and finally how their online experiences impacted on their offline experiences and vice-versa.

Semi-structured interviews were included as part of the methodology as a direct response to some of the documented shortcomings of non-participant ethnography (Becker and Geer 1957, Parke and Griffiths 2008). With regard to the online research I acted as a non-participatory ethnographer; Here there was little to no scope to ensure that the exact data required could be extracted from the social setting being observed. As I have previously mentioned I would supplement the non-participatory ethnography with offline research conducted in person and sometimes participatory in nature – I would engage residents and public officials in informal conversations. This helped provide a backdrop and context to my online observations complimenting a similar process garnered through my resident interviews.

Another reason semi-structured interviews were included into the overall research methodology was that for various reasons the research subjects, in the course of going about their usual business, may not have provided me with the answers to the research questions that were being addressed. Traditional ethnography enables the researcher to

explore themes and establish rationales behind the surface data but this can be problematic when conducted extensively through online observations as many of the intricacies of the discipline are lost.

Environmental factors, body language, social dynamics and other determinants described by Rotman et al (2012) as ‘thick descriptions’ can often be lost when viewed through the prism of a two dimensional computer screen. The challenge when conducting ethnography online is to ensure that, as far as possible, the holistic understandings and rich data collections that characterise the discipline are not dismissed. As such semi-structured interviews were selected to mitigate the identified shortcomings of online observation. It was through the semi-structured interviews that I sought to understand the array of meaning, motivations and value opinions of the membership of the Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook groups. Therefore, my research is a tapestry of stories, journeys and experiences that can at best be woven together to provide a complete holistic narrative whereby individuals are given opportunity to tell them. This is perhaps best reflected by the following quote from Hutchinson et al, who state:

“Interviews that provide opportunities to describe events validate these experiences and, as a result, the person’s self-worth. The act of interviewing, with the rhythms of speaking, listening, and responding, promotes a connection between interviewer and participant. The interview gives the participant a voice. This voice may be particularly meaningful for members of discredited groups such as the elderly, poor, or chronically mentally ill.”
(Hutchinson et al, 1994, p.162)

The individuals who participated in the interviews were not randomly sampled, due in part to the difficulties associated with accessing the names and contact permissions of a large number of Facebook group members. One should be aware that each of the sample Facebook groups had an overall membership exceeding 700 with the main two groups observed in the study, GPPF and GFR, approaching 1,500 members by the end of the research period. One should also be aware that many of the group members were not very

active, or may play the role of observer rather than engage in active interaction and participation through posting – this is studied further later in the thesis. To use the language of web2.0 there were a number of 'lurkers'. It is the intention of this research to tell the stories and experiences of participation and therefore those selected to be approached for follow-up interviews were selected based on their observed involvement and participation in the groups. It is understood that there may be representation issues here however the difficulties, and risks of random sampling, of interviewing people who have no involvement in the group other than have the odd post pop up in their Facebook timeline from time to time were too overwhelming not to be negated.

Interview Participants

As previously mentioned, interview participants were identified primarily through my observations of the committed and sustained participation with the Grange Farm Facebook groups. Where possible I gave consideration to the need to get as broad a demographic sample of interview participants as possible. It should be noted that a number of interview requests were declined where individuals either did not feel confident enough to talk about their personal situations, did not have the time due to other commitments, or simply had no inclination or desire to participate. Where this was the case individual decisions were respected and no further attempts were made at persuasion. In total nine participants drawn from across the various Facebook groups were interviewed as part of the research they were:

Sophie - Founder and administrator of GPPF. Sophie moved to Grange Farm from Tyneside in early adulthood and has been active in community affairs ever since. She was a former Grange Farm Parish Councillor as well as an active volunteer in a number of community projects. Not one to mince her words, Sophie was always keen to speak her mind and take

a stand for what she believes in and she brought these attributes to her role as group administrator.

Alice - Alice is Sophie's daughter, the youngest participant interviewed in this research and active member of all the Grange Farm Facebook groups. She had recently moved back to Grange Farm full time after spending a short time away for her University studies. By her own admission she had grown up in and around various community projects being 'dragged along' to various meetings and events by her mother and it is clear that this influence has rubbed off.

Sandy - An active regular of GFR, Sandy was employed full time as a care assistant and as such worked long anti-social hours. Sandy used GFR as one of her primary means of community participation, using it to keep abreast of local news and events as well as maintaining a number of social relationships via the platform.

Maggie - Maggie worked in the local Medical Centre and had been active in community activities and projects for a number of years. She helped to set up a local community group to maintain an area of communal green space and was instrumental in helping the group secure Village Green Status to prevent further development there. Like many others she is an outspoken critic of the Grange Farm Town / Parish Council.

Ozzy - Narrowly missing out on being elected by a handful of votes at the last round of local elections Ozzy was a budding politician and keen follower of local political affairs in Grange Farm. Ozzy was often to be witnessed engaging in political and ideological debate on the GPPF group and was a local organiser for the United Kingdom Independence Party and the Leave campaign in the 2016 UK Referendum on membership of the European Union.

Dave - Motivated by his opposition to the Parish Council proposal to change Grange Farm from the status of parish to a town factory worker Dave established GTE. Initially the purpose of GTE was to act as a place for discussion and debate on the proposals however as the group evolved it became a de facto pressure and campaign group against them. Motivated primarily by this single issue Dave seldom participated in the other Facebook groups or on other issues affecting the community.

Kevin - When I interviewed him Kevin was a relative newcomer to civic participation although his friends, family and kinship networks remained firmly rooted in Grange Farm. Inspired by the upsurge in online community participation resulting from the town status proposals Kevin was instrumental in establishing GCG, an embryonic residents association that sought to combine social media engagement with real life community action.

Cllr George Frost - Former trades unionist George Frost was elected as Borough Ward Councillor for Grange Farm in 2015 having been previously elected as County Councillor for the area two years prior. A staunch Labour Party activist and committed socialist George understood the importance of social media in engaging with his constituents. By his own admission he was a technophobe prior to being elected but soon realised the power and utility of social media platforms and in particular Facebook groups.

Cllr Simon Tasker - Simon Tasker was also elected to the Borough Council, on a UKIP ticket, in 2015 by the people of Grange Farm. An army veteran and local Grange Farm resident for most of his life, Simon by his own admission, was less ideological than his UKIP running mate Ozzy, claiming that he stood as a UKIP candidate because it gave him most chance

of winning. Rather than using the Grange Farm groups to engage in dialogue on national politics he prefers to concentrate his energies on local issues and campaigns.

Data Analysis – A Thematic Approach

So far, this Chapter has outlined the methodological strategies I chose to employ for my research in Grange Farm and a rationale for such decisions. I have coupled this with detailing the research strategy that I had developed throughout the data gathering process. I will now briefly document how I would come to collate and analyse my research data. As I outlined at the beginning of this Chapter, I would maintain a research diary that I would update at the end of each day with reflections on the interactions and activity that I had observed. Three months into my field research I began to look for observable participatory trends and categorizing these into themes. As such my research data was primarily analyzed through a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis, as described by Clarke and Braun (2015) is a “method for identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data”. They subsequently state that “it offers a method - a tool or technique, unbounded by theoretical commitments – rather than a methodology” (p.1). The utility of this approach is that it allows for total emersion of the researcher in the field whereby context and meaning can be attributed to observations of actions and behaviours as well as enabling the researcher to build theoretical frameworks upon which to collate data. Riger and Sigurvinsdottir (2016) critically elaborate on the practice, outlining the subjective nature of the method and its reliance on individual understandings. They state that thematic analysis is “how people make sense of their experience is the focus of their research. Because various people may differ in their understandings, there is no single, fixed reality apart from people’s interpretations” (p.33). However, for the purposes of this thesis thematic analysis was important because I wanted to ascertain the exact nature of how and

why Grange Farm Residents participated within their community – grouping observational data in themes would assist me in understanding this.

Along with organising the data collected in my research diary into themes I would undertake the lengthy process of retrospectively reviewing every original post and follow on engagement from each of the Grange Farm Facebook groups and classifying each under one or more of the five *‘participation parallels’ – participatory themes or trends identified through the thematic analysis process*. This quantitative data was then collated into tables which are presented to the reader later in this thesis. As such the overall data analysis strategy of my research would combine both thematic and content analyses.

Having successfully identified these five thematic participation trends during the first months of my observational research I was able to use these as a basis for the conversations I would have with residents in my semi-structured interviews. Indeed, I would ensure that these specific areas were covered in my interview schedule (see APPENDIX A). Conducting interviews at the halfway point of my field research allowed me to tailor my questioning as well as obtaining unique resident perspectives on local issues and community life to provide extra context to my observations during the second six month period.

Ethical Considerations

The research undertaken for this thesis was overseen by the University of Hull. As such it was conducted with strict adherence to the University's Code of Ethical Practice along with a commitment to adhere also to the Statement of Ethical Practice (2017) produced by the British Sociological Association. The data and findings of this research are therefore public and open to others to use at a future date in the interests of sociological inquiry. Through my professional experience and academic training both at undergraduate and post-graduate

level I believe I possessed the skills and knowledge to safely carry out the research competently and without risk of harm to others or myself. Hine (2000 and 2017) Goodwin et al (2003) and Madison (2011) have outlined the necessity of ethical rigour in the undertaking of ethnographic research. Moreover, a more recent study undertaken by Winter and Lavis (2020) has underlined the process of listening, understanding interactions contextually and as part of ongoing dialogues and histories, as well as observing in ethical online ethnography.

Relations towards sponsors - As my employer was a financial sponsor of the research they, quite rightly, expressed an interest in the findings. This posed an ethical dilemma with regard to the fact that some of the groups involved in the research would be actively opposed to Council (my employer) policy and there may have been situations where disclosure of information to the sponsors may have been to the detriment of the researched group. However the object of the research here was not the rights and wrongs of council policy or the community reaction to it but instead the experiences of identity, attachment and social capital that were generated through participation in the process. Therefore, I endeavoured to ensure that sensitive information of a potentially detrimental nature was not revealed within the findings. To ensure this, in certain circumstances the research subjects were privileged to review the information written about them for agreement prior to thesis submission.

Relations with and toward research participants - Full disclosure of the research intentions was given to all those involved. As the research involved a large proportion of non-participant observation it was not feasible to speak directly to each individual involved. This was ensured by via communication with the leaders / administrators of each particular group to ensure the consent of all involved. This situation was compounded further as some of the

proposed Facebook groups were open access groups with a fluid membership and therefore full disclosure of intentions needed to be an ongoing action throughout the research period. Group leaders, administrators and key individuals were approached and engaged prior to commencement of the research to fully outline and explain the research objectives and intentions. To this end I requested permission from the Administrators of each of the five Grange Farm community Facebook groups to place a 'pinned post' at the top of the content feed of each group stating my presence in the group as a researcher and allowing the option for residents to not have any digital content they published on the groups involved within the research on an 'opt-out' basis. If for whatever reason any individual did give permission for their involvement to be used in the research then it was ensured that any statements and interactions concerning them were not used as part of the collected data. If sufficient participants refused consent then the use of that particular group within the research was reconsidered. This, however, was luckily not the case.

Further into the research period, once the non-participant observation period had ended there was further engagement of some of the research participants in semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These were audio recorded for transcription at a later date. It was ensured that prior to commencement of any interview or focus group that participants were informed of their ability to terminate their participation at any point and also of their rights under data protection legislation. It was also the intention to give participants full access to any transcripts for agreement and amendment, or statement withdrawal prior to use as primary data.

Anonymity, privacy and confidentiality - All those who participated in the research, at whatever level of involvement, were given full anonymity. For those who were involved at a deeper level (interviewees, focus group participants) a policy was adopted to apportion

pseudonyms. For those with lesser involvement, any reference was limited to a descriptive label i.e. 'a male member of the group', 'a younger resident' etc.. As the non-participant observation was of an online nature it may have been the case that screen shots were used to document some of the data - if this was the case then individuals will have their name, profile picture / avatar and any other identifying information blurred out to ensure their identity was not compromised. All participants were informed that data collected through the research has the potential to be included in the final thesis which will be read by others and may be used as secondary data by others at a future point.

Conclusions

In developing the research brief for this thesis I have chosen a blended methodology. This research approach is primarily qualitative combining both online and offline ethnography to establish over-arching themes and trends and semi-structured interviews designed to probe for further, richer, data with individuals identified as regular participants within the Grange Farm Facebook groups. Day to day online and offline ethnographic practice was recorded daily into a comprehensive research diary and a number of 'push' notifications were activated to alert me to new participation in each of the groups. In order to establish relevant statistical parameters pertinent to the subject Facebook groups I have also undertaken a small amount of quantitative data collection such as; numbers of overall and 'active participants', original post counts and follow on engagement activity related to each of the five groups. I believe this methodology best reflects the augmented characteristics of community participation in Grange Farm 1.1. Whereas the 12 month ethnographic research enabled me to establish general themes and trends related to the community participation experience in Grange Farm 1.1 the utilisation of semi-structured interviews enabled me to delve into and explore the stories, experiences and meanings of those involved.

The chosen methodology is not without its challenges; some of these challenges are associated as an inherent part of online ethnographic practice (absence of context, environmental factors). Others are apparent in the phenomenon of who is involved in the participation; participation can be observed but only from those who choose to participate and indeed engage in a research interview. Further research may in fact be needed to establish the context and reasons behind decisions to not participate.

Chapter Five – Discussion: An Overview of Community Participation in Grange Farm 1.1

Introduction

The findings from my research in Grange Farm revealed a community whose residents were orchestrating a transition in the means by which they engaged, with each other and to a lesser extent with the apparatus of local polity and service delivery. This Chapter is the first of three discussion Chapters that will document the main findings of this thesis presenting an analysis of the contemporary participatory landscape in Grange Farm 1.1. Further to this, in the following two Chapters, I will outline how my research is evolving discussions on some of the main advantages and disadvantages of social media-enabled community participation as well as an academic dissection of what I observed as the successes and failures of the medium.

My time observing Grange Farm 1.1 left me in little doubt that for those who involved themselves in the local community Facebook groups they had become their preferred space for community involvement. They had become a preferred place of many residents for social and civic expressions and the places where, ultimately, they would feel most comfortable. It should, however, be noted at this early juncture, that for these residents social media participation was not exclusive as they would traverse a participation landscape that would span both online and offline realms, often with actions and events occurring in one impacting and influencing participation in the other (Jurgenson 2012 and 2012a, Diaz et al 2018, Wolf et al 2020). This Chapter will draw upon my research findings to show how the neighbourhood Facebook Groups of Grange Farm 1.1 helped to build and maintain participation. I will outline the context within which residents have migrated their participation

towards their Facebook groups, drawing from interviews and ethnography to document the reasons for this.

In this Chapter I will introduce the five ‘participation parallels’ that I propose are the different and varied ways with which Grange Farm residents utilised their local Facebook groups to mirror traditional, established forms of participation. I will then progress to draw upon my research to understand how the neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 have developed an understanding of hybrid participatory activity across analogue and digital realities and how both of these participatory arenas compliment and weave into one another. This Chapter will explore what this means for realisations of community.

Overcoming the Failings of Traditional Civic Participation

My research uncovered three distinct explanations as to why some residents in Grange Farm had migrated their civic involvement into the social media space to achieve the aims and objectives of civic participation. Grange Farm residents who were actively involved in the neighbourhood Facebook groups engaged with them to fulfil their civic ambitions for three distinct reasons. I will address each of these in turn.

Pressures of Time and Convenience

Many Grange Farm residents who worked did so within the service sector or in factories where working hours and shift patterns fell outside of the traditional 9-5 structure. This often presented challenges for involvement through traditional channels of civic participation. Regular commenter to the GPPF and GTE group Ozzy noted how his civic desires were curtailed due to the nature of his job and the hours he worked. I have previously identified attendance and involvement with local community meetings or forums as a recognised

avenue for localised offline participation; When asked why he had not previously sought election or co-option onto the Parish / Town Council or attended their monthly meetings despite being a somewhat civically and politically engaged person Ozzy explained:

"I would attend but I work usually when they are on..... Because I do 6-2 2-10 shifts it does happen to fall every time I'm doing a late shift, it's just I'm out of sync with them. I would attend if I could but obviously working." (Interview with Ozzy, March 2016).

Historic academic literature (Putnam 1994 and 2000, McComas et al 2006) cites decreasing amounts of free time experienced by individuals in Western Democracies as one of the reasons for a documented decline in rates of civic participation. Moreover, as was reflected with my interviews with residents, other priorities such as relaxation and spending time with family were considered much more desirable activities than attending a meeting in a drafty community hall. For Maggie it was simple, she had 'better things to do with her time' than waste it attending Parish / Town Council meetings at the Community Centre. Maggie's reservations were reflected through my numerous conversations and observations during the 12 months.

For Sandy, the emergence of the local community Facebook groups meant that she could keep up to date with what was going on locally and offer her opinions often at times that would be considered by most to be anti-social but convenient for her in that they fitted around her job as a care assistant. The same is true for Maggie, who also worked long hours, and liked to be able to catch up on community news and information by logging into the groups in the evening time, between having dinner and retiring to bed.

For many it was the convenience of civic participation through the medium of Facebook groups that made it the medium of choice. Residents were not only able to participate at times and locations suitable for them but could also engage around working schedules and

other commitments. Williamson (2007) noted how in research studies into the reasons behind citizen disenfranchisement up to 40% of people not currently engaged in civic participation activity fail to do so because of time pressures. Williamson suggests that the internet and moreover social media has begun to remove this barrier. Participation in Grange Farm 1.1 was conducted at the convenience of the participant, although, as I shall progress further in this thesis, the removal of time constraints as a barrier to involvement was by no means a panacea for civic disengagement.

Lack of Local Ownership

Observations and discussions with local residents uncovered how participatory space in Grange Farm 1.0 was implied to have hitherto been imposed on residents from outside factors rather than being adopted as their own space. For example, all three tiers of local government acquiesced to legal obligations to allow members of the public to attend and speak at council meetings or to develop participatory channels for local people to be consulted on service issues or policy change. However, the perceived lack of local ownership of the participatory framework by Grange Farm residents helped to disengage it from a community that already placed little trust in local structures and institutions. This ultimately would contribute to a situation of ‘us and them’ between residents and Power Elites and an absence of ‘linking capital’ that is a recurring theme throughout the research documented in this Chapter and reflected upon in key literature outlined in Chapter 2 (Szreter and Woolcock 2004, Jordan 2015, Claridge 2018)

My research suggests that resident engagement in community matters was strengthened and diversified by the introduction of neighbourhood Facebook groups into the Grange Farm community. This was in large part due to the ownership and pride residents felt for the groups themselves. It has been argued that traditional avenues for civic participation, such

as community meetings or residents forums, offer little more than token involvement with much of the power still being maintained by local elites and power structures (Arnstein, 1969; Robinson et al, 2005; Mathers et al, 2008). No matter the agenda that was being delivered, nor the power dynamics within the space, Grange Farm residents felt that these traditional avenues were unable to connect ordinary residents with power structures and local elites. In contrast to this, my research suggests neighbourhood Facebook groups acted as a conduit for resident engagement and participation in communities that are incentivised and managed at a local level through local people and in some cases facilitated supplementary offline activity as both digital and physical arenas would merge. I give case study examples over the next three Chapters (the House Fire, the School Campaign, the Traffic Survey) to illustrate this.

Each of the five Facebook groups included in this research was controlled and managed by local people – with the minor exception of GFR where the lead administrator for the group was a former resident who still maintained close ties to the area. As the gatekeepers of participatory content it was these local people that decided what was and what was not relevant for community discussion. All of the groups operated on the basis of allowing members to put up new posts and comments without being filtered however group administrators would constantly review posts and comments to ensure they were of relevance to Grange Farm and local people.

Disenfranchisement

Finally, I suggest that some residents of Grange Farm had migrated to the social media space to express their civic desires simply because they did not feel able or welcome to do so anywhere else. This was felt most distinctly regarding civic engagement at Parish / Town Council level but was also characterised by low levels of engagement with Borough and

County tiers of Local Government with a widespread belief held by residents that no one would listen anyway.

My interviews with group participants uncovered that many felt involvement with local institutions and agencies to be a waste of time for two main reasons. Firstly, many felt they, or their views, would not be respected. Maggie alluded to this in her interview with me where she referred to being made to feel ‘inferior’ when she had attended Parish / Town Council meetings in the past. Furthermore, Cllr Frost recited to me in his interview how his conversations with residents on doorsteps had revealed their discomfort with engaging with external organisations and agencies. These findings support the argument advanced by Hay and Stoker (2009) that suggest a growing separation, discontent and distrust between the citizenry and those in public office (elected or paid) that has led to an active disengagement on the part of local people. This perpetual state of ‘us and them’ and the lack of identifiable ‘linking capital’ along vertical lines had disadvantaged participatory, and thus subsequently, social capital outcomes for the community of Grange Farm; My conversations with key residents evidenced how trust was further eroded, barriers erected and participation ultimately withdrawn.

The Facebook groups were of no remedy to this the above state of affairs. If anything, they intensified and solidified the problem rather than rectified it. To give the most obvious example from my field research the state of affairs between ordinary residents and the Parish / Town Council had led to a virtually complete state of disengagement. Examples and case studies throughout this thesis will reflect upon the distrust and outright hostile nature that the residents of Grange Farm had for the institutions of power in their local community.

Secondly there was a general belief that key decisions had already been made and participation was being conducted in a token manner. This should be no surprise as previous studies (Oliver 1984, McComas et al 2006, Hays 2007) have repeatedly shown civic involvement is limited by a number of factors such as; educational attainment, socio-economic status, confidence, previous bad experiences all of which I have previously detailed as characteristic of civic engagement in Grange Farm 1.0. Not everyone has the same access to participatory capital and this was evident in my study of the Grange Farm Facebook groups. Moreover, my research suggests that residents were likely to engage at a more committed level or more passionately in an environment they felt comfortable and safe in via the Facebook groups. This feeling is best summed up by two quotes, one from Alice who said:

"People are so passionate on social media that I think that if you are that bothered you would go to the meetings and things. So I just feel people haven't been properly told. That's why I said I think it's been decided and then 'oh yeah we'll get some people so we can say we've asked people' I think it was just done and decided yeah." (Interview with Alice, May 2016).

The other from Cllr Simon Tasker who stated:

"They don't because they see it as 'what's the point?', they can ask a load of questions during public question time which is at the beginning and they have to wait a month for the answers, there's no interaction at all and that's the way the Borough Council operates as well, but if the questions that were asked could be debated there and then, then there would be a lot more." (Interview with Cllr Simon Tasker, March 2016)

This disenfranchisement with the statutory participatory structures of local Government is evidenced through my observations on two occasions during the 12 months when the County Council held its Local Area Committee meeting at the Grange Farm Community Centre. Despite the fact the open meeting, which was being held to discuss local issues pertaining to Grange Farm, being promoted widely through the groups by Cllr Frost (including posting a copy of the agenda) not one Grange Farm Resident attended. In some cases disenfranchisement was so strong that augmenting participatory information across

both digital and physical channels did not increase engagement. Ironically, around the same time however a number of residents engaged with GFR to have their say on the items being discussed by Councillors at the meeting such as the proposed closure of the Library and the plans for a new school within the Lower Grangeside Development. Simultaneously they felt disenfranchised from attending a local meeting with public officials where they had the right to raise their issues and concerns yet felt comfortable spending time airing these grievances in their own space with only their peers there to hear them.

There is an overriding perception from the residents of Grange Farm that participation in traditional engagement structures would be in vain as their views would not be listened to. This was reflected countless times in GTE where residents expressed little confidence that the Parish / Town Councillors would take heed of their concerns over the town status proposals. Moreover, despite co-ordinated attempts at opposition to the proposals there was little confidence in a successful outcome. There was also a general feeling that Grange Farm was a forgotten community that was overlooked by the respective authorities. Cllr Frost referred to how many of his constituents were ‘downtrodden’ and tired of what he referred to as ‘mushroom politics’ – ‘being kept in the dark and fed shit’. It was assumed executives at Borough and County Hall acted in favour of more affluent and rural areas and that Grange Farm remained a ‘forgotten community’. It has been suggested elsewhere that both capacity and confidence issues are commonplace within socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Robinson et al (2005) have documented how historic engagement in local regeneration programmes have been disinclined to engage with the process due to fears of not being taken seriously or lack of knowledge of how to influence imposed engagement frameworks.

My research suggests that residents were interested and concerned about local issues. This was, however, curtailed by a distrust of, and unfamiliarity with, the structures in place to represent their interests and concerns and ensured that they felt unable to appropriately engage. Subsequently residents felt a sense of impotence, as the following quote from Sandy demonstrates:

“You still don’t get them (local residents) at the meetings unless it is something that is going to personally affect them. I also think a lot of it is now down to how they’ve changed the way the meetings are run. You are only allowed three minutes to talk and only on certain issues and only at the beginning so anything that comes up afterwards you can’t discuss which is.... it shut us out, and that’s put people off. Why bother going if you can’t have your say. It wouldn’t be so bad if they had a Facebook page and then people could....but is anyone going to be brave enough to answer them? No. And I think that’s another thing that is lacking there, they haven’t got the skills. If they had the skills they would be able to answer stuff in a way that is non-threatening or ‘we know better than you and you’re thick and stupid’. That’s all we’ve had from them.” (Interview with Sandy, March 2016).

Traditional participatory channels in Grange Farm have failed residents and consequently they have sought out other, more accessible means to engage - despite the knowledge that this engagement may often be in vain. For most residents the very act of finding a voice within GPPF, GFR or GTE was a more effective remedy for their perceived disenfranchisement than having that voice ignored. Disenfranchisement with local power structures and frameworks was, however, most apparent when it came to the Parish / Town Council and the contempt many in the community had for them.

Case Study – Resident Views on Grange Farm Parish / Town Council

As referenced above my fieldwork uncovered frequent expressions of ill-feeling toward the Parish / Town Council from Grange Farm residents within the local Facebook groups. This would become a running theme of my research. Localised hostility and disenfranchisement from and to their first tier of local government was reflected in the following comments taken from my research interviews:

"People are not happy with cuts in services, they are not happy. I mean the Parish Council precept went up 55% not this year just gone but the year before to fund the cutting of grass and the grass is in the worst state that it's ever been. I think a lot of people are just unhappy with a lack of investment in Grange Farm" (Interview with Ozzy, March 2016).

"I think they are a waste of time. I don't think they are interested in what the residents of Grange Farm want. I think they have their own agenda... They are there to boost their own egos to be fair. I don't like them." (Interview with Dave, March 2016).

"No, because they know best. We're just trouble causers. In fact we're lower than trouble causers, we're just thick. However some of us are very experienced but they just don't want to acknowledge that and they don't want to use of the skills that any of us have got which is a shame." (Interview with Sandy, March 2016).

It was clear that the Parish / Town Council were not seen as representative of the people of Grange Farm both in the views they took forward or the reluctance with which they engaged their parishioners. The transcript below of a GPPF discussion highlights the vitriol with which they were viewed by many residents and simultaneously documents resident grievances and accusations including; corruption / misappropriation of public funds, lack of confidence in the sincerity of the Council's community engagement responsibilities and a perceived lack of communication openness and transparency:

Sophie (original post): "A good source has informed me that the Parish Council are wanting town status. I know for a fact there will be no major benefits for Grange Farm. Just a certain jumped up person wanting to wear a big gold chain"

Greg: "Town status for Grange Farm, what a joke. There are only half a dozen shops and one pub. Hardly a town."

Frank "The Parish Council told us this would not happen and now it's back on the agenda? Our rates will go up and its legal robbery. Grange Farm people need to have a vote on this and not just the Parish Council who say they work for us and then come out with this bullshit"

Sophie: "Simon Tasker (tagged) I don't know what your views are on this but the people need a voice."

Greg: "Is there no Parish Councillors on here that can shed some light on the situation? Why won't they tell us the advantages and disadvantages or are they too busy plotting against us?"

Maggie: "George Frost has asked for this to be on the next Parish Council meeting agenda."

Kelly: "Yeah but I doubt they will let residents ask questions about it at the meeting"

(Source: Facebook, 2016)

In reality Grange Farm Parish / Town Council were not a democratically elected body. A Parish election had not taken place for many years. Election after election too few candidates would come forward to necessitate a competitive election process and those that were already appointed often simply co-opted others to the council. The few attempts at community engagement that I did witness during my observations such as their town status community survey, were restrictive and unappealing to local people. Moreover, my observations of Grange Farm 1.1 revealed a deep-rooted misunderstanding of the function of, and processes of, the Parish / Town Council within which the Council operates with information and awareness in this respect offered on a peer-to-peer basis within the groups rather than any top-down communication from the Parish / Town Council or other agencies.

Although monthly Parish / Town Council meetings were required to be open to the Public by law, the Standing Orders of the Council meant that the Public were only allowed to speak on a predesignated slot at the beginning of the meeting when formal Standing Orders had been suspended. Following that allotted time members of the public were only able to observe. This adherence to formality and process, albeit legally required, was alien to many Grange Farm residents who possessed neither the confidence and capacity nor the inclination to acquiesce to it. I witnessed first-hand how the formality of interaction with the Parish / Town Council through their meeting procedures and Standing Orders was failing local democracy in Grange Farm.

Moving Online to Offset the Failures of Traditional Avenues for Social Participation

Both GPPF and GFR groups had evolved into a space where resident's free time could be utilised to engage in meaningful social interaction as well as civic endeavours. As I outlined in Chapter 3, opportunities for social participation in Grange Farm 1.0 were limited. Both the decline of neutral community space and a reduction in kinship bonds between people had curtailed social participation between residents and their peers and those I interviewed believed that there had been negative effects on community cohesion because of this.

My initial observations of Social participation in Grange Farm 1.1 was that it was characterised by group discussions on local community news and events – what I will progress to title the 'noticeboard function'. The groups were where residents would find out what was going on in their area but, more importantly, they also provided a common bond around, and shared space within which, they could associate and base their interactions. As well as the 'noticeboard function' these discussions would also contribute to what I have termed the 'agora function' of the Grange Farm Facebook groups replicating the third spaces in which these interactions had traditionally taken place; cafes, pubs, parks etc... The content of discussion was remarkably familiar but the space in which they took place had changed.

Often benign or inconsequential social interactions in Grange Farm 1.1 enabled residents to build and strengthen bonds with others inhabiting the same geographic space. An example of this was the numerous times when residents would post light-hearted comments and musings regarding life in their community; for example when members of GPPF took the time to explain how the local frozen chip factory periodically caused the Estate to smell of chips or when a local resident posted to GFR a picture of a marauding herd of cows that

had escaped onto the Estate from a local farmer's field. The use of humour as a tool for community building has been highlighted by Marone (2015) who documents how online gaming communities use humour as a means of achieving social goals including engendering a 'smiling' atmosphere, promoting collaboration, fostering peer-to-peer feedback and achieving social cohesion. Marone progresses this narrative to suggest that peer-to-peer humour within online communities can contribute to boundary formation and identity creation. The users of the Grange Farm Facebook groups, through their deployment of light-hearted comments and musings, used humour as a tool to enable them to establish and reinforce boundaries and ultimately to informally establish common bonds that tied them to their Grange Farm identity.

The Grange Farm Facebook groups became recognised third places for the community. For example, they were where residents would go to make announcements to others, where they would go to share and receive local gossip and where they would go to discuss local issues. For some that I interviewed such as Maggie, Sandy, and Sophie they were a space within which to hang out or simply pass the time of day. Residents felt comfortable in the space and free to participate on their terms utilising the groups to share what was on their mind or pool stories and anecdotes that helped reinforce common bonds. Interviews with residents uncovered that they feel this level of comfort within the space because they understood them as collectively owned spaces where their interactions could occur, away from the prying eyes of power elites or policy makers. However, as I will progress to outline in Chapter 7, it was to the detriment of civic participation and the advancement of social change in Grange Farm 1.1 that the groups existed as a locally owned and maintained spaces but void of those with localised power and / or influence.

Cllr Tasker recounted to me how his idea of a relaxing evening was enjoying a couple of glasses of wine and scrolling through the posts on GPPF, participating when he came across something of interest. For Cllr Tasker the ease of entry into the space as a destination to find out what was going on in the community was a major selling point. Likewise, Maggie mentioned that a large part of her free time was taken up browsing and posting in GPPF, GFR and GTE. Oldenburg (1986) advocates that participatory decline at local levels has been accompanied by a decline in the availability of community 'third places'. The familiarity and ubiquity with which residents viewed Grange Farm 1.1 lent itself to the Facebook groups acting as the default third place for many local people.

Within these digital third places Grange Farm residents engaged each other in informal discussions on locally relevant issues. For example they would share amusing anecdotes or muse over local news or lament the trials and tribulations of the local football team. The following transcribed excerpts from discussions in the Grange Farm Facebook groups highlight a range of social commentaries that residents engaged in. For example, a discussion in GFR documented the annoyance of residents to an alarm going off at a local supermarket late at night:

Sarah (original post): "I've seen about three posts tonight about the [supermarket] alarm going off constantly. It was going off until 4.30 the other morning and it's been going off all night since 5. It's not fair, some people have to live near that shop and be up early in the morning. Is there anything that can be done George Frost (tags Cllr Frost)"

Joan: "The staff won't care, they'll be at home all warm and comfy."

Sarah: "That's why I've posted on here, to try and get some info for the people who are having to put up with it."

Kirsty: "The engineers were supposed to have fixed that bloody thing last week"

Cllr Frost: "Sorry Sarah, have only just seen your post. It seems to have stopped now but if it goes off again please message me".

In a more jovial and light-hearted exchange GPPF Founder Sophie quipped with the group membership over a recent incident where a herd of cows had escaped a local farmer’s field and were spotted by many locals roaming around the estate:

Sophie (original post): “I think this month’s photo competition should be themed on the recent visiting cows to Grange Farm. Cow related jokes also encouraged!”

Danny “A cow walks into a bar covered in blood. It was a metal bar”

Maggie “Where do cows live? Uddersfiled”

Danny “That’s an old one Maggie. Don’t you know any udders?”

Cllr Tasker “What did the mummy cow say to the baby cow? Its pasture bed time.”

Maggie “Does this prove that Grange Farm is not a town? It is a cowncil estate.”

The residents of Grange Farm utilised their Facebook groups to help build, maintain, and strengthen social circles within their immediate locality. My observations even suggest that in some cases the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 had become the primary medium for interaction between social circles relegating face-to-face interaction to secondary. I will explain later in this Chapter how I have come to term this the ‘bowling alley function’ in that it provided accessible space within which kinship bonds between individuals could develop. Sophie, Sandy, and Dave all explained to me in their interviews how they maintained an active social circle of friends and acquaintances through the GPPF and GFR groups and how they had even progressed to make several friends through the groups with whom they had subsequently interacted with offline.

My experience of Grange Farm 1.1 suggests that many geographically close social relationships traversed both online and offline spaces as well as more distanced ones that existed primarily online. In this respect it correlated with the findings of Wellman et al (2001) that hypothesise that the social utility of the internet can be exploited by individuals to

maintain bonds with others within their social networks that have become physically remote. I suggest that the decline in accessible third places in Grange Farm 1.0 may have been a key factor for this migration online. In this sense the experiences of Grange Farm 1.1 differed little from previous studies (Soukup 2006, McArthur and White, 2016) on the social utility of digital platforms as viable third places. In Grange Farm residents had opted to take the path of least resistance with regard to their participatory behaviours and oftentimes this path would lead them to their local Facebook groups.

As I have documented above many residents of Grange Farm were taking to the Facebook Groups Platform as a primary means of sustaining social interactions but more than this they were using Facebook groups to facilitate offline participation and relationship building. The ease and ubiquity of these online platforms was used to good effect to organise activity that would increase and improve social connectedness in the offline world. Increasingly the distinctions between on and offline in Grange Farm 1.1 were interwoven and complex. This will be explored at length later in this Chapter.

I have previously identified how Grange Farm Residents had identified and demonstrated how the time pressures of modern living and the lack of viable community space to build and exercise social bonds between residents had contributed to a lack of participatory space. The neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 emerged to provide an alternative avenue for some who wished to express these social participatory desires. Loss of community, or third, space had been identified in the pre-Internet Era by writers such as Oldenburg (1986) who observed many of the same de-socialising time constraints that emerged through my research. He states:

“Even if I had a third place, I wouldn’t have the time to enjoy it.’ This is a common response among those who appreciate the merits of third place involvement but who are inclined to relegate these pleasant little institutions

of social relaxation to a simpler past and its slower pace of life.” (Oldenburg, 1986, loc:89%)

Interviews with residents revealed how they have used GPPF and GFR to overcome these barriers to social interaction. For example Sandy informed me that:

“Those who are working and everything are too busy to get involved in life outside the home. Whereas if you’ve got your computer on you can go to your computer, do a bit, leave it, then do a bit more.” (Interview with Sandy, 2016)

Local Councillor and Grange Farm resident Simon Tasker outlined similar concerns over the lack of shared community space:

“I feel it’s (online social space) becoming more important as well because I’d say there is less opportunities for people to do that now. As I said, gone are the days that you could come home, have your tea and then go and play snooker or whatever, you’re not really doing that any more... so yeah I think it plays a very important part, as you say information sharing and stuff like that and obviously the friendship aspect of it as well. I’m friends with people now that I wouldn’t be if it wasn’t for social media.” (Interview with Cllr Tasker, March 2016).

As the comments above demonstrate, there was a comfort with which the Grange Farm residents used their community Facebook groups to engage in community affairs online. They identified how their involvement aligned with the accessibility demands of the modern lifestyle. The fact that residents could also dip in and dip out of their participation and prompt their involvement through bespoke notifications allowed for the civic and social aspects of their daily lives to be engaged with more efficiently. For example, both Sophie and Maggie explained to me how they would often pause what they were doing to check notification updates from GPPF. This was increasingly important for Sophie who, as the group Administrator, would be needed to ensure posts to the group adhered to the rules and behaviour standards. I will explore the role that new technologies play in facilitating community participation further in the next Chapter. Antoci et al (2014) support my findings here, stating “Social networking has made it simpler to interact with others without the limitations of geography and lack of time.” (p.1915) and “Web-mediated interaction is less

sensitive to a reduction in leisure time caused by an intense pace of work. Facebook and Twitter allow users to stay in touch with their friends and acquaintances" (p.1915). What is worthy of note however is that residents did not see their participation through the Facebook groups as the most ideal way of getting involved. For most, the traditional avenues were nostalgically viewed as the most ideal way. Their community Facebook groups were seen as a necessity of modern life or 'the next best thing'.

Case study – Sandy's Story

Sandy was a middle-aged care worker and regular participant of GFR. Sandy, more than anyone else I interviewed, embraced the accessibility of Grange Farm 1.1. For Sandy GFR was not only a space where she could converse with others on community matters, it was a space in which she could socialise with her fellow residents. Some of those she interacted with she knew well and others not. Some she knew in 'real life' some she did not. As such Sandy would, by her own admission, engage in most of her social and civic endeavours from the comfort of her own living room.

In the hour we spent together, ironically in the rather public arena of a bench in the middle of Grange Farm High Street we discussed at length the nature of her social interactions in GFR and how they had allowed her to reconnect to the community that has been her home for over 30 years. Our conversation had seemed to put her in high spirits although I could not help but feel she seemed a little embarrassed disclosing some aspects of her involvement such as the length of time she spent participating in the group and the times of day that she would engage. In a world that has increasingly become 'digital by default' I got the feeling that Sandy feared social interaction in this way was not 'normal' – or at least would not be seen by wider society as normal.

Interestingly she disclosed to me that Sandy was not her real name. She had opted to break the Facebook usage policy and use a pseudonym on her Facebook profile to ensure a complete break with her online activities from her 'real life' identity. Whereas most other indicators from my research have pointed towards a blurring of boundaries between on and offline identity and action Sandy had chosen to maintain the anonymity characteristic of so many of the social components to Web 2.0. Besides, she informed me, her fellow members of GFR whom she had grown close to all had the privilege of knowing her real name.

Sandy typically engaged with GFR in the late evening time, often for hours on end and occupying the majority of her free time between work and sleep. Her interactions were both civic and social in nature, choosing to alternate between using the platform to help others by providing local information and engaging in light-hearted discussion and banter with the other regulars. Every so often Sandy would engage in passionate and oft-time heated debates with others around certain local issues such as the Town status debate, the future of the local Library and the looming spectre of further housing development. By her own admission she had little time for some of the members of GPPF who took a decidedly different political stance to Cllr Frost with whom she had become very close through her involvement with GFR. As a former member of GPPF she felt somewhat aggrieved that she had felt the need to leave the group because her views and support for Cllr Frost had led to friction with some of its regular members. I shall explore further the polarising of both GFR and GPPF around political affiliation in Chapter 7.

What struck me most throughout my conversation with Sandy was the ease with which she had made the Facebook Groups Platform work for her. She had fully embraced the informal and accessible nature of GFR as a participatory medium and had proactively used it to provide both a social and civic function that had been missing in her life due to her

circumstances. She recounted to me how for herself, and others in her situation, GFR had enabled them to still feel involved in community life:

"I think people are, and I can only answer this from personal experience, those who are working and everything are too busy to get involved in life outside the home. Whereas if you've got your computer on you can go to your computer, do a bit, leave it, then do a bit more.... I think it also gives you, I actually think it's probably better for some people than not having it. The reason, I mean I work 15 hours a day on a one-to-one basis with somebody else, so I don't speak to anybody. I get home and it's bedtime. So I don't see nobody who could give me an interesting conversation. But if I get home and put the computer on I can have it for as long as I want." (Interview with Sandy, March 2016).

Although naturally a shy individual Sandy expressed to me how she had made a small number of close friends through GFR and that these had tended to be regular users of the group like her. She cheekily recalled the occasions when her and some of her GFR friends had ended up in verbal altercations with others on the group who had disagreed with their point of view:

"There are a few people that I've just got friendly with through the group really. So some of the group I have a positive relationship with, some of them perhaps not. If I'm in dialogue with somebody I will try and do it in a way which won't cause offence. If they way overstep the mark then I just don't want to be involved in something like that. There is a couple on there that, we would try and respond in a way which is intelligent rather than gut reactions and I think there is a couple others of us who do that as well. But no there are times when it has got really bad and there's been hundreds of comments and a lot of them have been really bad so it's just been deleted." (Interview with Sandy, March 2016)

It was becoming clear to me that GFR had become part of Sandy's social identity – although she would not recognise this herself and moreover would probably deny the fact. She recalled how she and the other GFR regulars would have little in jokes and routines such as the times of day when they would be online together. In a hectic and busy world, Sandy had used a local Facebook group, known to few others outside of Grange Farm, to help her feel normal and to reconnect her with the community experience that she so craved.

Moving from the Social to the Civic – Online Participation as Civic Engagement

In Chapter 2 of this thesis I constructed a narrative that denotes civic participation as participatory activity that directly links individuals to the decision-making and power distribution of a community. Through engaging in civic participation at the local level individuals seek to improve or influence community institutions through positive action and interaction. In this section I begin to introduce how in Grange Farm 1.1 residents used their Facebook groups to work together to enact change in their own locality.

My findings from Grange Farm suggest that civic engagement with neighbourhood Facebook groups could be argued as a latest manifestation of a trend towards a new culture of civic engagement via digital means. Digital engagement in local matters, even if they constitute mere dialogue, have helped to promote the overall concept of civic participation within communities by raising awareness of local issues and highlighting opportunities for involvement where previously these were absent. Online political participation has evolved in tandem with the internet, enabling new groups and demographics to engage in the mechanics of civic and political life (Gibson et al, 2005). Previous studies into participation on both local and national levels (Shah et al 2005, Valenzuela et al 2009) have documented how the use of the internet as a medium and conduit for civic participation is not a new phenomenon. What I observed in Grange Farm was the evolution of the medium from observable phenomenon into a new norm for those residents who chose to engage this way – with mixed results in achieving a redress of power imbalances and the ability to influence local polity.

The migration of civic participation from offline to online platforms enfranchised a number of those within the Grange Farm community. For some they enabled a platform and voice to those that were disengaged from the participatory framework. The groups enabled them to

have an involvement in the affairs of their community that they had not had in the past. At the time of my research others, however, were yet to migrate their civic involvement online, although as I have pointed out throughout this thesis the number of Grange Farm residents active within the groups continued to grow. Local resident and GTE founder Dave recounted the speed at which membership of the group he established had grown. He argued this was due to it providing a space for dialogue to the Parish / Town Council's Town status proposals - dialogue that had been denied elsewhere. He proudly informed me:

"It grew from 10 or 15 people all the way up to, I think it's 493 at the last count. It's maybe more than that now. The majority of those joined within the first two weeks. Anyone can join to be fair. It's there for everybody. I just thought anyone can join as far as I'm concerned because we wanna get people's views. We wanna get as many people's views as possible because they are aren't allowed to speak at the Parish Council meeting" (Interview with Dave, March 2016)

As membership of the Grange Farm Facebook groups continued to grow they replaced the seldom used traditional avenues of civic participation within the community as the default participatory space. Academic thinking (Coleman and Blumler, Kirk and Schill 2011) has provided a basis for assertions of the enfranchising power of the internet. Civic participation via community Facebook groups was by no means a panacea for entrenched disenfranchisement and civic apathy however the creation of any participatory space that enabled resident involvement in civic affairs was to be welcomed. Through my conversations with regular members of the Grange Farm Facebook groups I probed their offline social and civic actions and interactions. Some outlined more everyday activities they engaged in such as looking after neighbours' children, gritting icy footpaths, and walking dogs for their friends. Actions that I would generally refer to as 'good neighbourliness'. Others were more civically engaged, spending their free time and effort involved in environmental or residents groups, or organising local petitions or campaigns. It is clear that for some the social media realm

had opened new avenues for local enfranchisement and for others it was a natural extension of their existing civic tendencies.

A disparity between the total memberships of the two main groups GPPF and GFR and those who were active participants suggests that residents were engaging at different levels – 24% / 6% and 18% / 5% of the population of Grange Farm for GPPF and GFR respectively. For some, involvement with the groups provided an effective means of keeping up to date with community affairs and for others they provided an opportunity to contribute towards the development of their community. For many more they act as a repository for local news and information. Whilst this research has focussed primarily on the actions and intentions of the more active members of the groups little is known about the usage habits of the majority of group members whose involvement was passive rather than active and this is an area that I will suggest later as a potential for further research.

My research findings uncovered that there were two categories of participants that were predominantly active in civic activity through the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1. There were those who would have found a way to have participated with or without the Facebook groups and those for whom they provided new opportunities. As my research incorporated elements of both online and offline observation, I was able to ascertain that the majority of those who played an active or semi-active part in the Facebook groups did not assume such roles in the offline sphere. My offline ethnography shows that the names and faces that had become common place through my Facebook observations were seldom if ever observed in the many offline community meetings, forums or consultation events that I attended. Those in the former category showed a higher propensity to expand their civic participatory endeavours into the offline sphere when the situation arose. Those in the latter category were happy to limit their involvement to the online sphere and, as I shall go on to

suggest in Chapter 7, this would present limitations for the Facebook groups in becoming true mechanisms of social change. I demonstrate this through pointing to the differences in action between those involved in the campaign against Town status who I knew to be traditionally those who would have been more active in offline space and those who I had observed making online cries to save the Grange Farm hotel - mainly residents who I had not observed in any considerable offline capacity before.

As I have previously established, the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 were community owned and facilitated entities, set up by local residents through their own volition and via their own rules and administration. As such they offered an experience of civic participation that is diametrically opposed to the participatory frameworks and mechanisms imposed on communities by power elites. Historically, Arnstein's (1969) appraisal of levels of involvement and influence within participatory structures provides a rationale for critique of statutory participation frameworks. My conversations with residents suggested that many residents acquiesced to this position, ascribing to the view that imposed engagement forums and consultations from power elites and institutions were characterised by tokenism, control or agenda setting from power elites, and manipulation. In establishing Grange Farm 1.1 residents had to navigate the difficult path of developing a purpose and legitimacy for their local Facebook groups as well as administering a commonly accepted set of rules and behaviours.

I would come to understand the local Facebook groups as the go to or default place for civic participation for some. For many it would be the only place they would make their views known. This was much to the disappointment of Cllr Frost, Ozzy and others active within the groups who had tried to harness their grassroots mobilizing power and transfer it into offline action. This contradicts recent research from Scandinavia (Eimhjellen, 2019) that

highlights the supplemental value of digital participation when enacted alongside more traditional forms. In Grange Farm there are a few options for traditional participation and my research suggests that even when digitally engaged through the Facebook groups residents are rarely able or willing to migrate this over to the offline.

It is sufficient to say that whilst the Facebook groups had become trusted spaces where residents could express civic opinion and comment, the absence of elites and policy makers in this space, save for a couple of Ward Councillors, ensured that any civic participatory action within the space had to move offline in order to be effective. Residents, in their own words to me, spoke of their feelings of discomfort within such offline participatory spaces.

This was made abundantly clear through the Parish / Town Council’s attempts at official consultation on their proposals to reclassify Grange Farm as a town. Whilst only 41 residents across the whole Parish completed and returned the Council’s official consultation questionnaire on the plans, hundreds of comments from a large cross section of the community filled the pages of GPPF, GFR and GTE for weeks on end. This was despite ongoing pleas from Cllrs Frost and Tasker and others for residents to submit their views on the official questionnaire so that the Council were aware of them. In this instance the Grange Farm Facebook groups had provided a valuable sounding board for resident opinion and no doubt had certain therapeutic benefits for residents. Their comments and opinions from this participation were, however, effectively lost in regard to affecting change.

Whilst not perfect the Grange Farm Facebook groups did fulfil a vital civic purpose in keeping local residents up to speed with community information. Cllr George Frost also alluded to this explaining how in the early days of his campaign to get elected to the Borough Council, and as a relative newcomer to the locality, he was informed by a resident on the doorstep

that if he wanted to find out what was going on in Grange Farm the best place to start would be the community Facebook pages. In his interview with me he recounted:

"I recall knocking on somebody's door prior to becoming a County Councillor and I was up for election. I had a long chat with a lady resident who mentioned it to me. She said if i want to know what's going on on the estate to get on this Facebook group, and i did. And it was fantastic. And I had my concerns, well not concerns but wondered what it was gonna be like because I'd never been on one, I've never been really computer literate it's something that's come along in the last three or four years with me. But yeah it was just through a conversation when I was stood on a door step trying to ascertain what makes people tick in Grange Farm, what were their concerns? What could I do to help etc?" (Interview with Cllr George Frost, March 2016).

Traditional civic engagement channels often require a certain level of dedicated commitment (Oliver, 1984). For example, residents wanting to attend community forums or meetings to have a say on local issues will need to set aside at least an hour of their time as well as being expected to have done some background research beforehand such as reading minutes or to take away actions after. Civic participation through the smartphone or tablet is quick, instantaneous and requires a significantly less demanding level of commitment. For many the trade-off of convenience for their expression and opinion versus the longer term, more sustained and more effective involvement through official channels is an acceptable one.

The use of the smartphone as a means of engaging within Grange Farm 1.1 enabled participation, especially in the case of information sharing, to become instant - group members were able to share information, local updates, make comment on ongoing issues or simply keep up to date with the latest happenings on the go and at their convenience. My observations also noted the tendency for group members to take photographs of various community issues such as vandalism, fly tipping or environmental neglect to illustrate their written points. This phenomenon was put to good use by members of the GPPF to update the wider community as to the various flash points of concern during a period of localised

flooding. As their familiarity and confidence within the space grew the ease with which they were able to navigate the functionality of the Facebook Groups Platform to engage in civic dialogue contributed to a more informed and locally aware community.

In migrating civic expression online, residents of Grange Farm were able to create a space where such participatory dialogue could and did flourish, where perhaps it had not before. Whilst this is to be welcomed it should be noted that unless residents were willing to evolve these discussions into offline action then the true power of the groups as a participatory medium was negated. When residents were able to make the switch from online dialogue to offline action the results were immediately apparent.

Case Study – The School Campaign

This is an interesting example of how Grange Farm Residents utilised their Facebook groups to engage in civic participation and bring about change on a local level. My analysis maps the development from individual to collective action. It began with a disgruntled post to the GPPF group setting up a poll asking if anyone else was having problems with the school handing out so many detentions and inviting others to respond either within the group poll or privately. The original post to GPPF prompted nearly 100 follow on responses from other local parents in support or showing solidarity and recounting their own similar stories or experiences. The majority of these agreed and gave examples of behaviour identified by the school as poor such as:

“I just asked my son and he said they’re giving out detentions for stupid reasons, like picking up a pen and putting it in the air. If you complain they just give you another one!”

And also:

“They are handing them out like sweets. Giving detentions out for looking out of the window”.

A common theme began to emerge through the sharing of resident’s experiences through the group – that the school were seemingly taking an extra hard stance on violations of the new behaviour and uniform policy. The group were concerned about their perceived triviality of behavioural offenses and the fact that 50 pupils were in detention at a time. Other comments were about uniform, dress and grooming with one particular resident annoyed that they:

“tried to isolate me for having a single streak of red hair” and calling the school “petty”

While another joined the discussion mentioning another school ‘Pinder’ when discipline was far too lax:

“They used to let a select few kids [...] just run around the place”

Overall residents complained about what they believed to be draconian new discipline rules and the over-zealous enforcement of them by some school staff. Many parents/residents talked about the stress that sons and daughters were under and their reluctance to attend school, worried that their education and results were suffering as a result:

“Upset, stress and heartache for my kids [...] they don’t wanna go to school”

One resident’s son was:

“Hysterical when he came in today to find 3 detention letters from Pindar”

Out of this discussion several suggestions were made on how to deal with the school which began with ignoring detentions and/or speaking to teachers and staff:

“Just tell your kids to ignore it”

“tell school and challenge it to say it issued unfairly”

“I threw them in the bin and just told my son to do his best”

As the discussion continued residents seemed to become more angry and welcomed the space to 'rant'. What is really interesting however, is how individual action began to develop into collective action when one resident offered "a link" to the "Ofsted guru and government observations on behaviour". And others warning:

"there is no point in going in angry. Everyone's points will be listened to better if it is presented in a clear and civil way".

"I agree. This needs to be sorted out in a calm and reasonable manner"

Eventually collective action was proposed and advertised:

"IF YOUR CHILD IS A ** SCHOOL PUPIL AND HAS A DETENTION TOMORROW OR HAS BEEN GIVEN DETENTIONS, PUT IN FLC OR TOLD THEY ARE NOT ALLOW TO UPCOMING PROM. PLEASE COME TO THE SCHOOL CARPARK ON FRIDAY 19th JUNE AT 3.30pm. WE ARE MEETING THERE PRIOR TO GOING INTO SCHOOL. please come and have your say. x"

GPPF was used as a way to bring these individuals, all with a common local grievance, together to collectively address a perceived community problem. Bennett (2012) documents how social media has led to a *personalisation of participation* within large scale political movements with individual circumstance and interest characterizing involvement choices. My findings suggest a similar scenario played out through the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 with a tendency for individuals to mobilise around a cause that was relevant to their circumstances. Whilst those who got involved in the campaign had participated intensely for a short period, their names seldom cropped up elsewhere in my ongoing observations.

GPPF became the accepted space within which to share information and reach a shared realization of the issue. Furthermore GPPF was the space where residents were able to

plan and mobilise an effective community response through the adoption of an agreed strategy. Whilst some individuals took on a more proactive organizing role others were happy to fall in line and support the campaign by adding their names to the petition or turning up to the meeting with the Head Teacher that had been planned to provide an effective show of support in numbers. Finally parents would use the group to feedback on progress to supporters and the wider community.

My knowledge and background research of Grange Farm 1.0, before the advent of the community Facebook groups, suggested that it was unlikely that such a mobilisation of community action to the school behaviour and uniform policy issue would have taken place were it not for GPPF acting as a conduit. Previous calls to action in the pre-social media era such as the campaign to save the Council-run Play Centre or the local requests for adequate lighting to be provided at the local Skate Park, did not benefit from such a powerful organising tool. GPPF enabled this disparate group of local parents an avenue to mount effective community action with speed, responsiveness and community backing.

Participation Parallels (an overview)

Previously in this Chapter I have documented how findings from my research characterised the analysis of community participation in Grange Farm 1.1. The community was witnessing a migration of a number of everyday community participatory functions onto the Facebook Groups Platform. Of course traditional forms of social and civic participation still occurred but for many they were gradually being replaced by social media facilitated alternatives.

In this section I will outline how residents of Grange Farm (re)connected with the various participatory aspects of community life through their local Facebook groups that had become accepted and recognised by many as tangible community space. I propose that this led to

the creation and development of five participatory functions; ‘the noticeboard’, ‘the committee’, ‘the bowling alley’, ‘the agora’ and ‘the surgery’.

These participatory functions mirrored the functions of offline, established conceptualisations of community participation albeit through a digital interface. As the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 evolved and emerged for many residents as the default medium for participatory activity the re-creation of traditional participatory functions within this digital space was reflected in the ways they were utilised by local residents.

The ‘Participation Parallels’ demonstrate a rejection of participatory approaches and inclusion that had hitherto characterised socio-economic policy initiatives in Grange Farm. They were a rejection that had emerged through previous failed attempts at meaningful involvement and numerous power sharing opportunities or initiatives to address inequalities of influence that had come to no avail. As I outline in the section on ‘Participation as Power’ in Chapter Two, Lukes (1974) clearly identifies one of the three forms of societal power as ‘ideological power’; As socialised norms, values and expectations that prevent citizens from developing any aspirations of redressing power imbalances. Put simply the residents of Grange Farm, through years of unsuccessful attempts at engaging with local power elites and within power sharing frameworks, had disengaged and no longer believed that their involvement in official channels of participation would be recognised or make any tangible difference.

Through adopting these ‘Parallels’ the Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook groups were what Gaventa (2006) refers to as ‘created’ spaces of power – although as I will process to argue whether or not these new spaces yielded any significant power at a local level is debateable. Through the creation of these new digital spaces as a space to utilise the

‘participation parallels’ the residents of Grange Farm had essentially ‘dropped out’, preferring to engage within a realm where power, where it was apparent, took a different form. It was indirect and influential and could be categorised within what Lukes (1974) termed ‘non-decision making power’.

Residents of Grange Farm used their neighbourhood Facebook groups to facilitate the functionality of community participation that they were socialised as collectively and historically familiar with. GPPF regular Alice viewed the Grange Farm Facebook groups as a potential substitute for more traditional avenues of participation. She succinctly summed it up by commenting that, “it is (GPPF) sort of standing in for how things used to be as things are going online” (Interview with Alice, May 2016). Many residents of Grange Farm came to use their Facebook groups in such a manner as to reproduce the social and civic participatory functions that they felt removed from. The ‘participation parallels’ would come to characterise the vast majority of every day interactions that I observed during my 12 months of field research. My findings correlate with recent studies (Eimhjellen, 2019; Penni, 2017) that mark the appeal and opportunity of digital participation in the modern-day community context. They also present a confused understanding to ongoing debates around technological versus social determinism as underpinned by Yun (2018). Through the ‘participation parallels’ in Grange Farm 1.1 it was unclear whether the availability of technology was shaping resident behaviours or if resident action was shaping how available technologies are being used. I suspect it was a little of both.

As I progress through this Chapter I will examine how each of my five identified ‘parallels’ provided a participatory function that helps to maintain a healthy and stable community setting for Grange Farm. I will document each ‘participation parallel’ in turn detailing its

purpose and its function within the context of Grange Farm 1.1. I will then progress to evidence this narrative with observational case studies from my field research.

Residents of Grange Farm had carved out these key participatory functions in the social media realm and my research indicates that they had come to both substitute and compliment offline community involvement. I have termed each ‘participation parallel’ in line with its offline conceptual equivalent. These five ‘participation parallels’ are:

‘The noticeboard’ - Residents and community organisations used the groups to share news and information and keep each other informed. They also used the groups to advertise local events and job opportunities and to promote local businesses.

‘The committee’ - On occasion, and usually in response to an offline community issue, the Grange Farm Facebook groups were used to mobilise and organise a community response. A number of residents would utilise the ease and ubiquity of Facebook to work collectively to bring about a positive difference to the community.

‘The bowling alley’ - For many residents active engagement with the Grange Farm Facebook groups helped to build and harness bonds, links and social networks with each other. Some also used the groups to develop and foster a shared sense of community identity through the reinforcement of attachment factors such as shared values, histories and traditions.

‘The agora’ - Often the Facebook groups were used to discuss local issues or occurrences. They had become an accessible community space where conversations and debate on a multitude of local issues could take place. The Facebook groups acted as a space for

residents to vent their frustrations, comment on Grange Farm news and ultimately to shape local public opinion.

'The surgery' - Some residents took to their local Facebook groups to appeal for help, advice and assistance on individual or local matters. Often this would come from their peers within the group but increasingly officers from local agencies and Borough and County Councillors would pick up case work within this space.

I found that more involved participatory activity cut across multiple parallels at the same time. Those who chose to participate through the groups were able to participate at different levels and exploit the different participatory functions. Although, as I will document through my analysis, the results of their endeavours were mixed. Fung's (2006) research into community participation suggests individuals will engage at their optimum comfort level and with consideration to their utility within the process. Whilst confirming Fung's argument my research advances his utilitarian narrative, suggesting that the core participatory functions can remain consistent across different elements of community space and 'realities'.

The different ways in which Grange Farm residents used their Facebook groups varied from group to group. For example, GTE was more proactive in its approach to addressing identified community concerns than either GPPF or GFR. GTE evolved to act as a focal point for community organisation and action against a single particular issue whereas GPPF and GFR facilitated information sharing and participatory discussion around a multitude of different issues, only occasionally evolving these discussions into community action. Through content analysis of the participatory engagement in the Grange Farm Facebook groups I was able to ascertain the frequency with which each participatory function was utilised in each group.

The differences in participatory behaviour between the groups is evidenced in *Tables 1 and 2* below which document the contrast between how residents engaged with GPPF and GTE. As one of the larger groups in terms of overall membership participation in GPPF was mostly characterised by the sharing of news and information or casual discussions on local issues (‘noticeboard function’ and ‘agora function’). GTE on the other hand, through its evolution into a resident-led protest group, still maintained half of resident interactions as ‘agora function’ discussions and also experienced a far higher percentage of interactions that were proactive and that I would classify as the ‘committee function’.

Table 1 Breakdown of Original Post Classification – GPPF

Grange Farm Past Present and Future		
Post type	Number of original posts	% of original posts
The 'noticeboard'	240	42%
The 'committee'	27	4%
The 'bowling alley'	174	31%
The 'agora'	115	20%
The 'surgery'	43	8%
Other	21	4%

Table 2 Breakdown of Original Post Classification – GTE

Grange Farm Town or Estate You Decide?		
Post type	Number of original posts	% of original posts
The 'noticeboard'	10	11%
The 'committee'	40	42%
The 'bowling alley'	5	5%
The 'agora'	48	50%
The 'surgery'	2	2%
Other	11	12%

The residents I spoke to identified that how residents chose to participate, and ultimately what they sought to achieve through their participation, was dependent upon the functional purpose of the group and the objectives it had been set up to achieve. In the case of the two main multi-purpose groups, (GPPF and GFR) this was primarily to create a space for community dialogue. In the case of GTE, it was specifically around campaign goals and organisation to bring about change. As a shared space where a community response to the Parish / Town Council's town status proposals could be organised GTE contrasted with the other Grange Farm Facebook groups as residents engaged significantly less with the 'noticeboard function' in GTE. They instead preferred to get news and information on the ongoing situation from GPPF or GFR and engaged with GTE when a more active and committed involvement was required.

Grange Farm 1.1 was characterised by a *plurality of functionality* whereby residents sought appropriate avenues for engagement dependent on what they wished to achieve. For

example, for some residents, such as Maggie, Sophie, and Sandy the groups were spaces to engage in a multitude of aspects of community life. For others, such as Dave and Kevin, involvement was focused around a specific task or goal (in their case the opposition to town status). For others such as Cllrs Frost and Tasker and local activist Ozzy the groups maintained a more practical focus, enabling them to carry out their political duties or ambitions. In this respect the findings of my research support similar studies in this area (Fagotto and Fung 2006, McComas et al 2006) that argue that the means of engagement correlate with the desired outcomes of the individual. My research indicates a clear distinction between what could be termed *active* and what could be termed *passive* participation. Residents actively participated through the ‘committee’ and ‘surgery functions’ where their involvement was characterised by distinct community action. For example, banding together to organise a community outing or organizing a volunteer for the local Library. They acted in a more passive manner with the ‘agora’ or ‘bowling alley functions’, however, engaging in dialogue over a rise in their annual council tax precept or when sharing stories and anecdotes from the community’s history.

During my research in Grange Farm the community Facebook groups were still very much in their infancy however their role and function within the fabric on community life in Grange Farm was becoming apparent. To the casual observer the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 presented as digitalised talking shops; the majority of interactions in GPPF and GTE were passive comment rather than active involvement. However, as I will progress to document in the next Chapter, my research in Grange Farm correlates with findings of Swart et al (2019) that pinpoints the community-building utility of social media participation when based around news and information sharing. My study gives credence to Swart et al and advances their narrative within a specific social media space – neighbourhood Facebook groups. I also claim that the participatory utility of the Grange Farm Facebook groups was

much more nuanced than simple information sharing. In harnessing the plurality of participatory functionality these community Facebook groups had become agents of community action, waging significant influence and ability to bring about social change.

The ‘participation parallels’ that characterise community participation in Grange Farm 1.1 existed because residents enabled them to exist. In their desire to reaffirm community through active participation they had turned to the medium of Facebook groups to achieve this. The residents of Grange Farm had developed their neighbourhood Facebook groups to, at most resurrect and at least reaffirm, the participatory functions and traditions necessary for the realisation of sustainable community. Moreover, they provided new impetus and opportunities for community involvement for residents disenfranchised by the traditional avenues of participation of Grange Farm 1.0. Grange Farm 1.1 offered a new means of participation that was different, whilst at the same time remarkably familiar. Residents were reconnecting themselves with their community; whether that be simply with each other as peers, with recognised community institutions or with shared values and aspirations for the future. In many ways the residents of Grange Farm were doing what they had always done - it was just the medium that had changed.

A 21st Century Response to a 21st Century Problem – How New Technologies were Exploited

The Facebook groups had become a 21st Century solution to a 21st Century problem. In the case of GPPF and GFR in particular they had been consciously created and crafted, to represent a participatory space that residents felt they had lost. The groups were so intertwined with social and community life on the Estate that it became hard to separate day to day community life from the conversations, debates and musings of social media.

In their simplest form the Grange Farm Facebook groups were a meeting space for local people. Crucially however they were spaces where the normal rules of time and place were suspended. Conversations on local issues were conducted over an elongated timeframe that crucially was adaptable to the busy lifestyles that many residents had to navigate. Convenience rivalled local ownership as a main reason the Facebook groups were being used by some as a space for participatory activity. More traditional forms of civic participation tend to revolve around structure; such as meetings or events, with social participation centred on the physical meeting of individuals with each other in a shared public space. Discussion, debate and opinion forming in Grange Farm 1.1 was within the confines of virtual space.

My conversations with some of the group regulars uncovered how frequently they would involve themselves in the space and for how long. Osman (2018) states that the average Facebook user spends 35 minutes of each day logged onto Facebook. A year on year increasing trend for the Facebook platform to consume more and more of our free time has been noted through other studies (Kirkpatrick 2010, Contreras 2013). For those that I spoke to, and many more, judging from the frequency of active participation by others gathered from my observations, participation in the Facebook groups was a daily activity. For some such as care assistant Sandy it was a scheduled daily event and for others their participation routine was unpredictable and would revolve around sporadic involvement and browsing the groups to see if there was anything of interest or concerning them or something that they needed to act on. Cllr Frost explained:

"I would say I log on virtually every day. I don't stop logged on every day. I probably just log on, see what's going off, if there's any..... because I get quite a lot of case work through and it's great." (Interview with Cllr George Frost, March 2016)

Middle aged factory worker Dave, who first became engaged with Grange Farm's Facebook groups through the Town status objections described his typical pattern of engagement as temperamental and dependent on the amount of free time he would have on any particular day. When asked to describe his typical usage patterns he explained "When I'm at work, just a couple of times a day and when I'm off I can be on it for hours basically." (Interview with Dave, March 2016). Local receptionist Maggie and active member of all of the Grange Farm Facebook groups was a little more self-conscious regarding the amount of time she spent in the groups confessing that she felt 'far too active' and that it 'makes her sound so sad'.

My time in Grange Farm uncovered details of the practicalities of resident's social media facilitated civic participation. A notable usage trend with the Facebook groups was how people would differentiate their periods of activity in the Groups by the technology they would use to access them. Extended periods of participation, perhaps when there was an issue of high community interest would be characterised by participation at home and usually during the evening hours at a PC or laptop computer. Quick and intermediary participation which would usually be engaged in whilst doing other things would be accessed via their smartphones with participation being limited to a short post or comment often prompted by a push notification. By utilising the instantaneous access afforded through mobile devices, civic participation in Grange Farm 1.1 required less sustained commitment than traditional forms of participation.

New technologies, in particular smartphones facilitated the shift to, and effectiveness of, social media participation. The proliferation of camera enabled smartphones meant that as residents came into contact with issues of community concern during their everyday lives they were able to capture these in photo or video format and upload them straight to their

favoured group(s) in real time. During my observations incidents of vandalism, fly-tipping and flooding were documented pictorially through GPPF and GFR, encouraging and enabling residents to share information, create awareness and comment on the goings on in their community. The screenshots of original posts in *Figures 2 and 3* below (Source: Facebook, 2015) below document two such instances.

Figure 2 Bus Stop Vandalism



Figure 3 *Dangerous for Dogs*



My interpretations of the information shared by residents immediately suggest that it was primarily undertaken to create awareness or raise concern. They would usually limit their posts to factual information either in comment or photographic form to quickly notify others in the community of the situation. Others would then engage in dialogue over the issue as the participatory function of the discussions evolved into a number of different forms; forming community opinion ('agora function'), formulating a co-ordinated community response ('committee function') or requesting help from peers or local councillors ('surgery function'). Often the original poster would return to the discussion some time later to engage in more detailed dialogue once time and convenience allowed.

Offline forms of community participation often require everyone participating to be present at the same place and the same time so that discussion and action can take place collectively. This was not the case with community participation through Facebook groups

in Grange Farm 1.1. Topics were posted, discussions were held, but at a time that was chosen by the participants themselves. They chose when, where and for how long they participated. This was best demonstrated through the 'agora function' where lengthy discussions and debate around community issues would often span a number of days due to the groups being inhabited by different people at different times. This was reflected in examples from my observations such as a protracted discussion between residents of the pros and cons of reopening the Skate Park or the numerous discussions on the plight of the Grange Farm Hotel which involved numerous residents engaging in months of dialogue. Grange Farm 1.1 operated no differently to the internet forums characteristic of Web 2.0; The immediacy and proximity requirements of participation were removed.

For those who were members of one or more of the community Facebook groups in Grange Farm the way they consumed community news and information had changed. For those I interviewed, the Facebook groups were their preferred place to receive up to date news and information regarding the local community. Very few of them chose to read the local newspaper, in print form or online. In her interview with me, Maggie referenced the fact that the local village / community round up section in the local paper had now ceased and that many Grange Farm residents now kept up to date with community news through Facebook.

The 'noticeboard function' of the Grange Farm Facebook groups exemplified a shift in how community information was delivered and digested. It allowed for more participatory opportunities than could be achieved through more traditional channels of news and information sharing. There was a multilateral rather than unilateral flow of information. Posters on noticeboards and media releases in the local newspaper represent a one way channel of communication whereby the agenda is controlled by local elites. Meraz (2009) refers to these elites as acting as 'gatekeepers' to knowledge and information. In this sense

with traditional channels of communication the residents of Grange Farm are recipients of information yet have no say over what is being distributed.

Control of the Grange Farm Facebook groups was maintained on a peer-to-peer basis and as such control over the participatory agenda was more devolved and localised. Group administrators acted as a filter for information shared with the wider community. Deciding what content was allowed and what should be removed would come down to a small group of dedicated local people. My conversations with group administrators uncovered that whilst their intentions in maintaining community harmony were sound they, by their own admission, had a very difficult job to do, as I explore below.

I observed tense difficulties first hand in the latter stages of my field research when local UKIP representatives attempted to steer local discussions towards macro-political concerns around the upcoming EU Referendum and wider Brexit narratives³. The edited transcription of a conversation in GPPF below highlights some of the intense discussions taking place locally which reflected wider debates of the time that were taking place nationally. In this example administrators Ozzy, Sophie and Lorraine consulted the group membership and each other to ascertain demand for a discussion on the divisive national issue:

Ozzy (original post): “Do people want a political debate on Brexit on here for the next four months or shall I take my campaigning elsewhere?”

Brian: “I would like some debate and discussion considering the upcoming referendum is the most important vote in a generation. It would be nice so that people can make an informed decision about being governed by a British elected government or one made up of unelected Germans, Dutch and French.”

Lorraine: “I think there is a compromise. No one wants to see the whole group taken over by politics for the next four months however it is a very important issue.”

³ The overall Referendum results of the Borough of Bryerton was 61.99% in favour of leave. Information is not available at Ward level as it is not a statutory requirement from Government to breakdown national referendum vote counts at a local authority ward level (Information supplied by Head of Service Democratic Services for Bryerton Borough Council during a Microsoft Teams video call conducted on 7 March 2024).

Sophie: "Oh no, we always get when we let you guys go on about politics. Personally I'm against. Lorraine (tags her into the post) you need to decide!"

Ozzy: "Lorraine (tags her into the post) so what's the compromise?"

Lorraine: "Perhaps we have one big thread for all Brexit related discussion that can be pinned to the top of the group. If anyone wants to discuss Brexit or politics they can do it in there and leave the rest of the group for Grange Farm posts."

Whilst this example documents one of the occasions when the Independence Referendum had been discussed through the groups there were many other times where the Administrators of both GPPF and GFR were quick to shut down these discussions on the basis that they served little relevance to day to day community life in Grange Farm and that they tended to divide residents rather than unite them. They eventually implemented Lorraine's suggestion and were able to keep the Brexit discussions and wider national issues confined to a pinned thread. I noted how despite the recognised group rules some more politically active or aware members of the group could often not help from bringing the referendum into their other interactions. GPPF admin Sophie explained to me that the community was already prone to division and that she felt she needed to take a hard line on Ozzy, Cllrs Frost and Tasker and others who had sought to play political games in the public arena of the group. If discussion was not related to Grange Farm then it would most likely be deleted.

A common theme running throughout both my observations of the groups and my interviews with active residents was that for many who participated in the groups it was done to obtain participatory utility. Their participation was out of necessity rather than choice. My interview with Maggie uncovered how she felt saddened by the apparent retreat of Grange Farm residents into their homes and behind their computer screens. She likened the situation to the animated feature film Wall-E stating:

"It's about a robot that's left behind..... You need to watch it. Everybody should watch it because it does make you think what could actually happen in the future, that we don't actually move and we just sit by our laptops."
(Interview with Maggie, February 2016).

Those I spoke to had recognised the increased tendency for their social and civic interactions to become digitised. They accepted their social media participation as part of everyday community life but that did not mean they were completely happy about the fact. Most harked back to previous times when community participation took a more physical form. The Facebook groups, in their eyes, were better than not being able or willing to participate at all.

Case Study – The Police Chase

One notable incident during my research demonstrated the speed at which the flow of community information and the resulting discussion and dialogue could occur in the social media age and when facilitated by modern technology. This case study evidenced how the Grange Farm Facebook groups were not only able to be used to participate in a retrospective manner but how they are also well placed to facilitate real time participation.

This was evidenced perhaps most effectively late one evening when residents took to GPPF to report that a Police helicopter was flying above Grange Farm and to enquire from others if anyone had any information as to why. Post by post, and in between the usual gossip and misinformation, residents were able to piece together the situation which turned out to be a Police chase with a stolen car through the estate. In real time they kept up with the events unfolding in their locality. Again, this was nothing new, doorstep gossip and word of mouth would have disseminated the information, albeit at a much slower pace, in days gone by. However this was immediate, what is often referred to in the modern lexicon as viral.

What the Police Chase shows is how the back of forth exchange of comments between residents in the Facebook groups serves to build community capital. The participation experience not only facilitated an exchange of news and information but also enabled residents to engage in a shared experience as well as an opportunity to craft a community narrative through commenting on local crime rates and policing practices. This case study is just one of many examples where the Grange Farm Facebook groups were used as a conduit to develop local public opinion.

A Hybrid Model of Community Participation

Community participation in modern day Grange Farm would transcend the traditional assumptions of online and offline realities. I have evidenced how social and civic interactions, linked to the distinct geography of the community were played out digitally through the medium of the community’s Facebook groups. This section will explore how these digital interactions were influenced by offline events and how the residents in this study would often traverse both online and offline realities through their ongoing participation.

Studies into internet and social media use (Chadwick 2011, Graham et al 2012, Jurgenson, 2012 and 2012a,) have identified a growing trend towards the augmentation, or merging, of social and political actions between what takes place in real time in the physical environment and what takes place in both real and asynchronous time in the digital. More recently Skarwarek (2018) has pointed to examples such as the Occupy Wall Street Movement to demonstrate the increasing augmentation of political action. On a more localised level an example of this phenomenon occurred when a small group of residents used the online platform to plan an offline social participation activity. In this regard the augmented nature of community participation in Grange Farm 1.1 mirrored the concept of the ‘social street’

advanced by Mosconi et al (2017) whereby a combination of online interactions within neighbourhood based Facebook groups and face-to-face meetings seek to bring about practical benefits for the community. A group of young parents used the GPPF group to organise a trip out for local families to a nearby theme park. The issue was raised through the group by a local parent, she posted, quite vehemently, that “it’s no wonder the bus stop was vandalised there is nothing for them (young people) to do”. This had been a common theme running through my research; A lack of positive activities for young people in Grange Farm. Commenting with my community development professional hat on I note that this is nothing new in regard to all communities. In the dozens of neighbourhood questionnaires, quality of life surveys and community consultations I have undertaken in my near 20 years in the field as a community development workers I have never seen ‘lack of positive activities for young people’, usually badged as ‘there is nothing for the kids to do’ come outside of the top three identified community priorities.

Initially I was unaware of their relationships offline although it was clear that they, at the very least, knew each other online. As the event planning advanced online, discussion would cross over into offline interactions and participation where necessary or more convenient and vice versa. Responding to a call for help organising the event one local dad posted “there are a few of us gonna meet up for a coffee at the library tomorrow to discuss planning the trip. All welcome” Some responded by signifying their intention to attend. Others offered apologies but fed in their ideas and offers of help digitally through the group.

By the time photographs of the day trip were being shared on GPPF it was clear from the participant comments that a number of new social relationships had either been formed or solidified on that day. This example highlights the interchangeable nature of augmented community participation that could be achieved through the Facebook groups.

What the parents in the previous example had realised was that it was digital technology that had brought them together, identified their mutual concern - of looking for something for families to do during the holidays - and enabled them to address it. It was, however, only through offline interaction and participation that the root cause of their concern, lack of positive activities for children and young people, could be addressed. Jurgenson (2012a) suggests that contemporary social activity exists across both physical and digital realities; stressing the vital need for in-person interaction is balanced and complimented with the accessibility of technological sociability. He states:

"If media alone are not enough to determine our situation, neither is embodiment. Embodiment will not become obsolete because it is essential to human being, but it can and does transform in relation to environmental selective pressures, particularly through interactions with technology..... What I want to propose is that the new technologies in question—especially the highly interrelated mobile web and social media—effectively merge the digital and physical into an augmented reality." (Jurgenson, 2012a, p.84).

Augmentation of participation is usually required for any positive effects from mass engagement in digital participation to be sustained. This was noted in the aforementioned family trip but also with the school campaign, the family fun day at the community centre and the co-ordinated community response to a local house fire, all of which are presented as case studies within this thesis. In this sense my research supports the narrative put forward by Shah et al (2005) who argue that digital platforms compliment more traditional and established methods to form a contemporary and holistic form of civic participation. I argue that social media facilitated civic participation needs to be an augmented model of community participation that factors in the realities that communities can and do exist beyond the screen of a Facebook page if it is to be successful and achieve a desired positive collective outcome.

I propose that augmented participation was most apparent through to the 'committee function' of the Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook groups. The 'committee function' blurred the boundaries between online and offline community action more than any of the other four 'parallels'. Regular participants of GPPF and GFR understood the groups as spaces to bring forward issues and situations in need of resolution and whilst these issues were identified online, solutions would most often be implemented in the offline space. An example of this, which will be documented as a case study later, is when residents on one local street rallied together to call for action to be taken against speeding traffic. The issue was identified through GPPF and a joint coordinated intelligence operation between local residents and the Police was established through discussion online with Cllr Tasker acting an online 'go-between' between residents and Police Officers. This coordinated intelligence operation required offline action from the local residents; assisting Police Officers with speed monitoring exercises and recording information regarding local speeding trends in incident logs. These findings support the views advanced by Wellman et al (2001) that properly harnessed internet technologies can be used to facilitate proactive participation and build social capital through the development of 'community commitment'. As such residents are able to exploit the accessible participation channels of the medium and harness the community engagement and exchange of ideas and information to bring about positive social change.

My findings from Grange Farm correspond with the narrative progressed by Jurgenson (2011) who emphasises that protest and social action in the modern day context plays out over the realities of on and offline simultaneously with participation jumping seamlessly from one reality to another. Whilst Jurgenson had crafted his narrative based on research conducted within a geo-political context my findings from Grange Farm point to how these principles are still relevant within a hyper-localised community setting. It is a situation which

ultimately blurs the boundaries between on and offline to the point where they exist as an augmented whole. Describing this phenomenon within the context of the 2009 Green Movement protests in Iran Jurgenson writes:

"Social media plays a key role, but so do the physical bodies standing in the streets taking up physical space, making speech heard not just through speak-to-tweet but also from voice to ear." (Jurgenson, 2011).

For the residents that engaged in the Grange Farm Facebook groups, local social bonds and kinship networks between began to take on a hybrid shape. The community experience was that an augmented reality of interwoven relationships and actions traversing between on and offline settings as relationships are established and built in one arena but develop in the other. This bears resemblance to observations made by Hampton and Wellman (2003). Their pre-Social Media Era investigation into the effects of internet-mediated communications and neighbourhood-based community advocated that the internet constituted just one piece of the complicated jigsaw of people's social interactions, often complimenting other forms of social interaction. A number of residents I spoke to described at length anecdotes of how their offline experiences and interactions had been continued in the social media realm or vice versa. These included student Alice who offered the following anecdote:

"I think the last thing I commented on was somebody had put something about asking for opinions on the Grange Farm Doctors Surgery and when I first read it I thought ooh she has obviously had a bad experience this is gonna turn into whatever. But there was quite a lot of positive comments and then there was quite a few negative comments as well but it turned out she was moving back to the area and wanted to know if that was the Doctors to go to. So I commented saying that when I left to go to Newcastle I signed up for a Doctors up there and I had to go to the Doctors one time and they were absolutely awful. Then I came back to Grange Farm and I was gutted because they had knocked me off the system. So I signed back up for this one and if I'm ill or I need to go I'll just take a day off Uni and come back for it. So I put something quite nice about it because I've got nothing bad to say about it they've always sorted me out and I do feel that the drop in, the open surgery is really good. So I put that and I didn't think nothing of it and then I was in the Doctors and one of the Drs said to me 'thank you for your nice comments' and I was thinking 'what are you on about?' And he said he saw

on Facebook so obviously even the Drs are watching what is being put about them". (Interview with Alice, May 2016).

Over my 12 months in Grange Farm 1.1 I noticed how residents involved in the Facebook groups had become accustomed to the augmented community experience. Jurgenson (2012a, p.84) refers to this as "a larger conceptual perspective that views our reality as the by-product of the enmeshing of the on and offline". Contemporary social relationships in Grange Farm 1.1 were, to varying and increasing extents, built upon such a mesh of online and offline interactions. Conversations that were begun on Facebook continued in real life whilst residents waited for a bus and vice versa.

The blurring of these spatial boundaries held significance for how residents viewed the importance of the physical world around them. Whilst their digital interactions had removed them physically from the offline community space the nature of their interactions served also to reinforce feelings of place and a community identity. Webber (1964) established how the urban community environment is characterised by a complex web of interaction and information exchanges. In the social media age the necessity of proximity is further reduced as avenues for access to both social and civic participation are further opened up.

I have recounted how there were numerous occasions when previous residents of Grange Farm had used the GPPF and GFR groups to reconnect with former friends and associates and to keep up to speed with community news. What distinguished the Grange Farm Facebook groups from other online communities of interest active on message boards and forums however was that geographic propinquity, even if it was only symbolic, was still necessary. Grange Farm was the *raison d'être* of the Facebook groups. It was the common bond that each member of the groups share and most probably the reason they signed up in the first place.

The ubiquitous presence of smartphones further enabled the transition of community discourse to the digital sphere in Grange Farm. Whilst smartphones do give credence to the scenario posited by Jurgenson (2012 and 2012a) that our social lives now reside in an intermeshed hybrid of physical and digital form they still essentially constitute a private space no different to the laptop or desktop computer whereby social interaction is mediated by an individual interfacing with technology. I have outlined in the previous section how the residents of Grange Farm uncovered new ways in which mobile technology could be used to participate in the community sphere (the posting of photographs of fly tipping or acts of vandalism or the live updates given from Parish / Town Council meetings). The augmented reality of the Grange Farm community experience was becoming characterised by interactions in a public digital space engaged with privately within the comfort of individualised private spaces.

In the adoption of neighbourhood Facebook groups as an avenue for community participation Grange Farm residents had constructed a community setting that was neither solely physical nor solely digital but was an interesting blend of both. Perhaps more interesting was the fact that neither reality was able to thrive without the other; the offline community of Grange Farm would be devoid of its participatory lifeblood and the online social media community of Grange Farm would be devoid of its reason for being and its common bond.

Case Study – The Parish / Town Council Meetings

This case study details an ongoing phenomenon that I witnessed throughout my 12 months at Grange Farm as I complimented my observations of civic discussions and interactions through the Facebook groups with offline observations of community meetings and events.

On a number of occasions during the research I would be sat in the public area at Grange Farm Town / Parish Council meetings, accompanied only by the Borough and County Councillors and the occasional Police Officer sent to deliver a verbal report and a solitary resident armed with a tablet and a data connection. At first it struck me as slightly odd why this lone resident had ventured out on a cold dark January evening to sit in a drafty community hall and browse Facebook. It was not until I returned home and logged on later that evening to see if there had been any activity on the groups to view an overwhelming amount of back and forth activity from dozens of members of the GFR group concerning the proceedings of the meeting - what had been discussed and what decisions had been made and of course resident reactions to them.

In actuality this became a reoccurring theme for Parish / Town Council meetings as one member of the group would volunteer to go to the meeting to report and live blog updates and discussions to the group where they would debate and discuss. This suggests that civic interest in Grange Farm was alive and well but not through the traditional channels; residents wanted to engage but they were seeking more convenient, trusted, or familiar ways of doing so even if the end result was a less immersive participatory experience. In opting to engage in this avenue of community information sharing rather than attending the meetings in person residents were limiting their opportunities to engage in more than just a one way information flow as any questions or suggestions they had were not able to be aired with the Council.

In her interview with me Maggie explained the immediacy with which she could get community information and contribute to ongoing discussions on the Town status proposals with other residents. She explained how the attendance at Parish / Town Council meetings

by GFR founder Lorraine and subsequent real time meeting updates to the group sparked her interest with the issue:

“I think a lot of it is seeing what’s going on, especially when Lorraine used to go to the meetings and she would report back. It’s replaced what the local news commenter reported because he wasn’t allowed to comment at Parish Council. They have like a village news in the paper and he was actually stopped from commenting, I don’t know how legal that is?” (Interview with Maggie, February 2016).

It was not just the live blogging of the Parish / Town Council meetings that reflected how some residents were beginning to blur the online and offline realities of their participation with the Authority. Examples of this were to be found throughout my yearlong field research.

Case Study – Cllr Frost’s Locality Budget

The distribution of local community grant funding was another area where the digital arena began to be merged with offline local action on the ground during my time in Grange Farm 1.1. The next two Case Studies presented in this section document how local funding opportunities for community groups and opportunities for deciding which groups and projects should receive funding were merged between online and offline participation. In both instances it was the GPPF and GFR groups that were at the heart of this civic participation process.

The first of these instances involve the Cllr Frost’s County Council Locality Budget. Cllr Frost used both GPPF and GFR to promote engagement with local voluntary and community sector groups around the distribution of his £5,000 Locality Budget which was available for them to bid into to. As well as using the groups as a free and interactive promotional tool he was able to advise interested groups on their projects, their applications, and the process

as well as provide valuable feedback to the wider community on how the successful applicants had used the money to benefit the Grange Farm Estate.

Case Study – ‘Divvy Up’

Secondly, and in a departure from usual relations, a Parish / Town Council event named ‘Divvy Up’ was actively embraced by members of the Grange Farm Facebook groups who used the groups to transform the event from what was once seen by the community as remote and exclusive to something that was more informed and inclusive. ‘Divvy Up’ was a somewhat unique, to the Borough at least, exercise in a process called ‘participatory budgeting’. Participatory budgeting is defined succinctly by the Participatory Budgeting Network as “local people making decisions directly over how local public budgets are spent” (PB Network, 2018). ‘Divvy Up’ was an annual event whereby any Grange Farm resident of secondary school age or older was entitled to vote on which local community projects they would like to see funded through the Parish Precept.

This exercise in participatory democracy concerning the financial matter of how a proportion of local council tax money was spent was, by its very nature, an open, transparent and inclusive initiative. That was not the popular perception amongst those active within the Grange Farm Neighbourhood Facebook groups, however, who historically had viewed it as a poorly publicised PR exercise and a way to channel public money to the same old handpicked and Parish / Town Council favoured groups and projects. The views of residents expressed online with regard to this situation echo the second of Luke’s (2021) dimensions of power, ‘non decision-making power’ in that a certain element of choice is presented to the citizenry as a democratic process when in fact major decisions on what options are able to be decided upon have already been made by power elites. Moreover, it could be argued at a theoretical level that the whole ‘Divvy Up’ process aligns with Arnsteins’ (1969) concept

of ‘placation’, rung five on her ‘Ladder of Participation’ and consistent with the notion that power elites may, from time to time, allow a tokenistic gesture of decision-making power to the Citizenry to project an illusion of devolved power whilst power over major decisions remains in the hands of elites. It could certainly be implied that this was the case with ‘Divvy Up’ as only a small proportion of the Council’s precept was allocated this way.

However, during my research such perceptions were to change considerably as Sophie and others from GPPF decided to get behind the event despite there not being any desire from the Parish / Town Council for them to do so. With the weight of the Past Present and Future Group behind the ‘Divvy Up’ initiative the event was able to be more effectively promoted and advertised, reaching far more people than the solitary poster in the Parish Noticeboard ever could. Moreover, GPPF actively encouraged community groups to get involved and bid for the money as well as encouraging residents to get involved in the voting process. Members of GPPF even sought out extra information about the various community projects applying for the money so that it could be posted onto the Group allowing residents a more informed choice. As a result a wider and more diverse range of projects were funded that were more in line with what residents wanted to see delivered in there are and moreover the process went some of the way in enabling residents to feel that their views and interests were heard. Although, to say that it overturned the commonly held distain with which residents viewed the Parish / Town Council would be an overstretch.

The Outlook for Realisations of Community and Social Capital

In establishing and facilitating a space for resident participation and interaction the Grange Farm Facebook groups had begun to enable agents of identity formation, attachment and familiarity around the common bond of their shared geographic space. The groups helped to internalise a collective identity which was strengthened through posts and comments that

celebrate life in Grange Farm and some of the positive aspects of living there as well as the negative. Through my research I encountered situations where residents would utilise the social media space to share local news stories that would reflect a positive image of their community. As such my findings reflect a number of concepts forwarded by the traditional asset-based community development theories. Asset-based approaches to developing communities focus around encouraging to nurture and develop what they already possess. Much of the thinking in this area is influenced by works authored or co-authored by Cormac Russell (McKnight and Russell 2018, Russell 2021, Russell and McKnight 2022, Russell 2022) and centres around the need for place-based action that is citizen-led and capitalises on pre-existing relationships between people and the existing capacity of the community. In Chapter 3 I examined how, whilst increasingly fragmented in more recent years, the social ties, sense of belong and adoption of a shared place-based identity was still apparent in Grange Farm. Whilst there was a belief that this was dwindling within physical space, it was harnessed and nurtured in the Offline World of the local Facebook groups.

Whilst the community may have been lacking capacity in some areas, for example, lower than average educational attainment trends in the community meant that many residents lacked the functional skills to significantly engage or volunteer at a meaningful level. the Grange Farm Facebook groups offered residents the opportunity to develop their shared asset of community identity, ultimately on occasion, as I shall document further into this thesis, exploiting this resource into positive social action. In particular my research from Grange Farm supports the theory of McKnight and Kretzmann (1993) who propose that informal and less public ‘associations of citizens’ can be mobilized to build communities from within. A more recent study (Shah et al, 2018) has demonstrated how in the field of community engagement the central tenants of asset-based community development can be transferred into digital social setting. The results of my research align strongly here.

One such instance was highlighted through GPPF whereby one local resident posted a message of congratulations for a school class that had won a community volunteering award. A local parent, who I had come to recognise as a frequent contributor to discussions on school related issues, took to the group to post a picture of the teacher receiving her award and to spearhead the praise, posting "Congratulations to Miss Fox on winning this award. My youngest is in her class and absolutely loves her lessons". Follow on interactions from residents strengthened the positive news of the original post and led to members of the group sharing other positive aspects of life in their community. One group member went as far as to comment "This is the real Grange Farm. We have the best teachers that really want to make a difference. Shame others don't view us that way". This was a marked departure from the negativity that would often characterise interactions in the group. News and information such as this would serve to unite the community around positive aspects as help to reinforce pride in their community through shared experiences.

I found through my observations of Grange Farm 1.1 that both positive and negative community information was actively shared but the social act of sharing information through the Platform tended to bring residents more together than push them apart. The more information that was made available to them the more they understood their shared community circumstances and felt a sense of belonging to the area. This was reflected to me in my conversations with local residents. When asked if GPPF had changed her views on the area either for better or worse Alice replied:

"I think it makes me think it is better because before I used to think no one really cares about Grange Farm and in the past it has had a bad reputation. I do think it has improved a lot and I do think that from people caring so much it makes you think this is quite a good place to live and that people do care and it's not as bad as everyone says. So it has definitely improved what I think." (Interview with Alice, May 2016)

Sophie was similarly candid, commenting:

"I think it's a safer area than you think because of the group. Ok there will always be some people posting about kids knocking about and vandalizing stuff but we try to balance that in the group and promote the positive side of Grange Farm. When we used to go to the Parish Council meetings, when you got the crime figures, they were there in black and white, and it was very little. All the PCSOs and that say it's the fear of crime and I think that's true. I mean I can walk these streets and feel safe, probably with the lights off a bit unsafe because you find you fall over. I've never felt unsafe as in..... I think the worst thing that has happened to me is kids asking me to buy them alcohol." (Interview with Sophie, March 2016)

Reinforced identity can be, however, a double-edged sword and my research supports the work of Putnam (2000) in suggesting that when bonds of identity were exceptionally strong it created a normalisation of the 'us and them' mentality where these bonds were favoured at the expense of all others. As such I would observe on a number of different occasions instances where discussions regarding other areas or those not belonging to the Grange Farm community were held in a negative light. When negative aspects of the community, such as petty crime or anti-social behaviour, were reflected upon within the groups the suspected perpetrators were either assumed to be from outside of the area or would have membership of the community metaphorically stripped by the critical mass of public opinion. Often those perceived to be engaging in socially deviant behaviour were young people and my observations suggested a desire of the collective opinion of the groups to further disenfranchise young people from community spaces. Research from Wallace and Coburn (2002) has highlighted how, historically and culturally, young people have been disenfranchised from public spaces as they are perceived to be 'up to no good'. Looking back on the notes from my observational research I note how GFE Founder and GPPF Regular Dave had put out a warning to the wider community to be on the lookout a 'bunch of scroats' trying door handles on houses and cars. Another resident post overserved in the field looked to blindly accuse young people of setting fire to the swings in the play park despite any evidence coming forward to corroborate this accusation. for They suggest these

stereotypes are crafted by media and public opinion; My research has documented how social media has emerged as a forum through which these negative and disenfranchising stereotypes can be reinforced but that these sites also do the opposite.

I propose that this hyper-identity, strengthened as it was by the advent of the Grange Farm Facebook groups, served to build *bonding* capital but did little to build *bridging* capital between the Grange Farm community and others. As such it was often the case that discussion, dialogue and active participation tended to fall within the realm of what is deemed acceptable to the collective.

Through their ‘agora function’ the Grange Farm Facebook groups provided an accessible communal space where public opinion could be formed and exercised. Some commentators have been quick to point to the utilitarian benefits of digitally mediated public opinion formation such as a more democratised access to information and free expression and exchange of opinion (Woo-Young, 2005) and the social capital benefits such as increased trust amongst neighbours (Xiong et al, 2017). Findings from my research, whilst simultaneously corroborating these benefits, also uncovered how this could often create a dominant narrative that rejects dissenting thought and opinion and lead to what Janis (1971) refers to as ‘groupthink’.

Furthermore, my research updates the findings of Burt (1999) and Xiong and Liu (2014) that propose that social groups exhibit a conformity of opinion that is shaped by various ‘opinion leaders’ who views influence the opinions of the wider collective. An example of this from the first half of my research period occurred when a new member of the GTE group entered the ongoing discussions on the town status proposals. By this point the group was already well on the way in its evolution from discussion forum to pressure group; from the ‘agora

function' to the 'committee function'. The new member entered the discussion by suggesting that the Parish Council proposals may have some merit albeit that they had not been presented in the most appropriate way. From my offline discussions with members of the Parish / Town Council I was fully aware of their rationale for moving towards town status. These included capitalising on the prevailing trend of local authority powers and responsibilities being either delegated or devolved from principle authorities to more localised tiers and the need for them to obtain greater status within the pool of third tier authorities in a climate of increased competition for resources. The new member of GTE was simply attempting to present this viewpoint in a considered and rational way however her views were dismissed by a small number of GTE regulars who disagreed with her. This ultimately led to the point of her disengaging with the group and the consensus viewpoint of the collective was maintained.

I witnessed how the local Facebook groups became a space for new residents to enable them to get to know others and immerse themselves in community life, helping them to develop a Grange Farm identity. Moreover, through the sharing of information via the group's 'noticeboard function' residents were able to produce and share content in the groups that they felt was relevant to them and their community. Alice recalled to me that she regularly spent long periods of time away from Grange Farm for her university studies. In the absence of access to physical sources of information she would log onto GPPF to help her stay in touch and informed on news and events in her home community whilst she was away. During our research interview she recounted a situation whereby she was living away and yet was more informed on news from Grange Farm through GPPF than her partner's parents (Grange Farm residents) who were not on Facebook:

"I know everything that goes on. If I lived away and I wasn't on the Facebook group I wouldn't know nothing. I said to my partner's parents something about us being a town and they were like 'no' and I was like 'yeah we are a town'

and they'd heard nothing about it and they've lived in Grange Farm for years and years so I do feel that the Facebook Group informs me of a lot of things."
(Interview with Alice, May 2016).

For Alice the information she received when whilst living away, quickly and efficiently through her Facebook newsfeed, was integral to her being able to connect and get involved with her community and maintaining her sense of local identity upon her return.

Alice was not alone. I observed situations where Grange Farm news would be discussed through posts and comments and how former residents of Grange Farm would reconnect with their former community through participation in the groups. Self-disclosed former residents used the Facebook groups as a reconnection tool; to seek out old friends and acquaintances, probe for updates on local developments or to relay information to the community regarding other former residents. This inward flow of information into Grange Farm was observed on a couple of occasions in relation to informing residents of the death of previous community stalwarts.

In the first case a local resident took to GPPF to announce the death of his brother, a well-known former resident of Grange Farm, who has passed away overseas. The resident posted to the group informing that, "It is with great sadness that I would like to inform those who knew my brother Mike that he has passed away suddenly. He leaves to mourn his beloved wife and daughter, along with his only grandchild, his elder sister and myself". Within minutes messages of condolences were offered as comments to the original post. It was clear from the comments that some had known the individual. One group member posted how he was a "lovely man" and that his "thoughts were with the family". For others it was not entirely clear if they knew the individual or not but nevertheless they felt it appropriate to leave supportive comments as a mark of respect. One group member

posted “so sorry for your loss, God bless” with another reiterating earlier comments that their thoughts were with the family.

The second case involved the death of a former Grange Farm Councillor and Mayor of the Borough who was also a well-respected school teacher at the local secondary school. This time it was Cllr George Frost who posted the sad news. In his post to GFR he announced “Very sad news today that Mavis Don OBE has passed away in Australia where she emigrated with her husband some years ago. Mavis was the Labour Group Leader on the Council for many years as well as Mayor of the Borough. A sad loss to her friends, family and fellow comrades. RIP Mavis”. Again residents in the GFR group joined Cllr Frost in paying their tributes and respects. One group member commented “She was a fabulous teacher when I was at school”, another noted how he “enjoyed being one of her students and getting into the odd political debate with her in later years”. Other comments demonstrated the interwoven historical social bonds that I had come to observe permeated much of Grange Farm life. One resident commented “My brother was a good friend of her husband. They were a lovely couple”.

What these two examples prove is how effective the Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook groups were in highlighting and promoting common bonds and histories between residents. Whilst these two original posts provided an informative function to those who knew the deceased individuals and documents their noticeboard function’ to good effect they also served to unite members of the community, even those who did not know them, around their importance to their shared local history.

Resident engagement in the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 facilitated a strengthened community identity. It was the small attentions and observations recalled by

residents that are really important here. Whether that be through the shared experience of local parents in campaigning against school discipline procedures, reconnecting old family, friendship or acquaintance relationships or being able to experience pride in one's local environs through the sharing of photographs these interactions helped people feel part of Grange Farm. They enabled a more informed community without the requirement of residents to actively seek out local news and information. Information was delivered to them in an interactive context directly to their Facebook timeline and within real time. Through engaging with the 'noticeboard function' and the 'agora function' residents were able to participate fuller, receive a better experience and make more of a contribution through having access to more local information and community dialogue.

Initial fieldwork observations and conversations with residents confirmed that the majority of news or information posts in the Grange Farm Facebook groups were locally based and Grange Farm specific. These were not message boards for general purpose news or advertising. Group Administrators were steadfast in enforcing policies restricting the posting of non-locally relevant content. This practice contributed to the establishment of symbolic boundaries within the groups as both social and civic participation was guided through the space. Group members attempting to post non-Grange Farm specific information would promptly have their post removed and be directed to more appropriate digital avenues. This unwritten rule helped reinforce the common bond that members had with each other. GPPF founder Sophie reiterated this to me, recounting the specific approach she took when moderating content posted to the group. In relation to advertising content posted to GPPF she explained to me that it must be a local Grange Farm and not more than one post a day:

"The only people who are allowed to advertise their businesses are local businesses. I mean there was this lad advertising tyres and because I don't drive and I don't know where this place is I had to say to him 'where, where are you' and he went 'oh I'm near the Coach Factory' and I said 'that's fine', just don't advertise more than once a day because some people say oh this group is just adverts'. It's not, the pet shop used to advertised, obviously the

Library, the Community Centre... I mean yesterday I seen an advert on one of the selling sites for this home delivery for food and I said 'if you deliver to Grange Farm you can advertise on there (GPPF), he said 'thanks' I said 'but only once a day.' (Interview with Sophie, March 2016).

Grange Farm residents would often post details of events, symbols or memories that acted as common bonds to unite the community. Grange Farm 1.1 contributed to ongoing narratives that reflected this social tradition encapsulating the digital age. Sometimes these would be contemporary, for example the previously highlighted post that documented the achievement of local Grange Farm school children in a national competition. Or they were historical, for example when residents used the GPPF group to post and comment on old photographs of the Estate. Often information regarding shared memories, historical events or local characters would be posted as a way to bring people together through shared recollection and histories. Such endeavours support key theoretical underpinnings of the concept of community (Barthes 1957, Cohen 1985) that propose that shared identities establish agency through shared symbols, traditions and mythologies.

One such example of residents utilising the groups to promote shared identity through symbols, traditions and mythologies came when I observed an initially random photograph of a middle-aged lady posing in a well-known Grange Farm street posted to GFR. The picture was obviously some years old and judging by the style of the clothes and the quality of the photograph I had judged it to have probably been taken in the 1970s or early 1980s. The lady was elaborately dressed with long permed blond hair and gloves that reached up her forearms. If it had not already become clear to me by this point the content and tone of the comments that she was celebrated as a local 'character'. The original poster after supplying the lady's name asked "Does anyone know what happened to her? Another legend". The first comment made in response stated that she had "died a few years ago". Another resident commented "Aww, that is such a shame. She always made me smile,

especially when she would sing her made up songs about men. There are too few ‘characters’ left nowadays”. The discussion then moved onto the final years of the lady’s life and how she came to leave Grange Farm. One group members stated that “she was moved to a home a few years before she died” with a number of other confirming that this was the case. As the group reminisced on her life more details emerged with one resident commenting that “she was actually a very clever women and she only starting acting like she did after she had a breakdown or something”. Finally, Sandy recounted her stories of the lady to the group. Sandy had worked in the same care home that she had spent her final years and had come to know her quite well whilst she had cared for her. She commented “She passed away a few years ago in a care home I worked in. She was a lovely lady, full of songs, jokes and laughter”.

The residents of Grange Farm were keen to use symbolism in their posts and interactions as they served as attachment factors for residents and created common bonds of kinship around shared histories and experiences. These attachment factors ultimately brought them closer together as a community. Residents would also often use the ‘agora function’ of Grange Farm 1.1 to reinforce their collective community identity through a collectively crafted community opinion. Previous theories and studies that have analysed public opinion formation (Hanifan 1916, Habermas 1962, Oldenburg, 1989, Kuo et al 1998, Leydon, 2003, Hays 2007) argue that shared public spaces are influential in reinforcing a communal identity. Galand and Macaraan (2021) present a more up to date reflection on social media platforms arguing, as is argued here, that this space is vital in understanding public opinion formation in contemporary communities. I suggest that the Grange Farm groups emphasised and reasserted the common bond that the participants within the spaced shared. This acted ultimately to unify rather than divide residents, despite differences of opinion within the discussions. I propose the act of engaging in discussions as a participatory

function reinforced the local Grange Farm identity in a wider society that I have outlined previously is characterised by multiple competing identities.

The ‘surgery function’ of the Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook groups enabled newcomers to the community to settle in and facilitated the processes of identity formation and attachment. On occasion during my field research I would observe individuals whose names I did not come to recognise from previous posts or comments disclosing themselves as newcomers with questions and queries to the GPPF and GFR groups asking for advice on which takeaways were the best locally, how to contact the local councillors or what suitable activities for a 10 year boy were available in the area. As well as the practical utilitarian benefits of the ‘surgery function’ the very act of residents reaching out to others for help and assistance through the Grange Farm groups helped to build new bonds and networks between them. As such, much of the participatory activity I observed through my field research would cross over between ‘surgery’ and ‘bowling alley functions’

The digitally infused participatory activity I witnessed within Grange Farm was consistent with established academic rationales of the characteristics of a healthy functioning community. These include; access to information (Woo-Young, 2005), co-production of problem solving (Househ et al, 2014), discussion and debate in the forming of public opinion and requests / provision of localised assistance (Galand and Macaraan, 2021). Grange Farm 1.1 was characterised by digital space that was host to a plurality of participatory utility that had reshaped relationships between residents, institutions and each other.

Finally in this section I will return to the concept of social capital and frame my findings from Grange Farm 1.1 within the four indicators that I presented in Chapter 2; connection,

cohesion, capacity and commitment. These will be expanded on in the following two Chapters.

Connection – The ‘bowling alley’ function of the Grange Farm Facebook groups enabled new kinship bonds between residents to be established and for pre-existing bonds to be further strengthened. These bonds would germinate online but in some cases flower in the offline. I witnessed how kinship bonds between residents were created through little more than mutual awareness and association, as was the case with Alice who recounted how she had struck up conversations with strangers on the bus who had recognised her profile from interactions in GPPF. I was also informed by residents of how acts of civic engagement fostered and facilitated through the groups, such as the campaign against town status proposals in GTE, or the co-ordinated community response to assist the victims of a local house fire, had led to long lasting friendships between some of those participating. Kevin, Dave, and Sophie all proudly explained to me how their online campaign against town status had brought them into contact with others in the community they had not known previously. As they used GTE as an organising tool kinship bonds between participants would form, just as they always have done through traditional forms of civic participation.

Cohesion – I noted in Chapter 3 how Grange Farm, whilst suffering multiple forms of disadvantage that were characteristic of White Working class Social Housing Estates in the North of England, did not experience any significant cohesion issues that often permeate through the social fault lines of ethnicity or religion. That being said, the processes of de-socialisation and participatory decline had led to a loss of community pride and a shared cohesive vision for the area. The neighbourhood Facebook groups, and in particular GPPF and GFR, had enabled a renaissance of community pride in the area. Through utilising the ‘bowling alley’ and ‘noticeboard functions’ of the groups, residents were brought into contact

with, familiarised and enabled, to associate through positive images of the community and collective traits that made them feel proud to live in Grange Farm. Further, the groups acted as accessible conduits for the sharing of community traditions and shared histories as well as shared norms and values.

The Grange Farm Facebook groups were well placed to foster a shared vision for the community. This feat was achieved in part through the provision of an enabled resident voice and the moulding of community opinion through the ‘agora function’. Whilst both individual resident and community collective opinion had rediscovered a voice through the groups they were not as successful in channelling this voice to influence local policy-makers or power elites. I shall document this position through a number of case studies in the following two Chapters.

Finally with regard to cohesion as an indicator of social capital I refer to the concept of trust. In Chapter 2 I reflected on how trust, both between individuals and between individuals and institutions, is a characteristic of community social capital. I noted how Putnam (2000) has influenced this debate by denoting how trust within social settings can be characterised as ‘thick’ or ‘thin’. Whereas ‘thick’ trust occurs through close personal kinship ties such as those bound by individualised social networks it is the notion of ‘thin trust’ as an indicator of community social capital that is of most relevance to this research. I have noted how ‘thin trust’ is described by Putnam as existing between members of a distinct community not personally known to each other; A form of trust that is formed through everyday interactions and the knowledge that others share the same collective community identity. My interviews with active residents pointed to scenarios where their involvement in the Grange Farm Facebook groups had enabled them to trust in the motives and actions of their fellow residents. Alice recounted how her involvement in GPPF had led to her engaging in

conversations on the street or on public transport with people she did not know. For Alice this would reaffirm her beliefs that her fellow residents were welcoming and shared similar values and aspirations to herself. Sandy recounted how she had made numerous acquaintances online; people who she did interact with offline but felt quite close to due to their shared inhabiting of GFR. There would be, however, instances where trust was broken via community participation in the Grange Farm Facebook groups. Primarily this concerned levels of trust between residents and the local institutions that served them as online dialogue came to reinforce dominant group narratives and reinforce feelings of ‘us and them’ between residents and local authorities and service providers.

Capacity – I found that the Grange Farm Facebook groups went some way to facilitating the capacity building process for local residents. This can be seen with the success of the school campaign where a group of ordinary parents, who on the face of it did not possess the usual skills and confidence to challenge authority, utilised the collected strength of the Facebook participation to challenge a policy they believed to be unfair to their children. The prime position of the groups, locally as distribution channels for news and information, ensured that residents were able to feel up to date with community life. Moreover, the peer-to-peer basis upon which news and information was shared ensured that residents trusted its validity or were able to challenge it when they believed it to be incorrect. I note throughout this thesis the participatory utility of the groups as an organising tool but their also their limitation if not complimented by offline participation. The Grange Farm Facebook groups provided a suitable ‘call to arms’ that could bolster collective community capacity to organise around particular issues but if their capacity building qualities were to be fully realised then this would need to be within the context of a larger, more diverse methodology of participation. Finally, I propose that, barring a few notable exceptions, residents tended to feel confident in their group interactions and felt encouraged to speak their mind. Whilst this is

encouraging, save for a couple of notable instances such as the case studies of the school campaign and the traffic survey highlighted in this thesis, I observed little evidence that this improved confidence transferred into the offline.

Commitment – I noted in Chapter 2 how sustained community involvement can bring about a virtuous circle of participation. I documented how community participation can bring about positive change, the result being that this encourages individuals already involved to participate further as they can recognise the fruits of their labour, but also can spur on other to get involved through setting a positive example. I did observe some instances where positive participatory outcomes acted as a catalyst for increased involvement (documented as case studies later in this thesis) such as the co-ordinated community response to a devastating house fire, the mounting of a local campaign against speeding traffic or the time when local parents organised a petition and protest against the local secondary school’s new behaviour policy. I also, however, encountered just as many occasions where initial participation failed to spur on continued future involvement such as the campaign to save the Grange Farm Hotel or the protests against town status which encouraged significant participation online but failed to materialise a significant enough ground swell of participation offline, and ultimately failed.

The findings I have documented in this section mark a subtle shift from earlier academic thought in the study of community and social media. Studies by Raine and Wellman (2012) and Park et al (2009) emphasise the utility of social media to improve the range and quality of individualised social networks whilst neglecting or downplaying the importance of community as a social phenomenon. My findings from Grange Farm suggest that in developing five distinct participatory functions within the local Facebook groups the goal was to re-establish and reaffirm a sense of community and collective identity rather than the

development of individualised personal networks. Though they may not have specifically realised it, by using their Facebook groups to participate in this way their end goal was distinctly collective rather than individual.

Conclusions

The Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 had evolved in a relatively short space of time to become a place where, for some, community could be reimagined and indeed experienced. Whether or not local residents were aware of the fact is a different matter. The groups had emerged as part of the Grange Farm community fabric as a direct consequence of the failings of local participatory options locally.

Such was the significance of the Grange Farm Facebook groups for some residents they have become the default place for social and civic participation in their locality. The case study of Sandy presented earlier in this Chapter demonstrates the extent to which one of the local Facebook groups had been able to characterise a large part of her social and civic life. Residents had adopted these digital spaces as places to reimagine and rekindle many aspects of community participation in ways that mimicked the participatory traditions that they had been socialised with pre-social media.

I have introduced and outlined my concept of the five 'participation parallels' as the five distinct functions for which Grange Farm residents utilised and adapted their Facebook groups function to engage in meaningful participation. I note that residents tended to use these five different functions to varying degrees with the general principle being that those functions that require less participatory commitment (the 'noticeboard function' or the 'agora function') tended to be utilised more often than the functions that required more sustained or committed involvement (the 'committee function', the 'surgery function' and to a lesser

extent the 'bowling alley function'). As such I highlight one of the key findings of this thesis to be that community participation via local community Facebook groups was effective in enabling a space where 'light touch' participation can be achieved on a large scale and therefore had recognised enfranchising qualities; However, with a few notable exceptions which I will explore in the next Chapter, achieving longer-term participation that required sustained or more intense commitment was more problematic.

Residents of Grange Farm migrated aspects of their participatory and community experiences online as an antidote to some of the identified failures of traditional participation as well as to combat elements of what they perceived to be their own disenfranchisement from traditional engagement frameworks. The pressures of time, and the way in which digital participation was able to negate this, were identified as a reason why the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 had been able to engage residents in the community participation process. Moreover, residents had come to feel an ownership of these new digital spaces and there was a recognition that they were spaces where their agenda could be progressed rather than the agendas of outside organisations or power elites. However, as I will come to explain in Chapter 7, whilst the Facebook groups were to enable residents to engage with their own agendas, advancing these agendas was often problematic due to the absence of many power elites within the space. Despite this, residents remained committed to their Facebook groups as they felt disenfranchised from other engagement structures and from other institutions, most significantly their own first tier of local government the Grange Farm Parish / Town Council.

New technologies had facilitated new ways in which the residents of Grange Farm were able to participate in their locality socially and civically. This ranged from the ability to use smartphone technology to inform others of issues within the community through the posting

of photos to the groups through to conducting participatory dialogue on community incidents in real time as they happened. Furthermore, it was apparent that in Grange Farm a hybrid form of community participation had emerged whereby social and civic interactions transcended both online and offline spaces. Participatory actions traversed between the online space of the Facebook groups and the offline space of the physical realm. The findings of my research take on a technologically determined stance in that the practicalities of the Facebook Groups Platform have influenced how local residents participate and interact.

Finally, the advent of neighbourhood Facebook groups to the community landscape of Grange Farm 1.1 had implications for local realisations of community and social capital. Participation within the space, in particular dialogue utilising the group’s ‘bowling alley’ and ‘agora functions’ enabled residents to strengthen their local identity and attachment to the wider Grange Farm community. Discussions within the groups also facilitated the promotion and sharing of common bonds of association between community members. I propose also that social capital was created through residents’ participation in their local Facebook groups. Connections were strengthened through increased social interactions between individuals. Cohesion was achieved through the development of trust and mutual association and the shaping of shared identity, outlook and vision for the future. Capacity was built, albeit to a limited degree, through an improved access to community information and community commitment was enhanced through the collective organising power that was facilitated through the ease and ubiquity of the groups. Whilst residents’ digitally facilitated social and civic participation was characterised and shaped by the technologies that enabled it to the outside observer to be novel it still bore enough resemblance to the idealisations of community and associated social capital to be warm and familiar.

Chapter Six – Discussion: An Analysis of what Works – Horizontal Participation, Kinship Bonds and Peer-to-peer Support

Introduction

This Chapter will present an analysis of factors that existed when community participation in Grange Farm 1.1 proved effective. It will document aspects of social and civic life that had been enabled and facilitated by the advent of neighbourhood Facebook groups in Grange Farm that ultimately contributed towards the community building agenda. Primarily, as I will outline throughout the Chapter, these were mostly based on peer-to-peer horizontal relationships and interactions between the inhabitants of Grange Farm rather than vertical relationships with local power elites and policy makers.

Expanding on themes introduced in the last Chapter I present an account of resident facilitated community participation that thrived on the establishment and emboldening of horizontal interactions between them. As I have documented the neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 were developed by residents themselves and had come to be accepted as their space. Coupled with a noted absence of many local institutions and policy makers within the space this led to horizontal interactions in the form of peer-to-peer support and mutual assistance becoming the most effective mode of effecting social change.

Understanding Horizontal Participation in Grange Farm 1.1

In Chapter 2 I presented a theoretical understanding of horizontal participation within a community setting. My research findings in this area build upon historical narratives (Bott 1957, Young and Willmott 1957, Wellman 1979) that had emphasised the social utility and importance of formal and informal networks within communities. In this area it was

observable how some of the key participatory trends I identified in the community profile of Grange Farm in Chapter 3 such as strong horizontal kinship bonds and mutual assistance coupled with a failure to adequately engage with local power elites were apparent. Research from the Internet Era (Wellman et al 2001, Hampton and Wellman 2013, Kelly and Findlayson 2015) has brought these trends up to date through a reflection of how horizontal social networks have been able to migrate online. Relationships and interactions within Grange Farm^{1.1} were primarily horizontal in nature as the space, save for a small few notable exceptions, was occupied by a network of peers. Therefore, any endeavours, conscious or otherwise, to advance individual or collective wellbeing outcomes tended to be achieved horizontally on a peer-to-peer basis by nature of who was available and active within the space.

Residents of Grange Farm capitalised on social media and their localised Facebook groups to construct an extensive network of social ties that could be called upon in moments of hardship or crisis or nurtured to bring about constructive community development. A number of residents who engaged with this research reported how they had used either GPPF or GFR to expand their social circles or frequency of social interaction. Through the ‘bowling alley function’ residents used the groups to maintain and strengthen pre-existing social bonds with people already known to them, confirming research conducted by Wellman et al (2001) in the early days of the internet. They also utilised the groups to foster new relationships with others in the community whom they hitherto had not known offline. Dave, Sophie and Alice all stated in their research interviews how their involvement in GPPF had introduced them to new friends and acquaintances in the community and importantly how these relationships had evolved offline. This confirms the research findings from Xie (2008) that suggests initial online interactions have the potential to develop into strengthened friendship bonds upon migration into the offline environment.

For some residents the Grange Farm Facebook groups offered new opportunities to engage in various forms of community organisation. Building on the increased social networks afforded by the 'bowling alley' function residents used their Facebook groups to devise and engage in campaigns, develop projects or initiatives, plan events or rally community support. I will be documenting throughout this Chapter instances of where this type of horizontal community participation had brought about social benefit.

Requests for help and assistance from peers horizontally along the social network was a characteristic of the groups that I encountered on a frequent basis. Residents would use the groups to locate lost pets or personal items, share recipe ideas or appeal for, or offer help with household tasks such as gardening or shopping. Putnam (2000) outlines reciprocal assistance as a key component of social capital emphasising how mutual, horizontal relationships helped to build trust within communities. Molm (2010) developed Putnam's narrative further, not only highlighting the importance of horizontal reciprocity in the creation of social capital but also the development of social networks. My findings from Grange Farm 1.1 were characterised by instances where either GPPF or GFR were used both as practical utility for residents to signal requests for information, advice, guidance or assistance but also for the wider social benefit of informally constructing and strengthening peer-based networks.

Finally, Grange Farm 1.1 created a level playing field through the provision of an accessible space for interaction and a standardised access to local knowledge and information through the ability of residents to share public posts to the groups (the 'noticeboard function'). Information flows not only became more immediate and accessible but also more democratically accountable with dissemination and curation undertaken by residents on a

peer-to-peer basis. Studies into resident participation levels (Robinson et al 2005, Fagatto and Fung 2006, Skidmore et al 2006, Tavares and Carr 2012) outline the importance of information flows in the participation process and how a significant detachment of local residents has hitherto existed with the agencies of local political power that are there to serve them. Access to knowledge and information is at the forefront of this power dynamic. In evolving the way in which residents create and receive news and information the Grange Farm Facebook groups were helping to establish a more equitable and informed platform upon which residents could participate more fully.

Establishing a Meaning

In adopting an ethnographical methodology to this research much of the data generated through direct observation and conversations with Grange Farm residents captured the participatory journey through their experiences as participants. This is in contrast to other studies on community participation programmes that have focused on the outcomes and utility of participation for the programme rather than the personalised experiences of individuals. Here I will document how, for local residents, a number of key elements attached to the meaning of their involvement suggested why they had chosen to engage through this medium and how they were beginning to characterise horizontal bonds and relationships between people.

My research proposes four distinct and recognisable meanings that residents would attach to their ongoing participation in Grange Farm 1.1. They were their opinions and how they perceived their involvement. These meanings suggest to residents that community participation in Grange Farm 1.1 was:

Achievable – There were few barriers to entry associated with involvement with the Grange Farm Facebook groups. Barring the obvious digital inclusion barriers involvement was free of charge and accessible to all with a smartphone and a rudimentary knowledge of Facebook. Some of those I interviewed had limited ICT skills at best but were able to competently administer a group (Sophie) or engage in sustained and intense involvement (Maggie / Sandy). Whilst residents were fully aware that their participation in the Grange Farm groups was unlikely to yield any significant influence or change of policy at Parish / Town, Borough or County level they continued to engage because they could. They were comfortable doing so and, furthermore, the idea of participation had become achievable to many because they could observe first-hand the ease and accessibility that others engaged with the space.

Communal – Residents had found a reconnection with each other through these groups. Through social participation they were able to share stories, histories and traditions and, importantly, to establish social bonds with their peers. The groups were a space where they could share, often with little outside interference. As such a number of communal traditions were established as well as collective positions on matters of local concern.

Mutually beneficial – The groups were a place for residents to help one another. Whilst for those that I interviewed the idea of good neighbourliness had diminished in the Offline World, they saw their community Facebook groups as a place where it could be re-established and hopefully flourish. Residents saw the groups as a place to frequent in times of need, whether that be for information, practical support, or advocacy. They were also aware that their involvement in the groups would undoubtedly mean that they would be called upon to help others as well.

Influential – Whilst the next Chapter will outline a number of areas where the Grange Farm Facebook groups had failed to establish effective avenues of participation between residents and agencies of local power, there is no doubt that residents viewed them as an important and influential part of the social and political landscape of the community. Local elected officials and a small number of paid local authority and charity officials would frequent the space, enabling residents direct access to them and an accessible way to get ‘in their ear’. As such group members were beginning to assert what I have previously documented as proposed by Lukes (2021) as ‘non decision-making’ power; The ability to exert power through agenda setting and influence. Participation within the groups, in particular GPPF and GFR, also provided a platform to promote individuals’ views and ultimately to influence to a large number of their fellow residents.

At this juncture the reader of the thesis is most likely first confronted with a paradox of such significance that upon first consideration could be considered to characterise this research as ‘confused’. As we progress through this Chapter we will be presented with case study upon case study that document ordinary Grange Farm residents utilising the horizontal community kinship networks enabled by their neighbourhood Facebook groups to collectively solve their common issues. In many cases these case studies will be in response to the failure of the local community to engage with local power elites – or vice versa. However, the final of the four ‘distinct and recognisable’ meanings documented in the paragraph above claims that they are influential; That they, in some form or other, are able to influence local polity. In fact, should the reader, at this very moment, jump ahead and begin to read Chapter 7 they will be presented with furthermore examples of instances where Grange Farm residents, through some form or other, come to utilise their Facebook groups to exert influence upon power elites. Whilst a core finding of this research is that neighbourhood Facebook groups have re-engaged communities with each other thus

reaping the associated mutual and reciprocal benefits, the influence of said groups is not by any means nil. Whilst it is true to say that horizontal channels of participation through the groups were more difficult to exploit for residents than vertical ones that is not to say that they do not exist entirely. For the neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 directions of participation were not entirely a 'zero sum game'. I will return to this paradox in the next Chapter.

It is the above mentioned 'distinct and recognisable' meanings that came to characterise the modern community participation experience of residents and characterised their perception of relationships between themselves and the wider Grange Farm community. As I have outlined previously, levels of participation in Grange Farm 1.1 varied between individuals based on a number of internal and external factors. More committed participants embraced the Facebook groups as an established part of the pattern of their community lives. For others they were a resource, a tool to help them get things done or achieve a particular task.

Reaching a Critical Mass

The findings from my research in Grange Farm 1.1 demonstrated that the local Facebook groups, as a means of facilitating community participation, fundamentally relied on two critical preconditions if they were to succeed as a viable means of community interaction. I found that these preconditions were woven into the fabric of Grange Farm 1.1.

Firstly, for the community Facebook groups to succeed and be legitimised by the community they served they needed to have a sizeable groundswell of the community within their memberships. Enough residents needed to be active within the space for it be an attractive proposition for others to do likewise. My research suggests a virtuous circle of participation within both GPPF and GTE, and to a lesser extent GTE, whereby engagement encouraged

further engagement by others, although this would remain along a horizontal access with their peers rather than vertically with power elites and institutions. My observations established that the groups with larger memberships not only had larger pools of residents from which to draw participation but also that their membership were more likely to engage in the space due to the wider pool of residents that could be reached. Thus, as a result, more residents were also likely to join the group. The opposite could be said for those groups with smaller memberships such as GFUA or GCG which retained such low memberships, to the point where the only real engagement in these two particular groups was by the group administrators. Even these same administrators were more commonly observed participating in the other, larger, groups. Using Grange Farm as a demonstrable example I propose that, neighbourhood Facebook groups can become an affective medium for community participation when a critical mass of local residents is able and willing to get involved and engage.

Secondly my research in Grange Farm 1.1 suggests that, as well as a critical mass in terms of numbers participating, neighbourhood Facebook groups also needed the involvement of a certain level of pre-existing community spirit, identity and community minded individuals in order to thrive. The residents I interviewed had all demonstrated characteristics of what could be term community or civic mindedness. Preliminary interview questions with interview participants scoped for evidence of civic mindedness, badged for the interviews as ‘good neighbourliness’ and I found that through their own admissions participants engaged in various acts of kindness or altruism to assist others in the community. These ranged from dog walking and childminding for neighbours to footpath gritting and Christmas food parcel deliveries to the elderly and vulnerable. This suggested that that the reason that so many within the community had joined was that they identified with Grange Farm as their

community and as such wished to participate, at varying levels of commitment, in it. As community moved to the social media space so too do those who identified with it.

Participation becomes Communal Practice

For many the Grange Farm Facebook groups were where their friends, family and social contacts were and importantly where they were active. The more that the Grange Farm groups were used in a participatory manner the more local people joined. The fact that the Facebook groups were owned by the residents themselves, spoke to their agenda and the fact that they made up the vast majority of those who inhabited the space was comforting to residents.

Within the Grange Farm Facebook groups discussion was themed around self-chosen issues. Whilst my interviews with residents uncovered their various perceptions that other residents within the space were using the platform to advance their own agendas – a belief exemplified by the ongoing conflict between GPPF and GFR – they are not perceived to be spaces dominated by the agendas of those from outside the community. The residents I spoke to held no suspicions in relation to the groups and moreover felt complete ownership of them. The problem was however, as is documented throughout this thesis, that local power elites were not present in, or recognised in, these spaces and often opportunities for rich participatory dialogue across vertical lines were lost.

Grange Farm 1.1 had evolved into a legitimate space for residents to engage in social participation and I propose that, for many, their local Facebook groups had come to represent the community of Grange Farm itself rather than a supplementary or complimentary space. They had become a digital reflection of community life and thus represented a collective endeavour between participating residents. I would ask residents

how they viewed the Facebook groups; were they ‘a distinct, separate community’ or were they a ‘community within a community’? Upon reflection most rejected both suggestions opting instead to state that they were ‘just Grange Farm’. They did not experience both realities as separate or distinct entities, they experienced them collectively. For example, in my interview with Kevin he reflected on these questions. His response portrayed the camaraderie with which many residents viewed their groups. He stated:

“The groups are part of the Estate. They are the community. We’ll always be a community, we’ll always be that. They’ll never take the Grange Farm out of us.” (Interview with Kevin, March 2016).

Local Borough and County Councillor George Frost was slightly more descriptive with his opinion, suggesting:

“They cover the wider aspect of Grange Farm. I’m not being parochial in any shape or form. They cover the whole of Grange Farm rather than just one small section of it. They are just part of community life now. I’ll put it this way, if they shut down Grange Farm For Real and Grange Farm Past Present and Future people wouldn’t know what to do, they’d be lost. So I think it’s vitally important, well all the groups, they’ve all got a role to play. But the two main ones, if they were suddenly shut down and nobody bothered to be an administrator etc... I think people would be really upset about that” (Interview with Cllr George Frost, March 2016).

The Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 were a space where symbolic boundaries could become established (Cohen, 1985) and public opinion could be shaped (Habermas 1965, Oldenburg 1986) but this was done collectively and through the prism of communal resident consent. The residents I interviewed indicated that they viewed community participation via their local Facebook groups as augmenting their wider community experience. Therefore, I propose the symbolic boundaries crafted through their online participation transferred to their social interactions in the offline realm. As such I believe my research has superseded research from West et al (2009) that suggests ambiguity between the online and offline social boundaries of Facebook users.

Residents have found additional meaning through the ability to assist one another either in times of crisis or with concerns or issues encountered through their daily lives. They turned to their local Facebook groups to satisfy their neighbourly desires or to provide reciprocal assistance. Putnam’s work on participatory decline (2000, 2003) emphasises the importance of reciprocity in the construction of informal bonds between individuals that contribute to the realisation of community and social capital. Within the context of Grange Farm 1.1 reciprocal assistance was often between individuals who had loose or tenuous connection with each other in the offline world. They would reach out with words of advice or offers of help to strangers on the internet in the comforting knowledge that other strangers from within the group may do the same for them in their hour of need.

As well as the examples mentioned above residents utilised the groups to work together on community initiatives or solutions, inform each other on upcoming events or anticipated problems in the area and to seek or provide advice on local facilities or traditions. The key factor behind this, and what contributed significantly to some of the associations that residents placed behind their groups, were that they were helping each other. Grange Farm 1.1 was no longer a helpless community that relied on assistance from outside. It was mobilised through residents assisting one another to solve their own problems and shape their own destiny. The findings from Grange Farm both evolves and counteracts the argument put forward by Wellman et al (2001). Whilst Wellman et al suggest that the internet is used as a social tool by communities to supplement offline ties and networks they argue that the generation of social capital needs a strong offline foundation upon which online participation is an added bonus. My research suggests that although community participation in Grange Farm was augmented between the online and offline, the online played more than just a supplementary role. This is supported by a recent study of digitally mediated community altruism during the Coronavirus Pandemic by Murayama and

Sugawara (2021) which highlighted the importance of social media in providing community self-help in the absence of possible offline alternatives. We can observe with Grange Farm 1.1 the progression of the internet as a consolidating tool for pre-existing social relationships into a destination resource for civic mindedness and neighbourly behaviour.

A thoroughly unanticipated finding from my research in Grange Farm 1.1 was the level of influence that the groups themselves had over the lives of those in the community. I use the word influence here cautiously as on one hand the strategic influence of vertical participation through the groups was minimal, as I have suggested previously that they were not linked into any of the local power structures or decision-making bodies. However my research indicates that neighbourhood Facebook groups held and asserted influence over the actions and interactions of ordinary people. Previous studies (Antoci et al 2013, Househ et al 2014) have documented how social media platforms have given a convenient voice to those who traditionally would not have hitherto had the confidence, skills or means to make themselves heard. In the case of Grange Farm 1.1 it was commonly the case that not only were residents able to find their voice on local issues but moreover they found that said voice was listened to and engaged with, at least by their peers.

Levels of engagement around discussions varied from group to group as well as depending on the participatory function that residents were aiming to achieve. For example, sharing of news and information through the 'noticeboard function' tended to be engaged with by residents less than more detailed discussions through the 'agora function' or cooperation through the 'committee function'. I found both in GPPF and GFR a combination of 53% of all original posts during the research period attracted follow up engagement consisting of at least five follow-on comments. The majority of the remaining 47% of posts were information-based posts that would warrant attention but not necessarily follow-on engagement. In GTE

where the participation was decidedly more focussed a total of 90% of original posts attracted five or more follow-on comments.

Conversations with Grange Farm residents who participated heavily in Grange Farm 1.1 suggested another, more grounded reason behind their sustained involvement - an opportunity to influence the ongoing story of their community. For GTE founder Dave it was about connecting him to the area he lived and had grown up in. Prior to founding GTE Dave initially joined GPPF to find out more about what was going on in his local community and to meet new people but found that his continued involvement brought with it other benefits such as being able to reminisce over old photographs and anecdotes. In his own words he described his journey:

“It was just a Grange Farm group and I like to know what is going on and I just thought the more groups about Grange Farm I can join the more information I can get the more people you can meet... I love the old photographs because I’ve lived here 57 years. So it’s great that I can look back at the old photos because I remember what it was like, and how it’s grown”. (Interview with Dave, March 2016).

For university student Alice, involvement with GPPF served two distinct purposes; helping her to stay in touch with news and events from Grange Farm whilst she was away at university and also helping her to play a full and active role in the community when breaks from her study allowed her to come home. The breadth of Grange Farm related information she was exposed to and able to interact with through the groups whilst she was away made her realise how vibrant her indigenous community actually was compared to the fabricated student one she experienced when she was away.

The residents of Grange Farm were exploring new avenues for community participation and for those that used the Facebook groups they were undertaking the venture together, learning from each other in the process. As GPPF, GFR and GTE began to etch themselves

into the community psyche for many they had become the accepted and default means of getting involved.

Online Participation and the Building of Kinship Bonds and Social Networks – Reflections on the ‘Bowling Alley’ Function

A significant proportion of social participation within Grange Farm 1.1 revolved around the promotion of common and uniting themes such as; shared histories, shared physical space or shared traditions or past times. In this section I will outline how, by engaging through the familiar community-owned space of their local Facebook groups, residents of Grange Farm came to construct new social kinship networks and local connections between each other – a fact that Gilchrist (2019) has pointed out as a major contributory factor to the development of sustainable communities. It will also draw from ethnographic evidence to show how some residents had capitalised on this rebirth of social connectedness to strive for collective community or individual benefits.

Social participation within the groups was initially used to create and establish new connections with each other. For some, whose social networks were more disparate, individualised and more in line with what Raine and Wellman (2012) characterise as the *networked individual*, the ‘bowling alley function’ would serve to establish new bonds of kinship with individuals closer to home. For others, the pressures of work and family commitments meant that social connections with fellow Grange Farm residents were most easily found online.

My conversations with Alice and Sandy revealed how, quite unintentionally, their active involvement in the GPPF and GFR groups had led to the widening of their local kinship network. Below Alice recalls a couple of situations where an individual, hitherto a stranger,

approached her to strike up conversation based on previous discussions on GPPF. The first relates to a positive encounter she had in the local Medical Centre, she recalls:

“Well I think the last thing I commented on was somebody had put something about asking for opinions on the Grange Farm Medical Centre so I commented saying that when I left to go University. I signed up for a Doctors up there and I had to go to the Doctors one time and they were absolutely awful. Then I came back to Grange Farm and I was gutted because they had knocked me off the system. So I signed back up for this one here and if I’m ill or I need to go I’ll just take a day off Uni and come back for it. So I put something quite nice about it on the group because I’ve got nothing bad to say about it they’ve always sorted me out. So I put that and I didn’t think nothing of it and then I was in the Medical Centre one day and one of the Drs said to me ‘thank you for your nice comments’ and I was thinking ‘what are you on about?’ And he said he saw on Facebook so obviously even the Drs are watching what is being put about them.” (Interview with Alice, May 2016).

The second recalls an encounter on local public transport:

“In the past, shall we say before I started University when I was more active on the groups, this lady came and spoke to me on the bus and she was like ‘blah blah blah and how are you doing Alice?’ and it was so awkward because I literally didn’t know who she was or what she was called, I’d never met her and I didn’t know who this person was and I couldn’t say to her. It turns out she was a lady off Grange Farm Past Present and Future group.” (Interview with Alice, May 2016)

As these examples document, the ‘bowling alley function’ helped residents of Grange Farm to turn online dialogue into offline familiarity and relationship building. From my field work observations it was clear that Sandy used the GFR group to construct a network of community contacts and friendships that she came to really upon for much needed social interaction. Not only was she using GFR to widen her network of contacts but she was actively using the group to develop and enrich these relationships. Sandy’s experience contradicts earlier research by Pollet et al (2011) that suggests that social media usage has an inconsequential effect on the quality or closeness of interpersonal relationships. These observations were backed up through my conversations with her where she recounted:

“I think it has done (increased my social circle), I mean I’ve got some friends through the group and they’ve become good friends. And I think if I’d put up on the group anything they would respond. I think people are busy, and I can

only answer this from personal experience, those who are working and everything are too busy to get involved in life outside the home. I mean I work 15 hours a day on a one to one basis with somebody else, so I don't speak to anybody. I get home and its bed time. So I don't see nobody who could give me an interesting conversation. But if I get home and put the computer on I can have it for as long as I want." (Interview with Sandy, March 2016)

Whilst I have documented in the examples above how residents used the groups as a means to evolve strangers into kin it was also apparent that the groups were used to strengthen social and kinship bonds that had already been established. On regular occasions during my observations GPPF and GFR were utilised by residents to strengthen the common bonds of community between them. Their actions in building bonds and networks between them support my narrative of community that is built on identity, symbolic attachment and participation. I suggest that residents achieved this by utilising the neighbourhood Facebook groups to establish and promote attachment factors which symbolically brought them closer together and helped to cement a shared Grange Farm identity. This in turn strengthened the meanings behind the shared experiences residents had with one another.

Residents would frequently share photographs of the area's picturesque green spaces or would recount community events or get-togethers from Grange Farm's past such as the local estate carnival. In this respect I observed how digital interactions in Grange Farm 1.1 had come to mimic traditional face to face interaction in the reinforcement of symbols and familiarity. Manzo and Perkins (2006) suggest that place-based communities are strengthened by an observance and recognition of shared common bonds between individuals. I propose that the neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 were a contemporary facilitator of this phenomenon. I suggest there existed an active will from regular participants to use the online space to document and promote the factors that they believed to be the shared capital of their community. The space also served as an unofficial

repository and archive of local history – something that was at the forefront of Sophie’s intentions when she established GPPF over 10 years ago.

The ‘bowling alley function’ of the Grange Farm Facebook groups represented an evolution of a community space. The groups had evolved into a participatory aid that enabled local people to reconnect with each other in a space where kinship bonds and networks could be exercised to facilitate community commitment and ultimately to build social capital.

Case Study – The Photograph Competition

Perhaps this strengthening of kinship bonds was best illustrated by the annual photo competition organised by the administrators of GPPF. The competition encouraged group members to post their own photos of positive images of Grange Farm with the independently judged winning photo becoming the group’s profile picture for the following month. Through active participation in, or simply through following the progress of the competition as observers, Grange Farm residents were able to identify, associate with and celebrate their common bonds of community.

The photography competition provided a digital avenue for residents to develop the symbolic iconography of their community. Whether that be the building of the High Street in the 1950s, the Wildflower Meadow that overlooked the entrance to the Estate, the local Community Library or the locally iconic 777 bus that took Grange Farm residents into Bryerton and back. Garcia (2018) suggests that socio-economically disadvantaged communities have shown a tendency to construct ownership over public space through the informal proclamation of locally recognisable symbols. What I observed in Grange Farm was residents utilising the space they have created online to identify physical offline symbols of their community. The

symbolic, imagined boundaries that characterise Cohen’s (1985) theories on community digitized and augmented within the community experience.

Co-ordinated Community Action – The Successes of the ‘Committee Function’

In this section I will outline how the second of my five ‘participation parallels’, the ‘committee function’, was successful in utilizing horizontal links between people in Grange Farm to enable co-ordinated community action. When the ‘committee function’ was observed to be successful and individuals were willing and able to translate their online passion into real life action the results were encouraging, even inspiring. My findings mainly illustrate examples of positive civic participation within Grange Farm 1.1 occurring when residents had been able to proactively take matters into their own hands and have controlled the agenda therefore mobilising positive outcomes.

The ‘committee function’ of Grange Farm 1.1 served as a catalyst and call to arms for collective community action. The ubiquitous nature of the medium, a critical mass of membership and the recognition and acceptance by residents of the groups as a community owned space ensured that when required they were able to switch from acting as a tool to facilitate dialogue and discussion into one that could effectively facilitate active participation. This situation is the antithesis of historical narratives (Oldenburg 1989, Putnam 1994 and 2000, Bauman 2001) that social settings have become characterised by apathy, non-participation and an absence of collective endeavour. In Grange Farm 1.1 participation was not absent, it had evolved. For some residents this was evident, for others not so. What was evident from my data however is that the ‘committee function’ was used sparingly by residents and certainly wasn’t the main focus of participatory activity taking place within the space.

Tables 18 and 19 below illustrate how infrequently the 'committee function' of the groups was utilised compared to the other participatory functionality within the two main groups of GPPF and GFR. Compared to participatory activity that required less engagement commitment such as the 'noticeboard function' or the 'agora function' the overall percentage of participatory activity taken up by the 'committee function' was 4% and 5% for GPPF and GFR respectively. To suggest neighbourhood Facebook groups as the panacea for the decline in organised Community altruism in Grange Farm is an overestimation of their capacity.

Table 1 Breakdown of Original Post Classification GPPF

Post type	Number of posts	% of posts
The 'noticeboard'	240	42%
The 'committee'	27	4%
The 'bowling alley'	174	31%
The 'town hall'	115	20%
The 'surgery'	43	8%
Other	21	4%

Table 2 Breakdown of Original Post Classification GFP

Post type	Number of posts	% of posts
The 'noticeboard'	199	38%
The 'committee'	27	5%
The 'bowling alley'	158	30%
The 'town hall'	146	28%
The 'surgery'	32	6%
Other	40	8%

Throughout my conversations with Grange Farm residents I would highlight some of my initial observations of the Grange Farm Facebook groups made during my time in the field; closer kinship networks, accessible engagement in local dialogue, the utility of collective action and reciprocal aid. Some residents expressed doubts over the effectiveness of the medium to bring any real or lasting benefits to themselves or their fellow residents. I began to think that they were underselling the medium or had not grasped the importance of their creation. They longed for a return to a Grange Farm of yesteryear where they perceived the community and their participation within it to be authentic, vibrant and inclusive. They viewed declining rates of traditional forms of participation in their community as symptomatic of the apathy and decay that had beset their neighbourhood in recent times.

For these residents the local Facebook groups proved an effective tool for finding out the latest gossip and as a local talking shop but were hardly a tool for constructive community development. Putnam and Feldstein (2003) found similar views emerging through their work suggesting that although a useful communication tool, internet mediated communication is not able to reverse declining trends in active participation and social capital due to the

medium's inherent impersonal nature. For these residents the declining levels of local participation had lessened the ability and aspiration for collective endeavour; the evolution of local civic involvement to a shared digital space was not immediately apparent. For others it was strikingly clear and championed.

For other residents I spoke to, for example Alice, Maggie and Dave, the evolution of Grange Farm 1.1 challenged the hypothesis presented by Putnam and Feldstein and many of their own peers. They pointed to examples whereby ordinary residents had used the groups to co-ordinate community action either in response to perceived local injustices or to improve quality of life for local people. For example they pointed out how the Facebook groups had played a key part in mobilizing community opposition to the town status proposals or the new school uniform rules or in planning a family coach trip or numerous charity coffee mornings. Residents such as Alice, Maggie and Dave had begun to realise the power yielded by bringing residents together within a digital space to coordinate activity that could improve the lives of local people. Maggie contemplated when recalling the informal online response to assist the victims of a house fire that happened locally. She recounted to me:

"Over the weekend there was a young girl whose house has burned down and she's lost everything in it and I don't know if it was Sophie, Lorraine or Tina, one of the three admin people, put on that this girls lost everything can anyone do anything and I think by the end of the weekend, everything's been replaced. Everything she needs, furniture, clothes...And that's the sort of place it is. If someone needs something people will help, or they will know somebody who can help" (Interview with Maggie, February 2016)

Grange Farm 1.1 had evolved into a space where proactive civic participation could occur and respond to need at lightening speeds. Many residents engaged within the space to work together to solve problems that had been directly identified and communicated through the groups themselves. Whereas in the past they may have got together in person and formed committees or action groups now they were engaging in this type of active participation online and through the local Facebook groups. The nature of this new community action is

by its very nature less formal and follows trends documented in Tsatsou’s (2018) analysis of the Taiwanese Sunflower movement which portrays how citizen activism is expanded and enhanced by social media platforms but remains fluid informal and unorganised. Whilst Tsatsou explains that online participation becomes more effective when capitalised on in the offline world it still retains its informal tendencies. The same is true of my findings from Grange Farm. There are distinct disadvantages apparent here; if community action is inherently informal it is unlikely to be recognised by power elites (Brownill and Halford 1990, Mayo and Taylor 2001) who tend to operate with participation frameworks and engagement practices that favour partnerships with groups with which they have more familiar and structured relationships. This fact, I suggest, further compounded the participatory nature of community-based Facebook groups in Grange Farm as horizontal. Their informality precluded them from acceptance into vertical relationships.

As I have mentioned previously in this section the ‘committee function’ of Grange Farm 1.1 could be successful in effecting change when it migrated online planning and coordination into offline action. I witnessed occasions where residents used their Facebook groups as a catalyst for offline action around particular local issues that were instigated to change local policy by identifying and coordinating a community response that would be carried out offline. This was witnessed with the campaign against Town status, the protest against the school behaviour and uniform policy and the campaign to save the local library. With each of these examples it is noted how the Grange Farm Facebook groups were used primarily as an organising tool, used to highlight issues, suggest ideas, co-ordinate plans and activity, recruit volunteers, allocate roles and importantly to seek community feedback. For example, with the campaign against town status, encapsulated by the transcript below of a discussion that took place in GTE, residents, members of GTE utilised the group to facilitate local

discussion, formulate a consensus of opinion, mobilise engagement in a formal community meeting and strategise their protests:

Ozzy (original poster): "When's the best date to call a community meeting on the Parish Council's proposals? Then I will need at least 6 signatures from registered voters. This way we can get a formal public meeting and see how that goes. If push comes to shove we can call a referendum"

Maggie: "I will sign it."

Ozzy: "I'm just thinking what night. Obviously we won't be able to keep everyone happy but some of us have been fighting this since the start and I don't want those people to miss out."

Maggie: "Most evenings are fine. I finish work at 6.30pm barring an emergency."

Dave: "I work shifts, 12 hour days and nights 7 till 7. Can you let me know what date and I will let you know if I'm working?"

Maggie: "Dave you started this group and this campaign so we should arrange the meeting around when you are working."

Ozzy: "I think it would be best when you are on early shifts then. We can call it for 7.30."

By involving themselves with the 'committee function' and importantly building upon online discussions to engage in offline action some residents of Grange Farm such as Dave, Kevin and Sandy had progressed from observers and commenters of their immediate geographic surroundings to influential participants within it. Again these examples document how Luke's (2021) theory on 'non decision-making' power through influence and agenda setting is clearly demonstrable in the Grange Farm Facebook groups. They had hitherto limited the extent and scope of their civic participation – this was certainly the case for Dave and Kevin who, prior to their involvement in the town status campaign, had little experience of community involvement. My research from Grange Farm directly contradicts similar research conducted in 2014 by Metallo et al (2020) who state that their findings from citizen participation on public Facebook pages in Italy and Spain does not directly correlate into increased citizen engagement offline. This contradiction is of relevance to the argument I

put forward as my findings from Grange Farm suggest that sustained online involvement will translate to offline action through the ‘committee function’ as and when residents deem it necessary.

Observations from Grange Farm 1.1 suggest that residents felt actively discouraged or prevented from engaging with local power structures through traditional means. This further drove them towards the horizontal participation channels offered by the community Facebook groups. It was particularly apparent through the interviews conducted with Maggie, Sandy, Ozzy and Dave and was a consistent theme running throughout my interactions and observations of residents. I have highlighted the perception of disenfranchisement in the previous Chapter as one of the motivating factors of Grange Farm residents in seeking out digital avenues of civic participation. It was also one of the key reasons why the ‘committee function’ had become such an important part of the evolution of Grange Farm 1.1.

Grange Farm 1.1 was a space where residents were not prevented from engaging in mutual assistance. King et al (1998) argue that as well as the pressures associated with the nature of modern life that have since been documented by Putnam (2000) there are significant difficulties with the administrative processes within modern liberal democracies that mean that the engagement structures and frameworks set up by local elites actively prevent local people from getting involved. From their study they state “Citizens in our project felt that information is usually managed, controlled, and manipulated, limiting their capacity to participate” (King et al, 1998, p.322). The residents of Grange Farm perceived similar barriers from their own situation. For example Ozzy explained to me how he felt that the Parish / Town Council would only recognise resident comments through their own official

and limited engagement channels and would disregard anything else. Thus residents turned to their own digitised solutions to get involved, even if this involvement remained fruitless.

Engaging with the ‘committee function’ of the Grange Farm Facebook groups, at least as an initial conduit and planning tool, served to remove identified barriers to civic participation for some local residents. What was abundantly clear however was that within the community context of Grange Farm the digitised solutions of the ‘noticeboard function’ could only progress collective action so far - at some point this engagement needed to migrate to the physical. Sometimes this would work, sometimes it would not and I propose that this was, more than anything else, down to ambition and capacity of the individuals involved rather than the particulars of the medium.

Finally in the section below I will outline how my research identifies ways in which the ‘committee function’ of the Grange Farm groups had come to utilise strengthened kinship arrangements to achieve mutual benefits or assistance for those in crisis. The case study of the house fire in the next section will document how GPPF was mobilised to help a single parent in her hour of need. By capitalising on the ‘bowling alley function’ of the groups to build and improve social bonds between residents this enabled the ‘committee function’ to be more effective.

Some residents I spoke to recognised how improved networks of social and kinship bonds within Grange Farm 1.1 provided a much needed support structure to a population that already suffered from multiple disadvantage. The digitised support structure enabled by the ‘bowling alley function’ contemporises historical works documenting propinquity and reciprocal kinship support networks of traditional Working class communities (Bott 1957, Young and Willmott 1957) - the community of Grange Farm had found a new medium to

renew and exploit reciprocity. A recent study by Witten et al (2020) outlines how community Facebook groups can be beneficial in cementing kinship bonds between residents of purpose built developments and how these bonds can be exploited in the development of mutual assistance and reciprocity. Witten et al's findings suggest that the ultimate outcome of this was increased feelings of trust between individuals. My conversations with Grange Farm residents uncovered similar feelings.

My observations led me to understand that assistance was provided to others on the general understanding that others within the groups would return the favour should it ever be needed. Examples of this included situations where residents would share excess or no longer needed baby formula, nappies and clothes as well as the offering of lifts to community meetings or events. The strengthening of social connections within the groups, facilitated by the ‘bowling alley function’ and actioned by the ‘committee function’, was fundamental to achieving this. A previous study by Bridger and Luloff (2001) identified how reciprocal assistance tends to be characteristic of developed social networks. They state:

"Generalized reciprocity is most likely to be found in dense networks of social exchange. In particular, it is associated with networks in which participants are of roughly equal status and power-what might be called horizontal as opposed to vertical networks." (Bridger and Luloff, 2001, p.466)

It was clear from my time spent observing the Grange Farm groups that most of the relationships within them were of roughly equal status and horizontal rather than vertical. This allowed them to evolve as an ideal space for generalised reciprocity and mutual assistance. It was a situation that strengthened the ties and relationships between residents and ultimately increased community capital but at the same time created further distance between residents and authorities as peer based support was favoured over official channels.

Case Study – The House Fire

There are often moments during any sustained period of qualitative research that can prompt the researcher to question why they are doing it and what they are actually hoping to uncover. My field research in Grange Farm was no different. At times the constant trawling through post after post of moans or community gossip led me to question why I was choosing to spend my precious free time staring at a computer screen. Then, close to halfway through my 12 months in the field, I had that eureka moment. It was the moment when I thought to myself 'this is it, this is the kind of thing I have been looking for'. The case study I have chosen to present to illustrate the success of the 'committee function' function of Grange Farm 1.1, but could just as easily been used to illustrate any of the four other 'participation parallels' such was the correlation between what I observed and the overall findings of my research, I have called 'the house fire'.

Towards the halfway point of my 12 month field work an unfortunate accident occurred in Grange Farm. A young mother and her infant child, who suffered from multiple physical disabilities, were victims of a devastating house fire. The fire was alleged from community sources to have been caused deliberately by the women's partner who had recently been released from prison⁴. Luckily both mother and child were unharmed in the fire however the damage to the property was so severe that much of the family's personal possessions were destroyed and the house deemed uninhabitable.

The Council and social landlords were quick to act, and the family were able to be rehoused locally but what authorities were not able to provide was clothes, furniture, appliances,

⁴ This is the opinion of a number of members of the community. Follow on investigation has uncovered no legal charges or prosecution brought against the individual in question.

children’s toys etc. to replace what had been destroyed in the fire. Once the news was made public GPPF was quick to act. Within 24 hours Sophie had instigated a community response using the group as the main organising tool. She posted “There is a young single mother with a daughter (who has health issues) and they need our help. Their house has been ravaged by a fire and she is left with nothing. Any help would be greatly received” What Sophie and her fellow residents had realised was that GPPF could function as one large local support network for the young mother. Where once she would have been dealing with the situation likely through exploiting her own individualised kinship network, through the ‘bowling alley function’ of Grange Farm 1.1 she would now receive the support of an entire community.

As the gravity of the situation became clear, requests for assistance were put out and subsequently came flooding in. One resident initially asked for clarity on what the family needed to which Sophie responded “everything, her little one is about 12 months old”. Another group member came into the conversations to offer help claiming “If she or yourself could inbox me with the essentials that she needs I will have a route around and see what I can gather up after I have finished work” Residents were actively exploiting the extended kinship network that had been informally constructed through GPPF and capitalising on it by engaging in a coordinated community response. Others posted to the group to offer to take up the family’s plight with the local Christian Social Action Centre who ran the clothing, furniture and food banks for those in crisis. Cllr Frost offered his personal advocacy in helping the family to get promptly rehomed, as well as offering a number of second hand toys, stating, “my daughter has a load of toys her child has grown out of that we could donate”. As the community relief began to pour in GPPF was used to co-ordinate the local response. One prominent member of the group offered to drive round and collect the donated items and take them directly to the family in their new accommodation. Another

took it upon herself to solicit help from the local Social Action Centre, commenting "I have spoken to the St Mary's Centre. They said if she comes down first thing on Monday morning they will be able to help her". As discussion progressed the victim of the fire herself engaged with the group to thank everyone for their help and to supply further information about what items she needed.

As news began to filter through GPPF that an abundance of toys had been donated but the family was still without usable bedding the situation was posted to the group allowing people to make a more informed choice of what they could offer to donate. Sophie explained to me in her own words how she recalled the incident and the community response:

"It's a young lass that I've known since she was about 12, I've known her and her mum. She hasn't had an easy life. Her daughter was born, she was only 17, 16 when she had this baby and the baby had to be born in Leeds and all her internal organs were born outside so she was in hospital a good time.... So she is left with nothing. So I thought right, so I put a request out. Anybody that had any spare stuff, and I know she has had some clothes and toys but I don't know whether she has had any furniture or anything because she has got nowhere to store it basically. But there was a lot of people pointing her in the right direction, like for the St Mary's Centre, the Christian Social Action Centre, I tagged my friend who volunteers up at the St Mary's Centre. So yeah, so that was a very positive." (Interview with Sophie, March 2016).

Alice provided extra context to the story, contrasting the community spirit of Grange Farm with her term time residence in the Student Quarter of Newcastle and just how the neighbourhood Facebook groups had helped facilitate positive connections and community action. She laments:

"I was in Newcastle at the time and I was seeing it because I had heard about it and it was like oh my God and it was just the way that everyone got together and because my mum was like sort of in the middle of it and she sort of knew what was going on she was like 'yeah she's got a new house in a new town' or wherever it was and she has got all this stuff together, she has only got a few more bits to get and I thought that was amazing like I can't believe how much everyone was really like just helping each other. There was people like 'I've got this this and this, will this be any good?' And then the girl was putting 'yeah that's great, thank you' and then there was someone else piping up offering to deliver stuff. It was really nice that people were being like that and it was really nice to watch it and I thought if something like that had happened

in Newcastle nobody would care, honestly you would see it and ignore it, you wouldn't be helping people. But I remember there was a fire that happened on Woodburn, outside Woodburn School, this was like going back a good few years and the women was really struggling to get stuff but because like social media, there wasn't these groups I think Facebook was just getting going, it was a good few years ago, she did not get the amount of help and support and the community did not pull together as much as they did a few months ago and I do not think that would have happened or it would not have happened as fast if it wasn't it for Facebook" (Interview with Alice, May 2016)

Alice's comments echo the findings from Young and Willmott's (1957) study of working class communities in Bethnal Green that detailed how wider kinship networks served to provide much needed mutual assistance in times of hardship and need. Moreover, Young and Willmott progressed to outline how with the displacement of much of the Working class community in Bethnal Green came the loss of this kinship network for support. I observed in Grange Farm how this working class community used social media to knit the social fabric together again. As support networks had been dissolved or disbanded, digitally mediated propinquity came to fill this void.

The closing comments to the group from a number of prominent members reflected on the situation and how it had brought the community closer together, how Grange Farm people were 'there for each other' and how common perceptions of the community were all wrong. Sophie commented "It just goes to show that Grange Farm is not full of nasty people. We have a lovely community and our residents are lovely". Lorraine also used the moment to praise the community spirit and social capital that had been demonstrated through the community response. She stated, "Its great when the community comes together. We all have hard times and bad luck. I'm wishing for better luck in the future for these guys".

In this case study I have demonstrated how the 'committee function' acted as both catalyst and conduit for peer-to-peer support. The case of the house fire shows that local residents were able to use the Facebook groups to co-ordinate and mobilise an effective response

when required. In turn this helped to instil a feeling of pride that they had been able to rekindle a semblance of community spirit through mutual assistance. Some, such as Sophie and Maggie, were acutely aware of their collective achievements and the mobilising power of the platform and how it could build bonds between them. In the case of the house fire, residents engaged with the 'committee function' of Grange Farm 1.1 without reference or foresight to its social significance however it was clear to see that for many the desire to reconnect with themselves digitally as a community was instinctual.

Case Study - The Campaign to Save the Library

Another case study from my observations that illustrated how residents engaged in coordinated community action through their Facebook groups was the campaign to save the local Library. During the first few weeks of my time in the field the local County Council announced that it was proposing to withdraw funding from Grange Farm Library - effectively meaning that the much loved and much needed facility would close should a community-led and resourced solution not be found. Officials from the County Council called an open meeting to discuss the proposals with the Grange Farm Community. With considerable promotion through the various Grange Farm Facebook groups, it should be noted, there was a respectable turn out at this meeting (30-40 local residents). It should also be noted that despite the respectable turn out at the meeting from community residents, many of whom felt confident enough to make their feelings known, this engagement was eclipsed by the many more Grange Farm Residents that chose to receive their information in real time through social media reports and have their say in the comfort of their own home as was observed primarily through GPPF and GFR.

The meeting was advertised, and reported on, extensively through the Grange Farm Facebook groups but the involvement of the groups did not end there. Updates from Cllr

Frost on meetings on the issue at County Hall were reported back on through the groups, online petitions were disseminated, and various options were debated and discussed. Some months later, when the campaign to keep the facility open through public ownership had failed, the Facebook groups were mobilised again. This time to support local efforts to bring it into community management. In an ironic twist of fate the virtual spaces that I argue had contributed to the privatisation of community space were being utilised to attempt to prevent such a thing from happening. Digital agoras were being used to maintain physical ones.

Understanding the need for the large number of volunteers that would be required to run the Library without the paid County Council staff the newly formed Management Committee used their prescience on the Facebook groups to put out regular, almost daily, calls for volunteers from within the Grange Farm and surrounding community. To this day the Grange Farm Community-run Library, now that its existence is a little more secure, is still prolific in its use of social media channels to spread the word on its upcoming activities and of course the occasional call for more volunteers.

Peer-to-peer Information Sharing – The Advantages of the ‘Noticeboard Function’

As I outlined in my overview of the ‘participation parallels’ in the previous Chapter, the most frequently engaged participatory function of the Facebook groups used by the residents of Grange Farm was the sharing of community information - the ‘noticeboard function’. I propose that the Grange Farm Facebook groups have taken the place of their offline equivalent, the community noticeboard, as the go to place to disseminate and receive news and information about the local area. A recent study by Swart et al (2019) suggests that interaction through community ties between individuals i.e. not family or friendship based relationships, is most often centred on shared local news as a common denominator. They propose that social media is in a prime position to facilitate this. However as I will progress

to analyse in this section the groups offered a more immersive and interactive social experience than the one way flow of information provided by the traditional, physical community noticeboard boards. This enabled residents to share information along horizontal networks as an aid to participation and involvement.

For those in Grange Farm who regularly frequented the Facebook groups they were the place where they received their local news. It was through the sharing of information flows through the 'noticeboard function' that residents further engaged in participation along horizontal lines rather than a reliance on garnering it from external sources. Such was the proliferation of information sharing based posts on the GPPF group local resident Maggie reflected in her interview with me that "sometimes it's a bit like the Yellow Pages" (Interview with Maggie, February 2016). As Maggie alluded to in this quote, the neighbourhood Facebook had become the place where local trades and services were touted but also where information about local events, projects and opportunities were posted and received.

The 'noticeboard function' primarily revolved around ensuring that residents were in possession of up to date information concerning life in Grange Farm. Crucially, within the groups, news was collated and disseminated on a peer-to-peer basis with residents acting as both the communicators and consumers of local news content. A study by de Zuniga (2012) into information sharing through social media channels outlines the democratising aspects of social media procured information sharing such as the ability to become more informed, find common causes, and participate in public life. My research correlates these studies on a hyper localised level.

Local community groups and a small number of Public and Voluntary Sector agencies that operated within Grange Farm would also take advantage of the 'noticeboard function'. As

evidenced in the *Figure 3* below (Source: Facebook, 2016) community groups would promote local events, projects or services. For these community groups the medium offered free publicity that would be guaranteed to reach their target audience.

Figure 4 Play Park Celebrations



Interestingly many residents took the opportunity to share locally relevant posts and information from outside organisations not active within groups for example the Borough Council or the local Citizen's Advice Bureau. This helped to facilitate for the inward flow of information into the community. Even the Parish / Town Council who had actively avoided engaging with social media found their literature and official correspondence shared digitally through the groups. In this respect my research findings are supported by the narrative advanced by Gerbaudo (2012) that social media is by its very nature inherently anarchistic, void of control or regulation from structures and institutions of power. This aligns with the findings from my research that points to an unregulated and anarchistic community ownership of the medium.

Prior to the advent of social media residents would have been a lot more restricted in how they were able to share information with each other. Whilst local information could be shared through informal, word of mouth channels, any attempts at more enhanced information sharing would require more effort and organisation. Through their local Facebook groups residents were able to achieve this through the click of a mouse or a tap on their phone. In the case of Grange Farm, an inward looking Parish / Town Council was assisted in getting its message out to the people by those very people themselves.

In disseminating local information to a wider audience than those who would usually actively seek it out the 'noticeboard function' addressed the concerns expressed by some scholars of civic participation (Scholzman et al 1999, Fung 2006, McComas et al, 2006, Mathers et al 2008) who ascertain that it is usually those who are better educated or who have more available free time who are able to access the relevant information required to participate effectively. Interviews with Grange Farm residents supported this view. A number of those that I spoke with described the ways in which they used their Facebook groups to keep up to date with community news and information and how this assisted their desires and abilities to get more involved. The following quotes are taken from my conversations with Dave and Kevin and illustrate the egalitarian nature of neighbourhood Facebook groups as a local media source:

"I think one of the best things that they (the Grange Farm Neighbourhood Facebook groups) are for is if something has happened and somebody needs information, that's the easiest way to get that information to them or to find out the information they need or whatever." (Interview with Maggie, February 2016).

"I like to know what is going on and I just thought the more groups about Grange Farm I can join the more information I can get, the more people you can meet" (Interview with Dave, March 2016).

"We share, we share stuff as well. Like if there's been an accident or like lost dog or something's happened we will share it so it keeps going..... We always

put stuff up on there (GCG) so that people get it anyway.” (Interview with Kevin, March 2016).

Residents chose to share information deemed important and relevant to them and their individual circumstances. The relative ease of information sharing through the Facebook groups enabled them to post mutually beneficial information quickly or in some cases in real time. During my field research I observed a number of instances where concerned residents would post warnings to the wider community. Often these would revolve around instances of suspicious behaviour or observations of suspicious characters. I noted how residents would take to the groups to report individuals trying door handles, cold callers operating without identification or to alert dog owners to the whereabouts of broken glass on the recreation fields. These types of clearly localised and time limited information would be out of date or of less relevance if disseminated via a local monthly newsletter or police notice. With the instant communication offered through their Facebook groups Grange Farm residents were able to alert one another to potential dangers in their community in an instant. In many ways they acted like a hyper-responsive neighbourhood watch group.

I have argued earlier in this thesis that, for community to be realised, participation must be able to occur. The ‘noticeboard function’ of the Grange Farm 1.1 was both informative and participatory. Whilst residents were able to receive information, they were also able to engage with it and with those individuals and organisations that had posted it. The ability to interact with the information that had been communicated allowed for a two-way dialogue to occur between information giver and receiver. It allowed for residents to shape the subject matter of news and information, find out more, and potentially influence outcomes. The facilitation of two way information flows through the ‘noticeboard function’ is evidenced with the lead up to, delivery, and aftermath of a local family fun day at the Community Centre

that was promoted to residents almost exclusively via the medium of the GPPF group. I will present this case study in the next part of this section.

The process of engaging with the ‘noticeboard function’ could be chaotic or lack appropriate regulations or direction which could often lead to false or dangerous information being disseminated throughout the community. Whilst group administrators would work to monitor content their roles and responsibilities were engaged with on a voluntary basis with little to no training on what constituted appropriate or relevant discussion. Whilst traditional news and information channels such as print and broadcast media must adhere to certain standards and responsibilities the administrators of the Grange Farm Facebook groups were having to make it up as they went along. The democratisation of news and information content distribution brought challenges as well as benefits.

Both Sandy and Alice explained some of the difficulties associated with such an anarchistic community information system. Alice had recognised the faults associated with information sharing through social media channels. She posed the question of whether or not the current system, whilst applauded for its grassroots ethos, could be amended and given more structure and focus. She states:

“When I post something I won’t post it unless I’m 100% sure I’m right but some people just post things and you think that it is utter rubbish and like ‘where have you got that from’ and sometimes it really irritates me if I know that that’s wrong so then I’ll be like actuallyBut sometimes I just get far too annoyed with myself and it just goes on for ever and ever and I get so annoyed. So I do think that I am quite a lurker so I just read and look at things and will only comment if I really want to give my opinion on something.”
(Interview with Alice, May 2016).

Grange Farm 1.1 remained overall a respectful and courteous space. Residents largely refrained from posting misleading or inciting information or opinion, although this was observed on a small number of occasions – most notably when a number of Gypsy

Travellers arrived in the community over a two week period in July to attend a local horse fair. Problems, however, tended to emerge through misinformation rather than anything else. Group administrators maintained orderly conduct and, on occasions, were known to remove content deemed incorrect or inappropriate. I propose that it was due to the value placed on the ‘noticeboard function’ of the groups by Grange Farm residents as a legitimate medium of community information that by and large it was not abused by those seeking to spread division and / or misinformation.

Case Study – The Family Fun Day

The interactive and communal ways in which residents exploited the ‘noticeboard function’ of Grange Farm 1.1 can be evidenced through a simple community event that took place at the Grange Farm Community Centre early on in my field research. It was an event, the coordination and promotion of which, augmented the realities of information sharing and social participation activity within Grange Farm.

Simply entitled *Family Fun Day* the event had been coordinated and facilitated by an informal group of community volunteers and supported by the Centre’s Management Committee who acted as a lead body for insurance purposes. The origins of the *Family Fun Day* lay in a response to comments and discussion that took place in the GPPF Group concerning a perceived lack of positive activity for local children and young people in the community - a common belief that was reiterated on a regular basis through both GPPF and GFR. The event, which had been funded through Cllr Frost’s Locality Budget, included many activities and attractions including a bird of prey display, children’s disco and an outside BBQ. It was well attended and brought people and families from the Estate together in a shared offline space. The planning and promotion of the event however was characterised

almost exclusively by online activity. The only 'offline', non-digital aspect being the actual event itself.

The rationale behind the Fun Day emerged through online discussions and the planning and promotion was organised almost exclusively through GPPF. Furthermore, photographs and videos from the event were uploaded to the Group in real time allowing both those present and those who were not to engage directly with the event and feel involved. Alice commented on the event during my interview with her. She was quick to point out how the organisers had capitalised on the effectiveness of social media to promote the event, stating:

"If I didn't hear about it online I don't think I would hear about things because things always get posted and I'm sure there is posters up here (the Library) but the posters get shared on the Facebook groups and things and I think if that party hadn't have been advertised on the groups then it wouldn't have been as popular. I do think there is nowhere like what there is online" (Interview with Alice, May 2016)

Figure 5 Event at the Community Centre



The Family Fun Day, highlighted by the promotional post in *Figure 5* above (Source: Facebook, 2015) reflected the paradoxical nature of augmented social relations within Grange Farm 1.1. The physical and the digital realms existed within a relationship whereby

on one hand they were mutually exclusive, occupying two distinct social spaces, yet on the other hand they could not exist without each other as participation within both spaces interacted with and complimented each other through a shared overall aim. I suggest the event would not have existed, let alone been planned or organised, without GPPF. It was the space within which need was identified. It provided the space for mutual cooperation and organisation as well as an efficient means of promotion and advertising. The organic reach of GPPF within the community ensured that a large number of residents attended the event. As well as creating awareness around the event the ‘noticeboard function’ of Grange Farm 1.1 served to democratise the event planning process through the facilitation of comments and follow on engagement to promotion that had been posted. It allowed a larger section of the community to feel involved in the event planning and thus have a stake in its success. Yet despite the pivotal role that GPPF provided within the process it was not able to recreate the basic human need for physical social interaction. For that to occur participation and interaction had to emerge from behind the screen.

Peer-to-peer Support – Where the ‘Surgery Function’ Works

As the Grange Farm Facebook groups evolved into an increasingly recognised space for community participation, for some they had become the preferred space to gravitate to with requests for help from their peers. Whereas the ‘noticeboard function’ enabled residents to collectively organise around issues of shared concern the ‘surgery function’ enabled them to elicit help and assistance along the horizontal network of peers that had been assembled. Residents utilised the groups to solicit help from others but did so on the understanding that it was assumed and understood that they would do the same for others – a mutual understanding that had hitherto been identified as a core component of social capital by Putnam (2000).

As with the other 'participation parallels' that I have so far outlined in this thesis, participatory activity that characterised the 'surgery function' ranged in importance and significance. As with the transcribed conversation from GFR below, requests for assistance, could range from simple and practical such as asking for information on opening times of the local takeaway or information on when the recycling bins are collected:

Dennis (original post): "Does anyone know what time they are supposed to empty the garden waste bins as we now have to pay for the privilege?"

Sandy: "It's usually done by now Dennis but I know last time it was quite late."

Steve: "Not been down our way yet."

Sandy: "They are heading your way now Dennis."

Laura "I'm on Cross Lane and I've not seen them yet."

Steve: "We will have the full route posted up here soon. Who needs GPS."
(Source: Facebook, 2016)

Whilst at the other end of the spectrum this participation was able to engage with complex issues that had a detrimental effect on residents' quality of life such as complaints about the quality of maintenance work by the local social housing provider or appeals for assistance with anti-social dog barking as evidenced in the transcribed conversation from GFR below:

Helen (original post): "Can the person that lives on Lime Tree Avenue that leaves their dog outside for most of the day barking all the time please sort it out. It's a joke! It was barking most of the day and throughout the night last night. Some people have to be up for work."

Geoff: "Contact the Council's Environmental Health People Helen. I think this would be classed as noise pollution"

Trevor: "RSPCA or Environmental Health won't do anything unless the dog is being mistreated."

Cllr George Frost: "Helen, as Geoff said you can contact the Environmental Health Officers at the Town Hall and make a complaint on the grounds of noise pollution. If you don't get any joy just inbox me and I will see what I can do."
(Source: Facebook, 2015)

My continued observation of this post and the few follow-on comments from others that followed did not catch any further dialogue in relation to this issue. Like so many of the ‘surgery function’ posts I came across during my time in Grange Farm 1.1 it ended abruptly and seemingly without any further information on whether the issue had been resolved or not. Whilst I did not observe any further follow on participation in relation to this issue, nor did I witness the original poster post to GFR (or any of the other Grange Farm Facebook groups) in relation to the same barking dog concerns I could not be 100% sure that the issue had been resolved although my assumption was that it had been.

On a practical level the residents of Grange Farm also used the potential reach of the Facebook Groups Platform to solicit information from others in the community. For example, to find out when refuse collections were scheduled after bank or public holidays ,or parents liaising with each other regarding the arrival time of bus bringing school children back from an away day. An examples of the groups utility as an extended support network are shown in the screenshot below (*Figure 6 and 7*) which documented two specific cases where residents reached out for information to their wider community through the groups. One in relation to trying to relocate a lost dog, the other appealing for help in locating a local resident. Previous studies (Livingstone and Markham 2008, Kavanaugh et al 2014) have documented how access to information flows can improve both community cohesion and community capacity and establish an environment more conducive to sustained civic participation. For newcomers to the area a quick post to the GPPF or GFR could help them obtain all the valuable and important community information that they required.

Figure 6 Lost Greyhound



Figure 7 Anyone Know Johnny



Establishing a Digital 'Third Place' – The 'Agora Function'

Grange Farm 1.1 provided residents with what they regarded as a community-controlled space where conversations on local matters could be engaged in – the 'agora function'. The community Facebook groups were a space where discussion, dialogue and debate occurred, and localised public opinion was shaped. Historically neutral public space has been recognised as essential in securing the fundamentals of democracy and civic responsibility (De Tocqueville 1835, Hanifan 1916, Habermas 1962). This narrative is progressed through identifying the importance of shared space outside of the agency of the state in constructing a consensus of public opinion. Studies on community (Oldenburg 1989, Putnam 2000 and 2003) have evolved these concepts to demonstrate the social capital

utility of shared community space. More recent thinking around digital space (Kirk and Schill 2011, Borch et al 2020) has evolved these arguments further and suggests how Facebook groups can be used to; formulate discourse around protest and objections and enable feelings of enfranchisement and inclusion.

This section examines the ways in which Grange Farm residents used their Facebook groups to progress the formation of public opinion at a localised level and to ensure civic discourse was engaged with through the peer based networks afforded by the platform. Borch et al’s (2020) study into the use of Facebook groups in localised wind farm protest movements outlines how they are used by communities as a ‘resonance space’ through which to shape and evolve community opinion. Historically concepts of agoras have revolved around place or space that enables a citizenry to gather and discuss issues of commonality. As the centrepiece of social, civic and political life the Agora remained an integral part of Athenian civitas. I propose that the local Facebook groups of Grange Farm also fulfilled this societal function as for many they had evolved into the default space for peer-to-peer dialogue.

A growing number of Grange Farm residents migrated everyday discussions into the digital arena. They shared dialogue concerning social and civic community issues within their local Facebook groups as a space that was outside of the jurisdiction and authority of local power elites. The Grange Farm Facebook groups were recognised space where residents felt comfortable to engage in civic discussions and debate; as residents discussed with me in their interviews they felt that suitable offline space to interact within was becoming less available within the community. Kirk and Schill (2011) have highlighted the propensity of social media platforms to fulfil this function and my research confirms this to be the case within the context of Grange Farm. Increasingly in Grange Farm the groups had become the

forum within which discussion was engaged with and community opinion formed. The findings from Grange Farm correlate with research from Australia by Clifford et al (2020) that uncovered similar findings.

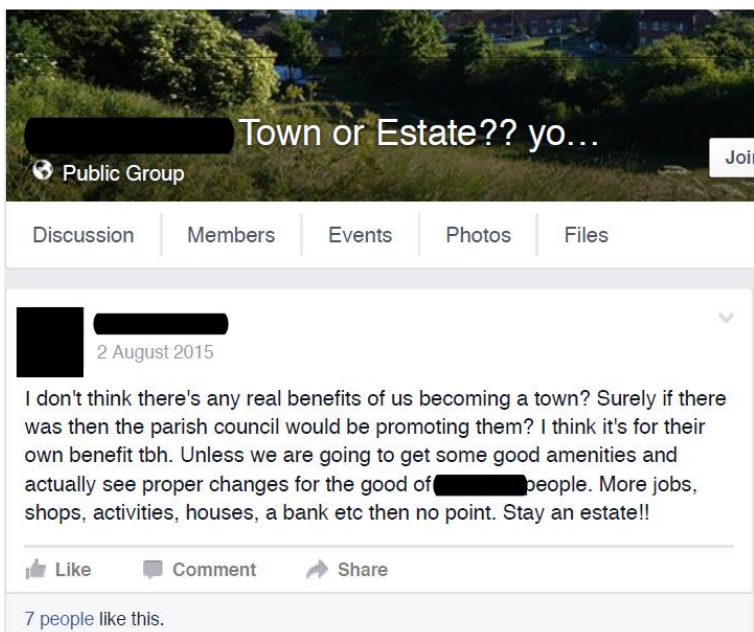
Not only did they provide a space for residents to engage in dialogue on the popular issues of the day they were also the space where discussion and debate could evolve differences of individual opinion into collective consensus.

The ‘agora function’ participation that I observed taking place within the Grange Farm Facebook groups mirrored similar discussions that would not be out of place in the local pub, cafe or high street. My observations, evidenced by the screenshots of original posts to GPPF and GTE in *Figures 8 and 9* (Source: Facebook, 2015) below enabled me to document discussion topics varying from the mundane (e.g. the closure of the local convenience store for refurbishment and the annoyance of the local supermarkets faulty burglar alarm), amusing (e.g. the apparent theft of a snowman and the local secondary school’s bizarre decision to ban a certain flavour of crisp for being too spicy) to the direct outcomes of local occurrences or polity (e.g. the ongoing community debate about the move to Town status or the implementation of the Borough Council’s controversial new garden waste collection policy).

Figure 8 Snowman Stolen



Figure 9 Benefits of Becoming a Town



What is apparent however was the importance these discussions held, both in the way they assisted engagement on civic issues and in how residents had chosen their Facebook groups as the trusted space to engage with them.

Pick and Choose – Grange Farm 1.1 and the ‘Community of Limited Liability’

Earlier in this thesis I proposed a theoretical narrative on community that relies on a plurality of membership whereby contemporary society enables individuals to belong to a multitude of communities at the same time. This enables individuals to limit both their commitment and dependence on community - a sociological version of not putting all one’s eggs in one’s basket. Key to this narrative is the work of Janowitz (1952) and what he terms the ‘community of limited liability’. Janowitz’s theory on the ‘community of limited liability’ is pertinent to my findings from Grange Farm in that a) the fact that a number of Facebook groups existed did not limit residents to restrict their participatory actions to one place and b) the particulars of the medium allowed residents to engage at varying different levels depending on their capacity and comfort. This section will draw from the research findings to analyse how the residents of Grange Farm engaged in a nuanced form of participation that allowed them to pick and choose the level and nature of their involvement and what the implications were for horizontal networks and the effectiveness of community participation.

As an ever increasingly integral part of Grange Farm community life the community’s Facebook groups provided an outlet for limited expression, frustration with, and relief from social disenfranchisement. This situation allowed for involvement that by its very nature required less social and emotional investment and commitment. The evidence from Grange Farm documents how social media facilitated community participation presented as a low risk activity in regard to the levels of commitment required. For some, whilst participatory activity through the groups would range from simple observation through to regular and

sustained participation I have noted previously that residents needed to migrate their involvement and commitment offline for social change to occur. This presented a situation whereby residents were able to participate passively through comment and opinion but would at some point have to migrate their interaction offline. For others levels of active civic participation within the groups was limited to their involvement with situations or issues relevant and pertinent to themselves, their family or their individual circumstances.

My professional experience in the field of community development has taught me that a limited number of community-minded individuals will get involved in numerous, multiple participatory initiatives. This is backed up through previous research (Fung 2006, McComas et al 2006). The majority, however, will engage as and when a particular issue pertains to themselves and their particular circumstances. Similar trends were evident within Grange Farm 1.1. I observed how a group of young mums used GPPF to organise and facilitate a family coach trip. I also observed how local parents used GPPF to orchestrate a response to a school uniform and behaviour policy and how a group of aggrieved residents mobilised the GTE group to lead a campaign strategy for Grange Farm to remain as an estate. In each case what motivated these individuals to engage with the 'committee function' of their local Facebook groups was that they had a particular vested interest in the outcome of their involvement. Maggie alluded to this fact in her interview, explaining how she had kept out of the GPPF school uniform and behaviour campaign because her children had grown up so the issue did not concern her. She did however realise how GPPF had brought together those in a similar situation and provided a forum for mutual support within their shared issue.

She told me:

"To me it wasn't my position to speak because my children aren't there. I think the people that wanted something to happen were supported so they knew that when they were going to the School to complain there were going to be others there as well so they've got that safety net. It's that feeling of security. That you might feel this way about something in the community and that there

are others who.... so I do feel there is that bit more support.” (Interview with Maggie, February 2016)

For others, including a number of those residents with the capacity, skills, confidence and civic mindedness whom I interviewed, engagement within Grange Farm 1.1 was more holistic. These residents sought out opportunities for active involvement across a variety of opportunities and issues. Metallo et al (2020) bring Janowitz’s thinking up to date by suggesting that whilst civic engagement in local issues through municipal Facebook groups encourages issue specific targeted participation this seldom translates into wider civic participatory behaviours. What is apparent from my ethnographic research however is that the advent of neighbourhood Facebook groups had given residents a real or prospective choice that they did not have before.

Cllr Tasker’s community traffic survey (highlighted as a case study in the next Chapter) further highlighted a continuing trend running through the analysis of the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1. Despite the large memberships of the groups, most residents tended to actively engage (that is to do more than merely view or like the post in their Facebook newsfeed) with issues that were pertinent to themselves and their situation. Those actively involved in Cllr Tasker’s online traffic survey, through their own disclosures and admissions, were those who lived close to the affected area or were worried parents of children to whom the speeding traffic presented most danger. The way in which the campaign was orchestrated also supports the cross-cutting theme running through this research that community life exists in augmented and merged reality. With Grange Farm 1.1 there existed a balance of online and offline realities with participation transitioning fluidly and rapidly between the two.

The cumulative influence of the Facebook groups continues to grow as at the time of writing their membership has grown exponentially since the observational research was conducted. However the GTE Group has been left redundant. Although not officially closed the group is seldom participated in by its users, it has served its intended purposes of providing a community space for discussion and debate on the Town status debate and later a community voice of protest. In this way the experiences of Grange Farm echo the findings of McComas et al (2006) whose analysis of a more traditional form of civic participation, attendance at the public meeting, suggests that participation is based on the utilitarian premise of benefit rewards, whether individually or communally. McComas et al identify that benefits are born out of rational, status or relational incentives to the individual and that participation is continued or limited to these rewards being apparent. The decline in usage of GTE correlates with the decline in its relevance to community life in Grange Farm. When the main reason for the group was no longer there i.e. a final decision on the discussion issue had been made, there was little incentive for people to participate there - at least when there were other, more active, groups where status and relational incentives could be sought.

The neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm were organic in that they were a considered community response in the face of perceived disenfranchisement. Residents used the groups to defend their sociability but only in so much as they were utilising a new technology to do so, as the email, telephone and local newspaper did for previous generations (Putnam, 2000). The ease with which residents could dip in and dip out of their participation was facilitated by modern technologies where smartphones and to a lesser extent tablet and laptop computers provided an easy route to social and civic involvement.

Moreover, residents were able to select how they participated and with which topics or issues they participated. With such a wealth of content generated daily on GFR and GPPF the group members were able to be selective in what they engage in. I return here to the example of the new uniform and behaviour policy at the local community secondary school. My observations uncovered something unique about those who were engaged in the discussions on the issue. On the surface what was taking place was an ordinary demonstration of the 'agora function' as described in the previous chapter with group members sharing, discussing, and debating local issues of community concern however what is revealing is not what they were discussing or how they were discussing it but instead who was discussing it. Many of the names of commenters were unfamiliar to me as the observer - by this point I had become familiar with the regular participants and the same names would pop up over and over again, to the point where their comments and written opinions could be somewhat predicted. It was clear that the only group members that were participating in this particular discussion were parents of young people in the 11-18 age category. To those outside of this category participation would not bring about any clear benefits.

Furthermore, I observed how as active and engaged as these parents had been through the debate their engagement did not seem to be sustained in that I did not recognise the vast majority of these individuals participate significantly in other debates or discussions in GPPF at later stages of the research. It would seem that the ease of entry afforded through civic participation through neighbourhood Facebook groups was counterbalanced by a lack of sustained involvement. I propose that the reduction in commitment required to participate in this manner leads to an absence of sustained investment and the freedom to pick and choose one's involvement without further long-term commitment ties.

Another example concerned the closure of the last remaining Pub in Grange Farm, included as a Case Study in the next Chapter, and took place mainly in the GFR. Those who engaged in the debates and discussions around the Pub closure limited their engagement on GFR almost exclusively to this issue, hardly engaging in any meaningful way on anything else. McComas et al's (2006) quantitative health needs study of six distinct American communities suggested that citizens are much more likely to participate when the topic of concern is of direct relevance to them and it seems that this may be the case with this example from Grange Farm. I proposed in Chapter 2 that civic participation is not a zero sum game and that communities are characterised by fluid and fluctuating instances of engagement. Just as not everyone will not participate to the same level, as desired or indeed acceptable levels of participation differ between individuals, not everyone will participate in the same way or with the same issues. The old adage that people only get involved if there is something in it for them is just as accurate for social media civic participation as it is for more traditional forms.

Conclusions

The Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 were established and developed by residents themselves. As such, participation within the space was predicated on peer-to-peer relationships. Horizontal channels of participation were the lynchpins that bound the groups together. Participation in these digital spaces worked best when it occurred between residents themselves. This is not to say that vertical participation did not occur within the space and this will be explored further in the next Chapter. However the pre-eminent form of participation happened between residents themselves rather than with residents and local elites. Both social participation and civic participation were characterised by peer-to-peer participation; Socially these interactions were informal and served to build trust and kinship

between group members, civically they often revolved around the provision of mutual assistance.

The residents of Grange Farm who participated through their local Facebook groups had begun to attach meaning to their groups and to their participation within them. For the Grange Farm residents who participated it meant that for them participation had become achievable, where it either had not been or had been more difficult before. Participation through the Facebook groups was also viewed as a collective experience and something that brought local people together; It was a communal endeavour. Furthermore, they understand their participation as being mutually beneficial, an established yet informal system of self-help. Finally, they came to understand the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 as influential. Primarily as influential spaces in terms of relationships between themselves but also increasingly as spaces within which things can get done and differences can be made.

In order for horizontal participation to be effective, or to even occur at all, I suggest that a critical mass of membership must be reached in order that residents view their participation in the space as viable. My research indicates that if a neighbourhood Facebook group is able to have at least 25% of the overall population of the community, as was the case at the time of my research with GPPF and GFR, then participation can occur frequently and across all five of the identified 'participation parallels'. In the case of groups that hold much lower memberships in relation to the local population as a whole, as was the case with GFUA and GCG, resident participation in general was limited at best and at times non-existent. Interestingly my research has shown that where a neighbourhood Facebook group attracts a membership of less than 25% of the local population, 7% in the case of GTE, but still retains an active membership that participate on a regular basis that this participation does

not span all five 'participation parallels' but moreover is limited to one or two. The case of GTE shows that neighbourhood Facebook groups can evolve to serve single issues or deliver a single purpose despite not reaching a critical mass of the population.

As horizontal participation between residents occurred it acted to build bonds and kinship between them. Most often I observed this with the 'bowling alley function' whereby social participation was played out within the space and those residents who got involved felt closer to each other and to their Grange Farm identity as a result. Residents utilised the groups to develop and nurture kinship bonds between each other, not just because it was a nice and neighbourly thing to do but for practical reasons also. They used the groups to help them turn to each other in their hours of need, no matter how big or small the need was. They used them to organise themselves either to enable self-help or altruistic endeavours or to challenge, influence or support local authorities or policy makers. They used the groups to share information between each other. The grapevine had always been the quickest way to find out information in close knit communities; now the grapevine was to be even quicker in this purpose.

Finally, the Grange Farm Facebook groups provided a new space. A resident-owned and maintained space where social and civic interaction could be nurtured. Within this space local democracy was enabled and strengthened. However, whilst my research identified how neighbourhood Facebook groups could foster horizontal participation and develop stronger relationships between residents similar benefits were not so obvious in terms of developing effective vertical channels of participation, as will be explored in the next Chapter.

Chapter Seven – Discussion: A Work in Progress – Vertical Participation and the Limitations of Grange Farm 1.1

Introduction

The previous Chapter argued that the advent of social media facilitated community participation had, for some in Grange Farm, resurrected their social and civic involvement and for others greatly enhanced it. Where residents had capitalised on the functionality of Facebook groups as a participatory medium they were able to realise new ways to involve themselves in community life albeit with the recognition that in order for digitally mediated participation to achieve change it would often require complimentary offline activity.

This Chapter will explore where my findings had shown community participation through the Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook groups to be mostly ineffectual and impotent in enabling community action or securing the effective or meaningful social and civic participation of residents. Primarily, as the case studies in this Chapter will document, this was where the groundswell of increased resident involvement through the groups either was not directly linked into the official participation frameworks of local power elites or failed to capitalise on digital grassroots engagement by migrating it into the offline sphere. Whereas in the previous Chapter I outlined how horizontal participation had been revitalised and enhanced by the establishment of local community Facebook groups, this Chapter will outline how these same groups achieved limited success in enhancing vertical channels of participation.

Inclusions and Exclusions – The Limitations of Online Participation

My observations of community participation in Grange Farm, both online and offline, enabled me to develop an understanding that, despite previously mentioned benefits, Grange Farm

1.1 was far from a panacea for participatory decline and social decapitalisation. At the most basic level, the community's Facebook groups presented new opportunities for resident involvement but these were far from engaged with by most residents. Further to this, whilst the mechanics of Facebook-enabled community participation resulted in some positive outcomes (the ability to participate around busy or anti-social schedules, the ability for residents to engage on issues in real time and in a responsive manner, the ability to construct larger social and kinship support networks) a number of fundamental logistical challenges still beset the medium.

Who Can Participate?

An analysis of who participated in the neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 and to what level they participated suggests that at the time the research was conducted less than a quarter of the population of the Grange Farm Community were members of either of the two most prominent groups. GPPF and GFR represented approximately 24% and 18% of the Grange Farm population respectively. When one also considers that some group members, such as myself, would not have been actual residents of the area those figures are likely to be lower⁵.

⁵ The fact that both groups allowed membership from those living outside the boundaries of Grange Farm and an absence of relevant data freely available from Facebook regarding group memberships mean that obtaining a more accurate number is not possible.

Table 3 General Activity Data GPPF

GPPF General Activity	
Number of Grange Farm Residents (population), taken from SBC 2012 Ward Profile	5,764
Group membership as % of Grange Farm population	24%
Number of Active Users (at least 1 post / comment)	369
Active users as % of Group membership	26%
Active users as % of Grange Farm population	6%
Total number of original posts during research period	567 (ave 1.5 per day)

Table 4 General Activity Data GFR

GFR General Activity	
Number of Grange Farm Residents (population)	5,764
Group membership as % of Grange Farm population	18%
Number of Active Users (at least 1 post / comment)	268
Active users as % of Group membership	25%
Active users as % of Grange Farm population	5%
Total number of original posts during research period	524 (ave 1.4 per day)

Tables 3 and 4 above indicate that, whilst a sizable proportion of the community would claim membership of either or both groups, numbers of those users actively participating in the space was significantly less. *Active members*, defined here as those who had either contributed an original post or commented on a post made by others in either of the groups, constituted only 6% and 5% of the overall Grange Farm population respectively. Superficially

it would seem that those who used the Facebook groups to participate, either socially or civically, was a distinctly small part of the overall Grange Farm population. Compared with UK Government research (2020) that indicates that 26% of residents of deprived communities were involved to some extent into formal volunteering in the previous 12 months and 49% in informal volunteering the relatively small percentage of Grange Farm residents actively participating through the Facebook groups suggests that they may not have been engaging additional people in the community participation process – just providing a more accessible means of doing so.

My research and time spent as a community development professional in Grange Farm suggests that many of those who were the most active and regular online were also the same residents who were active offline - either through attending meetings or getting involved in campaigns or through formal or informal volunteering. This assertion was supported by the experiences of group regulars I interviewed; Maggie founded and chaired a local environmental group, Sophie and Alice had been involved in numerous community projects and Dave and Kevin proudly recounted to me how they would altruistically offer to undertake chores or gardening work for elderly neighbours and those in need within the community. Cllr Simon Tasker, himself a local resident, recalled some of the neighbourly and community minded activity he would engage in on a regular basis, stating:

“Yeah, I always help out my neighbours because they are of an elderly age, I think I’m the youngest in my block by about two generations. I mean, when we have bad weather I’ll go out there and grit all the paths late at night just to make sure they don’t slip or whatever in the morning. Luckily we have a grit bucket which is sort of next to my block, so yeah it’s quite handy to get all the paths and that gritted”. (Interview with Cllr Simon Tasker, March 2016).

The fact that those I interviewed as regular Facebook group participants were already civic or community minded individuals supports historic suggestions by Hampton and Wellman that “connectivity seems to go to the connected: greater social benefit from the Internet

accrues to those already well situated socially” (Hampton and Wellman, 2003, p.283). Whilst over the 12 months I would observe situations where hitherto unengaged residents would find new participatory agency through the Facebook groups as the field research progressed it became more and more apparent that the medium was being utilised to further involve those who were already engaged rather than enfranchising a large section of the community that for whatever reason did not or could not participate.

Echo Chambers and Power Vacuums

A situation was emerging in Grange Farm whereby some residents were engaging in a new dedicated space that they felt ownership of at the sake of forgoing engagement in traditional, more established spaces. They had, as Gaventa (2006) would put it, established new ‘created’ spaces through which community agency could be developed. At the same time some of those in positions of localised power refused to acknowledge this new space and steadfastly continued to recognise the established engagement spaces despite the fact that they no longer seemed fit for purpose. This had led to the creation of new power dynamics within the groups themselves based along grassroots, horizontal lines as opinion and proposed communal narratives battled for dominance within a relatively egalitarian space. Previous research by Burt (1999) suggests that social spaces are characterised by the viewpoints of ‘opinion brokers’ who:

“Carry information across the social boundaries between groups. They are not people at the top of things so much as people at the edge of things, not leaders within groups so much as brokers between groups” (Burt, 1999, p.1).

A similar situation had arisen within the Grange Farm Facebook groups as a number of key individuals, usually regular posters or group admins or those with access to community information, crafted the dominant narrative with the rest tending to fall in line behind it.

Through my observations I noted how the Grange Farm Facebook groups had evolved into echo chambers. There is a growing wealth of academic literature (Colleoni et al 2014, Goldie et al 2014, Quattrociocchi et al 2016) that proposes that wider social media participation takes place in a detached echo chamber, the result being a reasserting and consolidating of popular opinions. Whilst I propose that there were some social capital and community cohesion benefits to the absence of dissenting opinion within the groups this also raises questions around democracy and the suppression of minority views. Deviation from the collective opinion within Grange Farm 1.1 left the dissenter at risk of hostility, humiliation and at worst being ostracised from the group.

The most striking example of this was the GTE group itself. As I have outlined previously, as GTE quickly progressed from community sounding board to all-out protest group, it was clear the agenda of the group was to mobilise and express grievance at the Grange Farm Parish Council's proposals for town status. Occasional dissenting voices, those in favour of Grange Farm becoming a town or even those who would be so bold as to 'sit on the fence' and remain undecided in their views, were shouted down. The experience from GTE supports the notion that participation in such an echo chamber does not enable the expression of minority views and opinions and is reminiscent of De Tocqueville's (1835) warnings of the 'tyranny of the majority'.

Debate was often shutdown and prevailing opinions dominated with little or no space for discussion. There was a critical democratic issue of concern here although during my observations I did not get the feeling that this was recognised by the majority of residents themselves. Whilst it could be argued that the paradigm shift that occurred through engagement with social media, that of individually curated news, information and comment meant that the characteristics of an echo chamber would be inevitable, it can be dangerous

when considered as a primary method of civic participation. Interestingly, concerns about the influence of prevailing opinions upon the groups went unrecognised by some of the residents who were interviewed. Both Sandy and Maggie recounted how they would often feel that their role within the groups was to mediate discussion and inform the wider group membership when individuals may have posted what they believed to be incorrect or misleading information. Sandy proudly recalled:

“I quite often correct stuff and people who've put wrong stuff and I do let them know to make sure they know what they are talking about. I suppose the main thing is to maybe enlighten people and hope that they will think this is something we need to be looking into because it's just been the same few of us for years. And you hope that other people will do more because you do get tired.” (Interview with Sandy, March 2016)

Ironically as regular and influential participants both Maggie and Sandy, whilst recognising the attempts of others to steer community discourse and acting to prevent this, were in fact further contributing to the phenomenon.

I came to observe how residents with similar views on local issues would gravitate to the Facebook groups to share them. As the groups evolved there would be less and less challenge from those with other viewpoints as confirmation bias and the selective exposure to information shaped collective opinion. Moreover, these views would often be at odds with the direction of local policies or political decisions and whilst residents were able to share their views with each other there was little tangible opportunity for them to be able to change anything whilst they remained contained within that space; Although, as I will point out later in this Chapter, the political influence exerted upon those with power who did engage with the groups has not gone unnoticed in this research. Regular participators identified that they were willing to forgo the fact that participation within the space often led to unfulfilled outcomes because it was their space, where they controlled the agenda and the narrative.

My findings from Grange Farm 1.1 suggest that whilst opportunities for social and civic participation had been increased that, in the main, there was little opportunity to redress traditional imbalances of power and influence on a local level. Whilst localised opinion could be formed and strengthened, albeit through the solidifying of dominant community narratives, it was questionable the extent to which residents of Grange Farm adequately utilised their Facebook groups to effect political change and influence power dynamics?

My research suggests that whilst dialogue and discussion mediated through Facebook groups was effective in sharing information, forming public opinion and soliciting help from others, it did little to enact a devolvement of power to the local level. Both Arnstein (1969) and more recently Karatzogianni (2006) suggest that the goal of participatory structures and organised community action is a fair and equitable redistribution of power. Karatzogianni’s studies of internet and social media based protest groups proposes that their main objective is the acquisition of power, she states:

“The issue is that what these groups struggle for, in the final analysis, are traditional modernist concepts like democracy, participation, and above all, power.” (Karatzogianni, 2006, p.17)

Residents did look to their Facebook groups as a means of affecting change within their locality but primarily they sought to achieve this through coordinated self-help and altruism. The Facebook groups themselves were relatively ineffective at influencing local power elites and I suggest that this, in part at least, may be why they were not appropriately recognised by the Parish / Town Council or other local state actors.

As Grange Farm Parish / Town Council were not active within the Grange Farm Facebook groups if residents chose to channel their participatory efforts through the local Facebook groups they had to recognise that representatives from their first tier of local government would not be present there. For the most part those who were active in the group understood

this yet it did not stop them from engaging within the space. On one occasion early on in the fieldwork a newly co-opted Grange Farm Parish / Town Councillor did decide to join GPPF in an attempt to widen the community conversations of councillors and engage with local people. Unfortunately, this involvement was short-lived as she was quickly targeted by some of the group regulars who had little desire to engage her in dialogue on local issues instead preferring to direct an anti-Parish / Town Council rhetoric towards her. Putnam (2000) warns of the negative connotations of overly strengthened social bonds within community settings and how these can often serve to exclude or discriminate others. The above example supports this phenomenon: as the Grange Farm Facebook groups evolved into a resident-controlled space outsiders became excluded, often despite the obvious benefits that would result from their involvement.

Informal research conversations with Parish / Town Councillors indicated that they were fully aware of the Facebook groups, the discussions and dialogues the group membership engaged in, and the negative perceptions of the Council portrayed within them. I became aware that in some instances Parish / Town councillors were even members of the Facebook groups in order to better ascertain what was being discussed locally. Whether or not this awareness influenced their actions and decisions I was unable to properly ascertain, however, I suspect not. Albeit their membership was hidden by the use of a pseudonym. As well as the desire to avoid the negative and ill feeling present in the groups my discussions with Parish / Town Councillors clarified that they also did not recognise forms of social media participation as a legitimate form of engagement. Local political activist and GPPF regular Ozzy referenced this view in my interview with him expressing the paradoxical situation:

"I think that a lot of people will stick their two penneth in on social media and won't get out and vote next time there is a Parish Council election. That's just the way it is I suppose. It's what's easy and convenient to people."

And:

“At the moment you can rant all you want about the town status on social media but the Parish Council won’t recognise that they’ll only recognise official feedback.” (Interviews with Ozzy, March 2016).

In succeeding as a tangible space for resident interaction the Grange Farm Facebook groups were perhaps a victim of their own success. Their anarchic grassroots evolution had resulted in the lack of a considered approach as to the benefits of properly regulating and directing participation within the space to ensure balanced discussion that encouraged inclusion of different interest parties. As a result, dominant narratives prevailed at the expense of less popular or minority views and potentially useful and influential individuals were dissuaded from participating. Whilst the resident-led, bottom-up approach should be welcomed, the absence of any strategic consideration to linkages with established engagement structures and influential local political actors led to apparent power vacuums within the groups and a lack of plurality of opinion.

Issues with the Mechanisms of Participation

The tangible benefits brought about by the accessibility of digital participation and the recognition and ubiquity of social media as an appropriate community space were documented in the previous Chapter. Although these documented advantages are to be welcomed, the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 were not without issues with respect to the mechanics and practicalities of how residents participated.

Earlier in this thesis I proposed how Grange Farm 1.1 simultaneously occupied both online and offline realities, allowing residents to engage with community affairs. Within this augmented form of community participation, it was apparent that for some residents online participation through the Facebook groups brought with it a separation from events in the

offline sphere. The separation of participating residents from the accepted behaviours that characterised offline group interaction was witnessed in the overtly negative, hostile and prejudiced comments towards outsiders that was evidenced when an influx of comments were posted to both GFR and GPPF concerning the arrival of a group of Gypsy Travelers onto a nearby field. The same principle would apply with local criminals or those committing anti-social behaviour in the community whereby the perpetrators were sometimes referred to as lesser and almost sub-human.

In this respect my research confirms the arguments made by Hooper and Kalidas (2012) that suggest that as social media is not an immediate medium for interaction insofar that comments made to others are not received either immediately or within physical proximity to the comment-maker with the computer screen becoming a layer of protection for any behaviour that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable. As I have pointed out elsewhere however this factor was disputed in Grange Farm 1.1 as I tended to observe mostly pleasant behaviour between residents interacting in the space as, by their own recognition, residents may well bump into someone they had argued with online the next day in an offline space. The lack of immediacy or physical proximity argument forwarded by Hooper and Kalidas seemed less apparent when participants inhabit the same geographical space.

I noted how the mechanics of community participation via the Facebook Groups Platform could often limit resident involvement to its shortest and simplest form. Often during my observations it felt as though residents' posts and comments acted as a quick fix to placate desires to engage more fully. As I have argued previously in this thesis there could often be potential costs associated with more intense or committed participation and the 'light touch' approach to community involvement enabled by the community Facebook groups allowed

residents to appease their social and civic desires without bearing too much risk, commitment, time or energy.

Finally, there were times when degrees of formality, organisation or structure were needed in order for residents to achieve desired outcomes or bring about social change. This was perhaps best reflected by the fact that the ‘committee function’ was the participation parallel least engaged with by residents during the study. The Facebook groups lent themselves well to facilitating discussion and sharing information but could be cumbersome when required to facilitate detailed organisation and planning. As I point out throughout this thesis it was most often the case that participation had to migrate offline for this to happen. When this happened the results are encouraging but all too often this migration fails to materialize.

When Migration Offline Fails

Whilst ostensibly my research findings highlight how, for some, there was a familiar digital solution to participatory disenfranchisement this is strongly caveated with the realisation that the tangible benefits of this renewed civic participation were most likely achieved when complimented with significant offline involvement due to the physical limitations of the digital medium. This section will identify how residents failed to capitalise on increased engagement through the Facebook groups. Whilst I have so far pointed to the organising power of Facebook groups to instigate community dialogue and interaction, in the case of Grange Farm it often did not go far enough to make a difference in an environment where they were either not recognised nor offered practical solutions. For the Grange Farm Facebook groups to truly effect and enable change I argue that they could not operate solely in the vacuum of digital space.

For every instance where residents had used initial Facebook engagement to come together over an issue of community concern and extend their participation into the offline realm there was an instance where their initial Facebook dialogue around a particular issue remained just that. In the last Chapter I highlighted the case of the School Campaign as an example of where Grange Farm residents successfully navigated the augmented duality of online and offline spaces to bring about positive change. In this Chapter I will document the unfortunate case of the campaign to save the Grange Farm Hotel – a campaign that failed to break free from its digital beginnings.

Ultimately, involvement in civic activity in Grange Farm 1.1 was curtailed somewhat by the simple physical limitations of the medium. It remained the case that no matter how often group members log on, however they choose to characterise their involvement, their participation was limited to pixels on a screen. As Nathan Jurgenson states, “Social media plays a key role, but so do the physical bodies standing in the streets taking up physical space” (Jurgenson, 2011). At some point dialogue needed to turn to action and the individuals who were willing to express their views and have their say through social media needed to transcend realities and evolve their participation into the offline sphere.

This was compounded in Grange Farm where, for the main part, the agencies of community power were not present within, nor did they recognise the legitimacy of, the resident-led Facebook groups. This situation has implications for the third objective of this research which is an analysis of the extent to which participation within neighbourhood Facebook groups impacts on local polity and influences established local power structures. Participation within these resident controlled spaces struggled to achieve this when it remained isolated from the wider political landscape. The ‘surgery function’ of the groups enabled peers and a small number of elected or paid officials to pick up concerns or issues

and report these into local services to be actioned but often, when co-ordinated community action was required, residents failed in their ability to achieve this through digital means alone.

The frequent failure of Grange Farm residents to capitalise on grass roots participation facilitated through the Facebook groups meant that residents did not develop their own capacity potential to enact change in their local area. The groups would be beneficial in helping to share information between residents, allowing them to formulate opinion, but often this was where their involvement ended. Whilst the groups provided a platform for voicing opinions they seldom acted as an adequate forum for residents to develop the skills required to act on them. They helped organise residents around particular causes but confined within their digital walls this organisation was chaotic, disparate and unfocussed.

Within the confines of the Facebook group this situation served to further the belief amongst some residents that they remained powerless over developments in their own community. Yet in many cases the disinclination of residents to involve themselves offline with issues that they would eagerly discuss and debate online was down to them – as far as I am aware they were not always actively prevented from doing such and in some cases were actively encouraged. For example, on a couple of occasions towards the end of my field research a local resident posted a couple of posts to GFR to enquire if there were any plans in the pipeline for the local Skate Park.

Managed by the Parish / Town Council and situated on the School grounds, the Skate Park had been closed to the general public for a number of years due to maintenance and health and safety concerns. Both posts elicited over 100 follow on comments although none of them advanced community action beyond peer-to-peer dialogue. Posts tended to focus

around allocating blame for the current situation. Most believed the Parish / Town Council to be at fault for lack of investment in the facility. Other posts bemoaned the plight of local young people who had been deprived of a much needed facility. Had there been a proactive desire from those involved in the GFR discussions they could have organised a working party, lobbied local services and funders and generated a wide spread community case for investment in, and reopening of, the Skate Park. I propose the determining factor as to whether residents progressed their initial Facebook group participation into tangible offline action was the capacity, skills and confidence of the residents involved. In cases where this migration was successful, such as the response to the house fire or the campaign against town status or family fun day at the community centre, the residents involved were experienced in voluntary activity in their community. I would ascertain this fact through either my interviews with them or my prior knowledge of their previous exploits through my professional work in the area. In cases where migration offline failed such as the Skate Park discussions or the calls to save the Grange Farm Hotel the individuals involved in online participatory dialogue were inexperienced in, or had no desire to engage in, further offline community action.

Case Study – The Grange Farm Hotel

The ongoing saga of the closure of the Grange Farm Hotel ran throughout my field research as the members of the GFR, and to a lesser extent GPPF, discussed and debated the unfolding events - from initial announcement through to the ringing of the bell for last orders for the final time. Despite numerous, and often passionate, posts to the Facebook groups calling for the powers that be to step in and save their beloved drinking establishment these pleas became little more than just that, pleas. An attempt was made by Cllr George Frost through GFR for local residents to physically write to the Borough Council to lodge their objection to the removal of a historical covenant on the property. The removal of the

covenant would allow the building to operate for reasons other than as public house. Cllr Frost’s advice was a sensible approach that could ensure that the venue remained as a community pub. His request went largely ignored by those involved in the GFR discussions.

It seemed that residents were comfortable and content to air their views through GFR where no one with any power to change the situation was listening but neglected to turn this online passion into offline action. As a result, the Grange Farm Hotel closed, and the building converted into a supermarket without any recognisable opposition mounted by the local community. The apathy and squandered opportunity of the situation is perhaps best documented by Cllr Frost himself:

“It was a pity at the time that more residents didn’t get involved and by getting involved I mean writing to the authority because that’s what I asked them to do. I said look I know from past experience that when it gets to planning committee or when it gets to the executive member or the portfolio holder, the more residents that write in, not a petition but individual letters, the more weight it carries and the more grease it gives my elbow. I was disappointed that there were not enough that did that, in fact there were very few.” (Interview with Cllr George Frost, March 2016).

Residents could be as vocal as they liked through their own locally controlled Facebook groups where they felt most comfortable expressing their civic opinion; The case remains however that at the time this research was conducted there were few people with any real power or influence other than the local Councillor sharing that space with them. Moreover, these residents made little attempt to organise any substantial opposition to the proposals or develop any community-led plans. Had the ‘committee function’ been a more dominant feature of GFR it is entirely possible that these residents could have mobilised their passions for this community asset to secure its future as a public house through preventing the removal of the restrictive covenant or even, with community and external support, brought the pub into community ownership. Indeed, there are plenty of examples nationally (Pub is the Hub, nd) where communities have come together and organised organically in order to

save their community pub without the need to use Facebook groups as the main organising principle.

The case of the Grange Farm Hotel highlights more than any other example in this thesis that the ‘agora function’ of the community Facebook groups was beneficial in stimulating local dialogue and opinion forming. However, it also highlights the preference that some local residents would have for more passive, less committal participation through their Facebook groups. Without a determined and sustained effort from residents to either evolve dialogue into planning and organisation through the ‘committee function’ or to turn online discussion into offline action then the function was largely impotent.

Understanding Vertical Participation Channels in Grange Farm 1.1 – What Works and what Does Not

An overarching theme within the findings from my research in Grange Farm 1.1 is that the community’s Facebook groups were more likely to bring about tangible community benefits and social change when they capitalised on or fostered horizontal avenues of participation between residents. In Chapter 2 I presented a theoretical analysis drawn from previous research that outlines participatory networks within communities as bi-lateral in that they exist between kin and peers but also between ordinary folk and vertically with agents of localised power. This section will explore the dynamics of vertical channels of participation between the engagement of local people in their community Facebook groups and the local services that work on their behalf. I will present two case studies; one where vertical channels of participation had proved successful in achieving desired community outcomes and one where success was limited at best.

Within Grange Farm 1.1 a situation had arisen whereby, in the absence of a corporate presence of local authorities, voluntary sector agencies and housing associations, a small number of influential individuals occupied the space and acted as a link between residents using the groups to identify and discuss issues of community concern and local agencies with the power or responsibility to address them. This small group of individuals included, in its entirety, two of the three Borough Councillors (one of which was also the elected County Councillor for Grange Farm), a Coastal Homes Housing Officer and a handful of knowledgeable residents experienced in dealing with public authorities – several of whom, Sandy, Maggie, Sophie and Ozzy were interviewed for this research. I have termed this previously as the 'surgery function' of the Facebook groups due to the similarities with councillor or MP surgeries where constituents can bring issues in the hope of resolution.

These individuals, *go-betweens*, for want of a better term, would pick up resident issues from the public posts they had made, usually on GFR or GPPF. Most of the time they would uncover these 'surgery function' posts themselves due to their almost omnipresence in the groups however on a small number of occasions residents would tag them into posts to alert them to a situation where their knowledge and confidence were needed. They would act as a recognised and trusted vertical channel of communication between residents frequenting the Facebook groups and elected and paid official within local services, relaying information, feeding back updates on progress and ensuring that issues were resolved.

Frequently, the groups would be used as a public forum for those with issues and the *go-betweens* to discuss them further, allowing clarifications to be sought or other perspectives to be considered. Oftentimes other residents who had experienced similar issues would raise them through the groups strengthening any case that could be made. The *go-betweens* would usually offer to take up a resident's cause with the relevant authorities or provide

information, advice and guidance to the complainant in order for them to take up the issue themselves. Cllr Frost outlined how he often saw his role as an elected official within the groups, he recalled:

“I spent most of my life being a ‘go-between’, I used to be a trade union official, a shop steward, so that was exactly what I was doing there. I was a buffer between management and the membership, the workforce. This is a similar situation. You are there as some kind of buffer, hopefully to stop some of the shit hitting the fan, before it actually hits there. And that goes both ways because as Councillors if we see something posted on the group that’s gonna cause some friction we can have a chat with the officers before the crap hits the fan.” (Interview with Cllr George Frost, Conducted March 2016)

Whilst the presence and role of individuals acting as vertical participation links between the grassroots discussions online and services that were not present in that space is to be encouraged, this opened up a pertinent question on how the situation may be different were services present themselves.

New research in this research in this area (Giatoli et al, 2024) has progressed to reinforce my findings regarding the difficulties of establishing and maintaining vertical participation channels between groups situated at levels within local power structures. Whilst Giatoli et al’s study mainly concentrated on participation and social capital ties between mental health service users and other stakeholders (family, kin, employers, training providers, authorities etc) their findings correlate with my own research from Grange Farm in that demonstrate that through the help of ‘Community Managed Organisations’ acting as *go-betweens* social capital ties were more likely to be established or re-established along horizontal lines, for example, family and kin than they were along vertical lines, for example, with perspective employers or training providers. Giatoli et al state,

These findings, seen through a social capital lens, reinforce the current literature that service providers tend to target the types of social activities within the consumer group that strengthen bonding and horizontal social

capital [7, 26]. They were less focused on extending the support to activities that promote bridging, linking, and vertical social capital.

This is an area that I propose demands future participatory action research; Would residents welcome a corporate presence from local authorities and service providers or would dominant narratives and an echo chamber culture prevent any meaningful dialogue taking place?

My informal conversations with members of the Parish / Town Council uncovered that they were fully aware of the Grange Farm neighbourhood Facebook groups. Moreover, they were aware of the discussions that took place within them and the way that the Council was generally perceived. The Parish / Town Council believed the GFR, GPPF and GTE groups to be 'anti-Parish / Town Council' and occupied mainly by trouble causers. Whilst other authorities and service provider agencies I spoke to informally did not take such a confrontational stance towards the Grange Farm groups, or neighbourhood Facebook groups in general, it was clear that they were unsure how to engage with such anarchistic and unstructured forums, much less forums that were wholly resident controlled. Officers I spoke to at the local Borough Council understood the nature of the Grange Farm groups along with dozens of other similar digital forums across the Borough. There was a recognition that they were where local people engaged yet entrenched scepticisms of social media, a lack of officer time available to engage in prolonged dialogue through online channels and, I believe, an aversion to engage in a space where they did not control the agenda, ensured that the Borough Council, corporately at least, did not and still does not to this day have an official presence within Grange Farm 1.1.

Local Voluntary Sector organisations and community groups were less apprehensive about utilising the Grange Farm Facebook groups to facilitate vertical channels of participation

between themselves and local residents. As I noted in the last Chapter these organisations would make use of the 'noticeboard function' of the groups, in particular GPPF and GFR, to disseminate information and promote their events and services. Some would use the platform for one way communication whereas others would engage in dialogue with residents when the situation called for it. My observations of these interactions between local charities and community groups and the residents active within the groups outlined that residents were overall perceptive and welcoming of them choosing to engage in their space.

Overall, however, vertical lines of participation between grassroots residents active within the Facebook groups and agencies of local power remained tentative at best and largely non-existent at worst. The evolution of the Facebook groups as a place where locals could gravitate and express a desire to civically participate as opposed to through officially recognised channels mirrors research from Johannesburg undertaken by Benit-Gbaffou (2008) that documents how breakdowns of trust and power disparities between authorities and urban communities have led residents to favour self-controlled and self-regulated participatory space over official participatory frameworks. Despite the myriad of local consultation and engagement requirements placed on local authorities ensuring that local residents and communities are placed at the heart of decision making, during my time with the Grange Farm groups not one statutory consultation was channelled through any of the groups. This included the Parish / Town Council's own consultation on Town Status, the planning consultation over change of use for the former Grange Farm Hotel or the Borough Council's consultation on the future regeneration of the community from financial windfalls generated from the Lower Grangeside Development.

Case Study – The Traffic Survey

The first case study in this section documents an example from my research of where the 'surgery function' and recognised and respected vertical channels of participation between the Grange Farm Facebook groups and authorities were utilised successfully. It outlines a speed awareness and enforcement campaign on one of the major roads through the Estate. A number of posts had been made to GPPF by local residents living on a particular street in Grange Farm complaining about speeding traffic and appealing for action to be taken to resolve the issue. Conversations from these posts are highlighted in the transcriptions of comments below:

Pauline (original post): "So Cross Street sounds like Brans Hatch again tonight."

Kristen: "This has been ignored for years."

Lorna: "Beyond a joke! Bloody stupid and dangerous now (tags Cllr Simon Tasker into the post)."

Cllr Tasker: "I was supposed to be on Cross Street this evening with the Police and a speed gun. Unfortunately they had to cancel but hopefully it can be rearranged for Friday evening."

Kirsty: "I don't mean to be rude but you are not gonna catch unless you hide. I work nights and see so many cars and taxis speeding after 2am."

Whilst the conversation on the issue continued back and forth between residents commenting on the post, demonstrating the 'agora function', it was in a later GPPF post on the same issue that residents began to utilise the 'committee function' of the groups and establish vertical channels of participation between local residents and the Police:

Lorna (original post): "When is something gonna be done about the speed cars are going up and down Cross Street. Someone is gonna get killed!"

Nicole: "I'm just up past London Drive. They build up the speed coming off the Bypass over the hill. There is going to be another accident soon."

Lorna: "Maybe we should do a petition and get the local paper involved?"

Sophie: "A petition will do nothing. Ozzy and Simon (tags in Ozzy and Cllr Simon Tasker to the post) can you look into this issue please."

Cllr Tasker: "I will."

Dialogue within the follow on comments continued for another couple of days with many more residents joining the conversation and recounting instances of speeding traffic along Cross Street from their own experiences. Approximately 24 hours after the original post was posted a local resident asked the group to submit their names and addresses along with written details of any speeding incidences they had observed as she was compiling a report for the local Police. Cllr Tasker soon seized upon the moment to spearhead a local anti-speeding campaign:

Cllr Tasker: "I had a good conversation this morning with a local Police Officer and the good news is there are a few things we can do"

Laura: "people are right though there is going to be someone killed there soon."

Cllr Tasker: "I'm not having it that someone has to be killed there before something is done about it. Let's keep a log of any incidents of speeding, time, date, car model etc... and get this evidence to the Police. They can then put officers there with speed guns or mobile speed cameras."

Residents had begun referring to the street where the incidents were reported to have taken place as being 'like Brans Hatch' and that it 'won't be long until someone is killed'. In response to these requests for help a campaign was launched by local Borough Councillor Simon Tasker acting very much as the *go-between* between the residents in GPPF and the local Police. The campaign was planned and conducted through GPPF over a number of weeks during my field research.

Interestingly, in relation to recently published academic literature on the issue of crime and fear of crime, in terms of this case study the community concerns around speeding traffic, my findings from Grange Farm both correspond with and contradict the work of Piscitelli and Perrella (2017). Piscitelli and Perrella’s findings, derived from a quantitative study of a number of Canadian communities suggest that localised criminal activity, and indeed the fear of it, is more likely to enable vertical channels of participation between local residents and authorities. Conversely the same study also concluded that localised criminal activity actually weakened internal horizontal ties within communities. This finding contradicts my research from Grange Farm, generally and in particular with this particular case study, that argues that crime and the fear of crime actually strengthen horizontal ties within the community – within the medium of social media at least.

Following the online complaints submitted to GPPF Cllr Tasker utilised the group to report that he would be taking the issue to liaison with the Police and asked residents to keep an ongoing log of any speeding incidents by reporting them through GPPF. He could then take screen shots as evidence for the Police. Many residents, most particularly the ones that lived in the immediate vicinity of the street in question, acquiesced the Councillor’s request and duly kept a log of incidents alongside dates, times and descriptions of the offending vehicles as requested.

Cllr Tasker’s campaign was initially successful and provided the impetus for the local Police to site speed detection apparatus at the side of the road but not before a further request was made. This time it was the Police themselves, through Cllr Tasker, requesting local residents in GPPF made an appeal for volunteers to accompany Cllr Tasker and Police Officers at the side of the road and deploy speed monitoring equipment to further gather much needed

evidence of persistent speeding traffic. Although the bureaucracy associated with putting such traffic control and calming initiatives in place meant that things could often take a while to happen it is worth noting that some months after the issue had first been raised on through GPPF temporary traffic control measures were implemented on the road in question. I propose that this was largely due to the actions of the residents in GPPF in first highlighting the issue and Cllr Tasker in using the group to receive the complaints and orchestrate a response.

Through a mutually recognised *go-between* in Cllr Tasker, residents within GPPF had succeeded in furthering their initial lamentations with each other into tangible action on the ground. What had initially been a commonplace example of the ‘agora function’ of the groups was evolved into both the ‘surgery’ and ‘committee functions’ as residents were able to turn dialogue into delivery. Simultaneously the local Police, through the intervention work of Cllr Tasker, had managed to engage a concerned group of local residents, many of whom would ordinarily avoid any contact with the Police, in an anti-speeding operation for which local intelligence was critical.

Case Study – The Town Status Campaign

The second case study in this section focusses on a situation that has been highlighted previously. It documents where, despite considerable community discussion through the ‘agora function’ of the Grange Farm Facebook groups, and a co-ordinated, if not slightly chaotic at times, community response through the ‘committee function’ Grange Farm 1.1 failed to establish any meaningful or fruitful channels of vertical participation.

The ongoing town status saga would characterise a large proportion of my ethnographic observations during my 12 months in Grange Farm. The proposal put forward by the Parish

/ Town Council was simple; in order to take the fullest advantage of anticipated moves to devolve County and Borough Council budgets, assets and services to parish or town level, Grange Farm would need a seat at the table with other, larger Town Councils within the County. It was felt they would not be able to achieve this as a lowly parish. Therefore a name change for the area from parish to town was suggested to enhance the status of Grange Farm and legitimise the Council's involvement in future devolution discussions.⁶ Whilst this rationale was presented to myself through my informal discussions with the Parish / Town Council it was not communicated effectively to local residents and the general feeling from those active in the Grange Farm Facebook groups was that the proposals would be an expensive endeavour that served only to stroke the Councillors' egos.

As such the proposals were met with suspicion and opposition by the majority of local residents active through the local Facebook groups. On one such instance these debates were played out through the GTE group in the form of a discussion over the merits of Grange Farm having its own Mayor, as would be the case should town status be adopted. Group founder Dave pitched the question in the original post to the group “If Grange Farm is to be its own town, will it have its own mayor and council?” An informed resident responded, stating “Technically nothing will change. Our Parish Council will become a Town Council. We will still come under the Borough Council and there's no Mayor Yet. But we are officially a town”. A resident whose name and profile picture was unfamiliar to me entered the conversation, “So does that mean we are getting pound shops and phone shops everywhere then” he commented with what was either ironic humour or longing hope. The comment sparked off a healthy debate within the group as to what actually constitutes a town and if actually, judging by the amenities, services and retail experiences on offer locally, Grange

⁶ Legally and for administrative purposes there is no difference between parish or town. Similarly there is no legal difference between a parish council and a town council other than the name. Both have the same executive and representative powers.

Farm could legitimately be referred to as a town. Kevin offered his thoughts, “Towns have banks and pubs and clothes shops, the list is endless”. His close friend and original poster Dave supported Kevin’s claim, stating “It will be a town in name only. There will be no more facilities and we may even lose the Library. But I’m sure we will have a Christmas tree with a bulb. Where the rest of our Parish, Council Tax goes who knows”. As the conversation quickly progressed into the perceived misspending of the local Parish Precept comments turned to how residents could once again attend the local Council meeting. If to do nothing else then to at least show the Council that there were residents out there that were opposed to their plans and they would make themselves visible.

The opposition to the proposals reflected the dichotomy of civic engagement between the online and offline realities in modern Grange Farm. In order to consult on the proposed plans the Parish Council opted to deliver a strictly offline programme of community engagement and consultation. As expected, with no official representation from the Parish / Town Council in the Grange Farm Facebook groups, offline communications on the matter were posted there and subsequently discussed by interested local residents. Offline consultation on the proposals did however include a couple of public meetings and a paper questionnaire delivered to every household in the Parish – whilst the public meeting was well attended by Grange Farm standards (approx. 30-40 resident attendees) the paper questionnaire was not (total 41 respondents).

In contrast to the official consultation and engagement local resident and GPPF member Dave was prompted to set up a dedicated Facebook group to enable residents to engage in discussion and dialogue on the issue. Grange Farm Town or Estate - You Decide (GTE) became the default space for local people to comment on the proposals. Within the space of just a few months, as shown in *Table 5* below, the total membership of the group had grown to nearly 500 people making up an estimated 7% of the Parish population.

Table 5 General Activity Data GTE

Grange Farm Town or Estate You Decide? General Activity	
Number of Grange Farm Residents (population), taken from SBC 2012 Ward Profile	5,764
Group membership as % of Grange Farm population	7%
Number of Active Users (at least 1 post / comment)	94
Active users as % of Group membership	22%
Active users as % of Grange Farm population	2%
Total number of original posts during research period	95

Despite, according to Dave, being established to provide an open forum where discussion and debate around the proposals could take place, GTE quickly descended into a single focus online pressure group. GTE became an echo chamber where a single narrative dominated and any conflicting or opposing views were not welcome.

As the weeks and months progressed residents attempted to utilise GTE to orchestrate a community campaign against the Parish / Town Council's plans. GTE became the focus point of the planning and organisation, the place where strategy was discussed and formulated, options considered and volunteers recruited. At the same time as acting as an organizing tool GTE, through the 'agora function', captured local public opinion on the matter. In total nearly 100 different residents posted comments of opposition to the proposals in the group with many more keeping up to date on progress as observers. Examples of how GTE was utilised by residents included; organizing a local radio interview and recruiting residents to speak out against the proposals on it, promoting a local community meeting on the issue and encouraging residents to attend, and attempting to directly force a local referendum on the issue.

As was fast becoming a familiar situation GTE, and the wider Town Status Campaign, was not linked into any official participation or engagement frameworks. It was not recognised by either the Parish / Town Council or other authorities. As such valuable community opinion and comment was not harnessed in such a way that it could have been incorporated into the official consultation questionnaire. Whereas there was little that residents could feasibly do to force the Parish / Town Council to recognise the views of residents portrayed through GTE, they did attempt to migrate online discussions into offline action but with little effect. In this instance the Facebook groups were without 'teeth'.

Whilst some residents within GTE did encourage others to attend the community meetings on the issue organised by the Parish / Town Council it was clear that even this would not cause the Parish / Town Council to reconsider their position. Steps proposed by Ozzy, Maggie and others to instigate a local referendum on the issue ultimately failed to materialize. Whilst a community referendum would not be legally binding, a vote of 'no confidence' in the Council's plans may have promoted the authority to reconsider, and consult with residents further. Over time, participatory dialogue within GTE evolved into fatalism with many residents viewing the proposals as a fait accompli. When the Council ultimately made the decision to change the status of Grange Farm from a Parish to a Town many residents within GTE and the other Grange Farm Facebook groups were despondent. Whilst they had made their feelings clear through the groups as a local public forum their views had been ignored or, what is just as likely, gone unseen. Moreover, Grange Farm 1.1 had failed to capitalise on the tide of community opinion and prevent the change from taking place.

A Counter Argument to the Perceived Failure of Vertical Participation

The failure of the Community's Town Status Campaign, perhaps more than any other case study, specifically highlights the failures of Grange Farm's neighbourhood Facebook groups to forge and develop effective vertical participatory action. However, as was noted in the previous Chapter, the divide between effective vertical participatory action and non-effective vertical participatory action – in basic terms, are elites engaged within or influenced from this virtual space and if so does this lead to positive social outcomes – is not a 'zero sum game'. The Facebook groups, through their ability to influence public opinion and attracting a critical mass, acted as what Gaventa (2006) would refer to as a 'reclaimed' space of power and enabled Residents to exert what VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) refer to as 'power with'. It was neither one outcome nor the other. This sub-section briefly explores the rationale that the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 had utility in regard to enabling effective vertical participation.

Firstly, I document the case study of the School Campaign (highlighted in Chapter 5) as an example of where the horizontal kinship ties of a particular section of the community were enabled and emboldened by one of the Facebook groups so as to ultimately acquire successful participatory dialogue with a local power elite. As was detailed previously the engaging parties in this case were a group of local parents and the headteacher of the local school, a clear vertical power dynamic exists between both actors. Whilst said dialogue was not conducted via the medium, the medium provided the knowledge, impetus and organising power for residents to successfully engage vertically. Here we can observe how the Facebook groups had enabled residents to realise what Lukes (1974) refers to as 'non decision-making power' through the acquisition and yielding of accrued social capital. Put simply, the strengthening of trust, relationships and bonds between them and the ability to

project their collective issues and grievances into the community domain allowed them the influence to set and shape the agenda to suit their circumstances. They were able to manipulate the situation from one where the Headteacher and the School had ‘power over’ them to one where they had ‘power with’ them. In what seems, at first glance at least, a bizarre comparison, evidence from a study by Aida et al (2009) documents how individuals who maintain strong horizontal ties are more likely to have better overall dental health (quantified by identifying how many teeth an individual would have remaining at the age of 65) than those with weaker ties. It would seem both Aida et al’s and my own research has drawn a parallel between strong horizontal participation and improved social outcomes through vertical channels. Whilst vertical participation is not necessarily identified as strong in either study the fact that horizontal participation and social capital ties was present (through organisational utility in Grange Farm and through a range of other factors in Aida et al’s research) suggests that positive outcomes can develop between vertical actors rather than solely through kith and kin.

Secondly, I refer to Cllr Tasker’s Traffic Survey, referenced earlier in this Chapter as another relevant example of where the Grange Farm Facebook groups had proved effective in generating positive social outcomes along vertical lines. In the case of the Traffic Survey it was the identified phenomenon of individuals, usually but not always, in positions of local power acting as ‘go-betweens’ between vertical parties. Again, we can observe elements of how the Facebook groups, as ‘reclaimed’ spaces were able to influence the local agenda towards addressing their perceived needs through community opinion shaping. On a small scale at least, it could even be argued that the influence on community opinion exerted by the Facebook groups during the Traffic Survey could constitute a form of what Lukes (1974) refers to as ‘ideological power’. Cllr Tasker with his mandate of elected office and clear and established links with the local police was able to facilitate an effective ongoing dialogue

between a grassroots group of concerned active on GPPF and local Police Officers who were not active within the digital space. As I have outlined throughout this Chapter the concept of informal ‘go-betweens’ has been vital to ensuring information and participation flow along the vertical axis.

Thirdly, in considering the paradox between effective and ineffective vertical participation between the Grange Farm Facebook groups and local power elites, it is worth mentioning, as has been alluded to throughout this thesis, that there were isolated cases of Third Sector officers such as housing officers or charity workers. Whether or not housing officers fully qualify as ‘power elites’ is perhaps a discussion for another day. However, they do deliver services to the residents of Grange Farm and in that sense there exists a power imbalance between the two. Examples illustrated through this thesis have documented rare cases where such officers have engaged the ‘surgery function’ of the groups to interact directly with resident concerns and take on case work. However, these were few and far between and far outweighed by ‘surgery function’ activity negotiated through recognised ‘go-betweens’. I suggest that the ‘Surgery Function’ had begun to make inroads into addressing certain power imbalances in Grange Farm. But there was still a long way to go. Through practical assistance to everyday problems the ‘Surgery Function’ contributed to the development of local social capital between Residents. This enabled them to yield a certain level of non decision-making, or invisible, power.

As is also documented earlier in this thesis the ‘noticeboard function’ to advertise local events services and projects (indeed Chapter 5 outlines such cases were promotional material posted to the Facebook groups) by organisations stimulated follow on engagement posts from residents of the groups was used to great effect by local Voluntary and Community Sector organisations. Whilst this is a less engaging form of vertical participation

between service providers and residents it represents effective vertical communication nevertheless.

Lastly, the final section of this Chapter will progress to elucidate on just how influential, and powerful, the Facebook groups could be in Political sense. The final section of this Chapter documents how *some* local politicians such as, for example, Councillors Tasker and Frost have come to capitalise on some of the various Grange Farm Facebook groups to both build a political base and reach out their communications and oftentimes campaigning to a large proportion of the community. In ascertaining the level to which vertical participation had been successful or not this also raises the pertinent question of ‘power elites; are they engaged within the space or not?’ As with ascertaining vertical participation via the Facebook groups, the answer here is both yes and no. However, whilst there are a small number of those who hold local power, either through elected office or through employment, many of which have been referenced within these pages, the situation still remained that the majority of power elites were not active within the space.

Limitations of the New ‘Agora’

In the previous Chapter I outlined how the ‘agora function’ of the Grange Farm Facebook groups offered new opportunities for community discourse; enabling space for the sharing of ideas and opinion and facilitating the development of public opinion on a local level. This section extends that narrative to its logical conclusion and identifies the ways in which the ‘agora function’ was limited in utility, save for its more obvious therapeutic benefits. Research undertaken in communities in Italy and Spain (Metallo et al, 2020) suggests that social media participation does not directly correlate with offline civic participation and whilst the ‘agora function’ of Grange Farm 1.1 provided new and accessible space for community

discussions it would oftentimes fail to translate these into meaningful social action or a furtherance of civic engagement.

I have explained how the ‘agora function’ of the Facebook groups had facilitated a space for community opinion to be formed in an environment where physical space to enable this was in decline. On many occasions however this would lead to the dominance of majority opinion at the expense of balanced discussion or the consideration of minority viewpoints. As I have noted earlier in this Chapter, deviation from accepted group opinion would often meet with objection and rejection. Burt (1999) has suggested how social groups will trend towards confirming with the viewpoints of a small number of ‘opinion leaders’ who are often those with easier access to information. Burt’s findings are updated by Nunes et al (2018) who present research from the business and marketing world to suggest that the social media realm is characterised by ‘digital opinion leaders’ who generate persuasive messages that can change the attitudes of followers and I would argue are consistent with what Lukes’ (1974) notion of ‘ideological power’. This phenomenon was supported through my conversations with Maggie, Sandy and Alice, all three regular participants of either GPPF or GFR, who would confidently proclaim that they believed one of their roles within the groups was to inform others of the facts (as they saw them) and correct people when they posted what they believed to be false information.

I propose that the dominance of accepted majority opinions would act as a demonstrable deterrent to others who may wish to present opinions contrary to the collectively accepted narrative. This in turn acted to negate some of the democratizing and enfranchising qualities of the Grange Farm groups. It may also warrant further investigation as to the extent that this led to a significantly smaller number of active group participants than group members; residents were happy to observe but less likely to put their heads above the parapet with

opinion they felt may be unpopular. The situation in Grange Farm confirms historical research by Janis (1971) that suggests a common occurrence in group behaviour is for individuals within the group to maintain cohesion and morale by conforming to collectively accepted normative opinion at the expense of diverging opinion. Janis states:

“There are numerous indications pointing to the development of group norms that bolster morale at the expense of critical thinking. One of the most common norms appears to be that of remaining loyal to the group by sticking with the policies to which the group has already committed itself” (Janis, 1971, p84)

The ‘agora function’ of Grange Farm 1.1 facilitated the development of a number of popular, dominant, and largely untested narratives. As these narratives were developed through ongoing participatory dialogue they became reinforced and began to resemble what Janis (1971) termed as ‘groupthink’. These narratives would tend to be held by the more active and vocal members of the groups. They included; the majority of Grange Farm residents were law-abiding citizens and therefore any crime or anti-social behaviour must be committed by outsiders, Grange Farm has been historically disadvantaged in the provision of Public Sector services it receives, and that the new Lower Grangeside housing development would not bring any positive benefits to local people, only outsiders. Social capital and community cohesion aspects aside, I argue that the consequence of the ‘agora function’ of the Grange Farm Facebook groups was to further cement division between local residents and policy makers as opinion became entrenched and compromise became less possible.

The ‘agora function’ of the Grange Farm Facebook groups provided access to engagement on local discussion and debate yet my observations suggest that oftentimes participation failed to advance beyond this. With some notable exceptions the majority of activity within the Grange Farm Facebook groups could be classified as passive. Involved residents sought

to comment and reflect on community affairs rather than to actively change them, at least through meaningful participation through vertical channels.

Interactions characterised by more active behaviour such as 'committee function' and 'surgery function' posts tended to occur less frequently and when failure to pursue more active participation potentially resulted in perceived negative consequences. However, in general, where the 'committee function' and 'surgery function' did yield success was through peer-to-peer horizontal lines of participation rather than vertical lines with power elites. To illustrate this, I point to a number of examples where active participation through the groups was deemed necessary by some local residents; facilitating a petition against an unjust school behaviour policy, organising the campaign against town status, the ongoing struggle to save the local Library and the organised community response to assist a young family affected by a house fire. In the above scenarios residents deemed inaction to bring about negative consequences that as a community they were not prepared to accept.

Contrast these examples with the passive response generated on GFR to the closure of the Grange Farm Hotel. My interviews with both Maggie and Ozzy had confirmed what I already suspected through my previous professional experience as a community worker on the Estate; That the overwhelming majority of residents did not patronise the Pub. They perceived it to be a generally unwelcoming and unpleasant environment. To most residents within GFR, mounting a campaign to save Grange Farm Hotel was not considered a priority. For the small group of pub regulars discussing the issue within GFR, their participation consisted of discussing or complaining about the closure with others within the group and certainly did not become active enough to be considered any real campaign.

One of the central arguments of my research shows is that community participation in Grange Farm was evolving into an online phenomenon. What the findings outlined in this Chapter, in particular, uncover, are the various ways Facebook Groups Platform was used as a substitute for offline forms of social and civic participatory activity, and the extent to which these strategies were able to achieve their aims. This poses the question of what relevance physical community space will hold for our understandings of contemporary community. More than any other ‘participation parallel’ the ‘agora function’ stands out as unique in that it was an online representation of discussions, debate and dialogue that traditionally occurred within offline community spaces or third places.

I argue that the representation of third places through my research into the ‘agora function’ is paradoxical in nature; the case of the Grange Farm Hotel perfectly illustrates this paradox. The case of the Grange Farm Hotel illustrates the major ‘chicken and egg’ question of my research; are the traditional ‘third places’ of Grange Farm 1.0 in decline because residents have migrated these spaces online? Or have these spaces migrated online, and in the case of Grange Farm, into the community’s local Facebook groups, due to a pre-existing decline in offline community space?

As I identified in Chapter 3, Grange Farm 1.0 had become characterised by a distinct lack of neutral and informal physical community space. My time spent in the community felt like it was little more than a collection of private places with little in common to bond them as a whole. The Grange Farm Hotel was one of the last physical places in the community where residents could associate in an informal and unstructured manner. From my observations in GFR it was clear that for a small number of residents the Grange Farm Hotel held a place in the hearts of a number of residents. Whilst many were happy to admit it was a bit rough

and ready, for some, it was their space and it was a key institution within their community.

Ray Oldenburg describes the traditional English pub as:

“What the English call a local, and it is always as good as the neighbourhood in which it is located—no better and no worse, except that it makes a real neighbourhood out of what might otherwise be nothing more than strangers who happen to live near one another.” (Oldenburg, 1989, loc:59%).

The Grange Farm Hotel, like other traditional English pubs, was a microcosm of the community it served. Its patrons drawn from the cross sections of the community and the conversations and discussions that take place over a drink or two will no doubt often revolve around local news and issues. Its closure brought about a participatory as well as a social vacuum within the Grange Farm community - a vacuum that would be filled, to some extent, by the local Facebook groups.

I have constructed a narrative that documents how community members had transported their civic duties and desires away from the traditional places of neighbourhood association and into the social media realm and have evidenced this with first hand empirical evidence from a typical everyday neighbourhood community. There is an argument to suggest that the very existence of the Facebook groups function, with its ubiquitous standing, ease of use and convenience factor, was a contributing factor to a decline in established and traditional forms of community participation, both social and civic. Hampton and Wellman (2003), writing in the pre-Facebook era, propose that the internet has allowed individuals greater choice and freedom of communication and the occupation of their free time. Putnam (2000) associates desocialising technologies such as the television and the telephone with the birth of the Baby Boomer generation whom he credits with bringing about the decline in civic and social participation, but in reality the introduction of each new technology since the Industrial Revolution (print press, motor car, aviation, radio) has had its part to play in detaching individuals from their community environment whilst also allowing them to make

new and different types of connections. In the competition for people’s attention, activities in the public sphere are forever pitted against the aforementioned private ones. It is suggested by Hampton and Wellman (2003) that internet use “exacerbates privatism with time spent in front of the screen undermining connections to one another and to communities” (p.284). Whilst my research recognises the extent to which contemporary internet use has evolved to provide digitised social space and an avenue to foster new connections, in a practical sense my findings from Grange Farm do demonstrate how social interactions conducted in this way can further exacerbate privatism and contribute to the decreasing the relevance of shared physical space.

Lack of Recognition and the Limitations of the ‘Surgery Function’

The residents of Grange Farm have historically been suspicious of interactions with those in positions of authority, and sometimes of those authorities themselves. As a result, some had opted to disengage with traditional power structures either in the belief that any attempts to engage would be fruitless or that doing so may be a further detriment to their own personal circumstances. Social media and the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 had, for some, become the space they turned to when wanting to address a particular grievance or issue.

Cllr Frost summed up the feeling on the ground in his interview with me, stating:

“I think going back to the people in Grange Farm, they’re suspicious of authority when they fill in a consultation form they are extremely suspicious of what’s gonna happen to it and so on and so forth so it doesn’t surprise me in the least that more people are comfortable on social media expressing their views.” (Interview with Cllr Frost, conducted March 2016)

A number of regeneration and civic renewal programmes of the last 20 years have espoused a resident-led, or ‘bottom up’ approach advocating a resident centred approach to policy formation. Such approaches have sought to engage civic participation to fulfil a purpose and they have ultimately operated within a framework established by those with localised power.

Recognition is given to the importance of resident involvement in the policy formation process but there still remains a clear vertical line of demarcation between those with power and those without. Whilst my research evidences the power of the Grange Farm Facebook groups to engage residents in participatory activity it also highlights the stark reality that, save for a few notable exceptions, those whose power they seek to influence are not present within the space. Traditionally participation frameworks associated with large scale regeneration programmes or community renewal have established participation as a means to an end. A way of achieving socio-economic outcomes that are in line with the needs, desires and knowledge offered up by local people. I claim that the Grange Farm Facebook groups have been established with the expressed aim of facilitating participation as an end in itself. As such the 'surgery function' was often observed as largely non-existent or, where it existed, largely impotent.

There existed a dichotomy between the space where citizen participation occurred and the institutional responsibility to engage with it. Although the involvement of a couple of local councillors and some professionals was slowly beginning to change the situation representation from local power brokers and power holders remained small. With authorities and service providers largely absent from the Grange Farm Facebook groups residents had become reliant on using them to solicit assistance from more knowledgeable or competent peers or through recognised go-betweens and as such desired outcomes were not always evidenced or were less efficient or more time consuming. This would lead to much of the 'surgery function' activity being resolved through the principles of self-help with the residents acting to help and give advice to their peers.

I propose that for residents to raise community issues through more established or traditional channels (for example emails or phone calls directly to authorities or raising concerns at

local community meetings) may take more time and indeed more effort but ultimately would provide a richer dialogue and was much more likely to be recognised by agencies and service providers than posts on social media. GPPF regular Ozzy reflected how a number of those who participated in the groups felt, that their participation was valuable and served a multitude of purposes but took place in a bubble that was not immediately recognised by the power structures and institutions through which change could be effected.

In the instances I observed residents attempting to redress the local lack of participation in community meetings through a blended online and offline approach the lack of recognition and practical difficulties of the medium rendered it futile. In order to counteract traditionally low resident attendance at Parish / Town Council meetings GFR attempted to involve more people by live posting updates and decisions via a chosen representative. As previously noted these individuals would observe the meeting proceedings and update others in the group who would then discuss online what was being discussed by the Council.

This live posting of community meetings reflected a strange and contemporary dichotomy whereby promotion of the meetings, by group postings of the agenda, and continuous live postings of proceedings and decisions in real time would foster discussion around the issues with some interesting, well thought through, and pertinent suggestions put forward. This valuable engagement, however, would be put to no good use as it was not officially recognised. Only physical attendance at the meeting and adherence to the Standing Orders of the Council would allow for that. As such another potential vertical channel of participation between residents at the grassroots and local policy makers was not capitalised on.

When Politics gets Involved

From the outset of the research, it was clear that the social media space of Grange Farm 1.1 had become politicised in both party political and 'small p' respects. As a key destination for social and civic participation for Grange Farm residents it was perhaps inevitable that politics would become involved, just as it does in more traditional or recognisable spaces of community participation. Politics would categorise and cut across all five of my identified 'participation parallels' and play a key part in both the 'agora function' and 'committee function' as residents utilised the Facebook groups to attempt to shape the community around them and local politicians sought to capitalize on the new participatory environment for political influence.

The Politics of Power in Grange Farm 1.1

In his 2018 book on the nature of politics Eijk presents us with a theory that power is central to a universal understanding of politics. Eijk was suggesting that politics at all levels and variants is the dissemination, distribution and organisation of power and power relationships. Through discussions of power detailed in Chapter Two I have documented the importance that theories of power (Lukes 1974, VeneKlasen and Miller 2002, Dowding 2006, Gaventa 2006) hold for our understandings of community participation. The story of Grange farm 1.1 was one of apathy, of a lack of confidence in, and mistrust of, traditional avenues of involvement and participation. A situation whereby residents had become socialised into accepting the perception that there was little to no point in them engaging in civic participation. That spaces of local power and influence were either closed to them or they were invited into them on a piecemeal or tokenistic basis. As such they had reimagined their own community involvement and recreated new, digital, spaces within which to engage.

From the outset my research had identified the key role that certain local elected representatives played in brokering power relationships between local residents and local authorities and service providers. This was to be a pivotal part of their involvement particularly within GFR and GPPF.

Ostensibly, it seemed that the sheer weight of numbers and reach involved ensured that for some local politicians engaging with the Facebook groups was an attractive proposition. Of the three local councillors elected to represent Grange Farm at Borough and County Council two were actively engaged in the local Facebook Groups. The other Councillor rejected social media as a viable means of engaging with his constituents and from resident comments overserved on social media and opinions gained through speaking face to face with local people it is my view that his standing in the local community was severely impacted through this absence. Residents wanted their elected representatives to be visible and the Facebook groups had for many become the place to be seen in. Likewise, the Grange Farm Parish / Town Council refusal to engage online severely impacted on both credibility with local residents and their effectiveness.

For local politicians to be absent from the Grange Farm Facebook groups and in particular GPPF and GFR meant being absent from the location of much local political dialogue and an accessible means of engaging with local residents and electors. It should be of little surprise then that for some local politicians such as Cllrs Frost and Tasker it was viewed as crucially important for them to be active within the space. Perhaps, just as important was the need to be seen as active.

Was their involvement a means to an end or were there wider power and influence factors behind it? With regard to power and influence there was an interesting paradox at play. Whilst on the one hand Grange Farm residents were ambivalent to their creations, viewing them as an acceptable sounding board for their frustrations but not a viable means for them to wrestle power back from local elites. On the other hand the reach of the Grange Farm Facebook groups meant they constituted a significant power base for local politicians. Residents themselves would identify their participation as a form of therapy if we are to use Arnstein’s (1969) Ladder of Participation, and more recent considerations by Lauria and Slotterback (2020) as a guide. They told me of how they posted to the groups to vent frustration at some of the decisions made that affected their community and to call out those they believed to be responsible. All the while under the tacit understanding that their words could possibly be in vain. Sandy reflected upon this in her interview with me. She claimed:

“I think it does help (commenting on community issues in the Facebook groups) personally. I mean it probably doesn’t achieve anything in the long road cos us just us Grange Farm folk that are commenting but I think it helps, yeah. It helps. Its stops us being frustrated” (Interview with Sandy, March 2016)

Maggie was slightly more optimistic:

“Sometimes it good to see that you are not the only one who is going through something. And it is good that some councilors like George (Frost) are on there to listen and take on board your concerns” (Interview with Maggie, February 2016)

I propose that in the instances where local politicians fully embraced the medium as a legitimate engagement tool, as was the case with Cllr Frost and Cllr Tasker, that it constituted a form of partnership between the citizenry and their elected representatives and the basis of a positive working relationship. My concern is that most other public officials (paid or elected) neglected to do so.

The political power Dynamic of the Grange Farm Facebook groups worked both ways. Savvy Councillors such as Cllr Frost and Cllr Tasker were duly aware of the fact that their involvement in the group was beneficial to the consolidation of their power and position, and ultimately re-election hopes. Local residents were also all too aware that their Facebook groups could be used as a powerful tool to remind their elected representatives that their position existed to serve the community. Through a process known as 'tagging', residents utilising the 'surgery function' of the groups were able to alert councillors via push notifications that they had used the group to call their attention to a particular issue. Due to the public nature of participation through the groups the fact that a Councillor had been tagged meant that everyone could see and was aware of this. Failure to act or even respond would not be looked upon favourably by the wider community and whilst the Councillors themselves did not state that they needed to keep on top of comments and messages because of this, the residents certainly understood it. Sophie cheekily explained to me how her and fellow administrator Lorraine would time the responses from both Councillors following the posting of particular issues to GPPF. Even when a Councillor needed to respond through private message, a public response to inform they had sent a private message was also posted to notify the original complainant, and more importantly everyone else, that they had not neglected the issue. When local politics was played out through social media an increase in the openness and transparency of elected representatives was an added benefit.

The fact that the actions or inactions of elected representatives active within the Grange Farm social media space were on full display and open to scrutiny by local residents had led to a number of more savvy residents using the Facebook groups to play both active Councillors off against each other. This was more apparent in the early days of my research before GPPF, GFR and GFUA developed distinct party political allegiances. As Sophie

mentioned to me in our interview “I tag them in both and I like to see who responds quickest.” (Interview with Sophie, March 2016).

Pick a Team

I have documented in previous chapters how the Grange Farm Facebook groups maintained distinct and separate memberships. There was of course some crossover with some individuals retaining membership of a number of the groups but for many there was an active loyalty to one particular group. Nowhere was this more apparent than with the two main groups in this study GPPF and GFR. As both main groups incrementally diverged into separate and distinct memberships so too did the group’s political leanings and, importantly, political influencers.

In Grange Farm Facebook had become a dominant political landscape and battleground. Civic participation moving into the social media space had necessitated that local politics does the same in order to capitalise on the newfound spheres of influence. At the time of my research the two most supported political parties in Grange Farm were the Labour Party and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and as such this was reflected in the ballot box with two of the three elected Borough Councillors and the County Councillor representing the Labour Party and one Borough Councillor representing UKIP. This political landscape would become reflected in the membership and political leanings of the groups.

The GFR group maintained a distinctly pro-Labour party culture. Many GFR members posted pro-Labour Party or left of centre political posts. Central to this groundswell of support was Cllr George Frost who situated himself firmly in the middle of the group dialogue and discussion. In his own words he describes his preference for the GFR group:

"Well I have been involved with Grange Farm For Real for the longest period of time. (I have been involved with) the Grange Farm Past Present and Future on and off and when I say on and off it's because whenever I went on there, and I had a word with the administrators about this, it was causing friction, political friction, unnecessarily. There was comments being made which I didn't think was appropriate. Whereas the Grange Farm For Real page I feel that you were able to give your opinions without being shot down in flames and crucified." (Interview with Cllr George Frost, March 2016)

As such GFR would become the place where Cllr Frost would update on his Council casework, promote local causes and charities he supported and actively campaigned and politicised. Conversations I had with Sophie and others identified that Cllr Frost had used GFR as a core part of his election campaign prior to being elected onto the Borough Council in May 2015. My observations of GFR evidenced the level of support for the Cllr among group administrators and regular contributors such as Sandy.

Whilst GFR evolved into a distinct sphere of influence for the local Labour Party and a digital 'power base' for Cllr Frost, representatives and supporters from the other main political party in Grange Farm, UKIP, were consolidating their influence within GPPF. With UKIP Ward Councillor Simon Tasker and local UKIP activist Ozzy active as group administrators and other Grange Farm residents with similar political views gravitating to the space, GPPF acted as a conduit for UKIP political action in Grange Farm. Ozzy explained to me how he saw the political divide of Grange Farm and the community Facebook groups:

"You see Grange Farm is actually quite politically divided between Labour and UKIP. UKIP less so because George Frost has actually got quite a big following. Even in the social media, if you look at Grange Farm For Real.... During the election we called it Grange Farm For Frost because it was pro-Labour, pro-Labour, pro-Labour. Anything..... he's got quite a strong following and he was always having sly digs at Simon (Grange Farm UKIP Councillor) on social media about various issues and whenever George posts something he is always very self-promoting I find and whenever Simon does something or has something in the paper the same people are always very critical towards him. I think to an extent that extends not just on social media but locally itself." (Interview with Ozzy, March 2016)

Despite the obvious political leanings of GPPF that were apparent through my observations, group founder Sophie was eager to stress that the group was in no way political. Prominent members of GFR, including Cllr Frost would say the same of their group. Ozzy and Sandy, a long standing GFR regular would also reference this in their interviews, their views included:

"It's very Labour-centric is Grange Farm For Real, maybe because half the UKIP supporters in Grange Farm have been banned off it. Any form of debate that disagreed with George Frost or disagreed with Labour would be gone. That was it, just shut down, you're gone. 'Oh but we don't promote any political party', yeah but you've allowed everything that is pro-Labour, as soon as you see anything that isn't what you agree with you're gone. So that was that. Past Present and Future was more on the fence during the election. The admin was definitely on the fence, Sophie was, but I find that George's very self-promoting on Facebook which is one of the things I don't like about him." (Interview with Ozzy, March 2016).

"I've taken myself out of the Grange Farm Past Present and Future... Grange Farm For Real is friendlier. We can, more often than not, we could have good debates without it being your idiots and your I'm right and you're wrong. I don't go on it as much now as I've blocked a couple of the main ones who are doing that so it makes it difficult although you can get the gist of what they've wrote by the comments that people put in response." (Interview with Sandy, March 2016)

Whilst political battle lines were being carved out in the digital space, not to be outdone in this new theatre of local political influence the Liberal Democrat's would also establish their own 'none political' Facebook group. Grange Farm For Us All was established after GPPF and GFR and was created by local Liberal Democrat activists in the area with a similar *raison d'être*, albeit one that they could control. GFUA would never really take off as a space for community participation in the same way that GPPF and GFR did, perhaps through the lack of influence that the Liberal Democrat's had in Grange Farm or perhaps because that community space had already been occupied and somewhat saturated. It seemed there was only so much participation to go around and residents were more likely to engage in the spaces that were already reasonably populated. Nevertheless the group was sporadically

used by a few residents, mainly those who shared posts and interactions across multiple groups.

Case Study - Cllr Frost and the Street Surgeries

Previously a novice, by his own admission, with new technology including social media participation, it was Cllr George Frost that I observed truly embrace the Facebook Groups Platform as a viable space for community participation and his role and duties within. In his own words he describes his initial naivety and indifference towards the Grange Farm groups:

*“I had my concerns, well not concerns but wondered what it was gonna be like because I’d never been on one, I’ve never been really computer literate it’s something that’s come along in the last three or four years with me.”
(Interview with Cllr George Frost, March 2016).*

As well as recognising the utility provided by the Grange Farm Facebook groups in efficient community engagement and casework it was Cllr Frost who most fully grasped the augmented nature of community engagement in Grange Farm 1.1. My discussions with Cllr Frost uncovered that he had his finger on the pulse of community participation in Grange Farm and was determined to engage with residents in the spaces that they occupied and felt comfortable in. I have proposed that social action was best achieved in Grange Farm 1.1 when initial engagement and participation was established in the online space of the Facebook groups and subsequently migrated into the offline sphere for action. In developing his weekly street surgeries Cllr Frost had fully grasped how to best utilise the augmented nature of participation in Grange Farm 1.1 for political gain.

Every weekend Cllr Frost would post a message to all the Grange Farm Facebook groups stating which street or streets he would be conducting his Street Surgery in the following Monday. The Street Surgeries would involve the Councillor posting a postcard through each

letterbox on the street which stated that he would be returning to that street later in the evening and if they had any local issues or concerns they wanted to discuss with him to place the postcard in their window. Ostensibly this unique method of engaging with his Ward Constituents was primarily an offline activity however Cllr Frost capitalised on his presence within the Facebook groups to maximise the reach and effectiveness of the endeavour.

Firstly by utilising the ‘noticeboard function’ of the Grange Farm Facebook groups Cllr Frost was able to give prior notice and reinforced notification of where the next Street Surgery would be held. He would also use the Facebook groups to inform residents of the streets scheduled for the coming weeks. This would allow residents a forewarning and also allowed for digital participation and the ‘surgery function’ to take place even if residents were not able to meet with him on a given Monday. Secondly by incorporating the Facebook groups into the ongoing Street Surgery engagement it would act as a catalyst for residents of individual streets who may share similar common concerns pertaining to their street and encourage the coordination of collective action. These collective actions would be actively encouraged by Cllr Frost who would then play a pivotal role within them.

The transcribed conversation from GFR below documents the various ‘participation parallels’ that Cllr Frost’s Street Surgeries would cut across. On one hand Cllr Frost’s original post was a simple ‘noticeboard function’ post, informing the community of the time and location of his next surgery. On the other hand the original post sparked discussion and debate between residents on community issues pertinent to the street in question and wider community issues in general - a functional example of the groups’, ‘agora’ and ‘surgery’ functions. The example below also documents a political exchange between Cllrs Frost and Tasker over their perceptions of the other to get things done:

Cllr George Frost (original post): "Street Surgery this week is on Crescent Gardens and Godthorpe Road folks."

Ian: "I live on Godthorpe Road and we have a massive pothole that has just appeared."

Cllr George Frost: "Thanks Ian. Please can you tell me the house number it is opposite and I will fire off an email to the County Council Highways Department."

Ian: "Thanks George, have inboxed you."

Cllr George Frost: "Ian, I went down and had a look at this area earlier on. It looks like County have done a repair on the pot hole although admittedly not a very good one. I also note there was another quite large pot hole at the bottom of the street. I have reported this one too to the County Highways Office."

Cllr Simon Tasker: "County Council are in charge of the highways George and you are our County Councillor. You need to shoulder some of the blame here rather than blame the officers or the fact that Grange Farm is now a town. Grange Farm suffers from your inability to get things done."

Cllr George Frost: "My my Simon. I challenge you to demonstrate where I have claimed that the state of the roads is because we Grange Farm is a town. It has nothing at all to do with that scenario. My inability to get things done, as you so crudely put it, is a comment that is unwarranted and undeserved and does you no favours at all. The reason the highways are such a state is down to lack of investment at County Hall."

Clive: "I wonder how many street repairs Cllr Tasker has reported or gotten fixed. In terms of being a 'town' I don't think that will make any difference at County Hall to how much money they invest into our roads. Cllr Frost knows me and him both have different political opinions but he did not deserve those comments"

Lorraine: "I can't see any comments from Cllr Tasker as he seems to have blocked me. However this is a warning from the group Admin that any personal attacks against another group member will be removed"

Sandy: "I removed myself from Grange Farm Past Present and Future because he is an admin over there and it is far too UKIP for me."

(Source: Facebook 2016)

Cllr Frost's Street Surgeries demonstrated how the utility of the Grange Farm Facebook group had matured; Similar to my hometown Facebook group set up in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic that I detailed in the Preface to this thesis. I will outline in the concluding

Chapter how there is still some way left to go before the Grange Farm Facebook groups could be said to be a true augmentation between online and offline realities however the example of Cllr Frost’s Street Surgeries demonstrate how such a concept can work when fully embraced at grassroots level.

Conclusions

The Grange Farm Community Facebook groups had begun to carve out utility as conduits for engagement between local residents and those who work on their behalf but, as the title of this Chapter reminds us, this is still very much a work in progress. Whilst at the time of the research their reach was limited in so far as acting as a legitimate avenue for engagement with local institutions and policy makers there were a few positive indicators that legitimate channels of vertical participation could be established and built upon if there was a will from all parties to do so.

Grange Farm 1.1 was far from a blueprint for a modern-day renaissance of civic engagement. At the time my research was conducted there was far from a universality of involvement from the local population – only around a quarter of the Grange Farm population were members of one of the two main groups and even less could be classed as regular participants. Healthy debate would often be stifled by louder, more dominant voices with minority viewpoint often silenced or ostracised. The logistical challenges presented by such a digital medium of participation ensured that participation in Grange Farm 1.1 remained limited if it was not able to move offline into ‘real life’.

Whilst both during the research period and subsequently the overall memberships of GPPF and GFR have continued to rise my findings have suggested that it is a smaller cohort of residents that graduated their involvement from more than that of an observer. A significantly

smaller cohort could be classed as regular participants and my conversations with a number of these residents clarified that these individuals tended to be those who had been active in community life in Grange Farm 1.0.

The 'agora' function, whilst providing a readily accessible digital third place for residents to associate, was demonstrably flawed in acting as a space where balanced and equitable participatory discussion could be nurtured. Whilst superficially the Facebook groups acted as an open accessible space where free-flowing community discussion could take place in reality they often did not function as neutral spaces. Oversight and management tasks undertaken by the volunteer administrators were to be lauded, but as I have demonstrated in this Chapter, they were operating in an often politically charged and horizontally influential space without any appropriate mandate other than loyalty to the group founders; Their influence within group dialogue was paramount. Similarly, a number of more active participants had begun to dominate the two main groups, influencing prevailing group opinion and leading to an echo-chamber effect.

As I have noted, organisations serving the Grange Farm community did not tend to be present within the online space. Save for a couple of Borough Councillors and housing officers who, accompanied by a handful of knowledgeable residents, acted as unofficial *go-betweens* there was little in the way of vertical communication between residents at the grass roots and the organisations that served them. Engagement between residents and local services was primarily conducted through the groups in this manner; Residents would raise issues in the digital space that they felt comfortable with and in the absence of public officials to pick up or address them they would be picked up by the *go-betweens* and progressed offline with relevant agencies – when relevant they would report progress back to the group. Whilst this may have often yield desired results, it was arguably an inefficient

process and moreover did little to foster trust or increase the confidence or capacity of residents to engage directly with service providers.

Often community issues required more committed or sustained involvement. I documented in the previous Chapter instances where residents had utilised their Facebook groups to capitalise on horizontal channels of communication conceived there and subsequently migrated participation offline where appropriate. I noted the case studies of the house fire and the campaign to save the Library as pertinent examples of where this phenomenon had been successful. All too often, however, when a community situation necessitated sustained engagement through vertical channels i.e. between residents and service provider organisations, participation was unable to escape the digital boundaries of the Facebook groups. We can observe this with the half-hearted campaign to save the Grange Farm Hotel where GFR provided a valuable third place to exercise the 'agora function' but for the campaign to make any real difference it would have needed to migrate offline to engage with institutions which were never going to be active in the resident's digital space. The fact that residents failed to achieve this highlights a major flaw in the ability of neighbourhood Facebook groups to act as conduits for meaningful community participation.

However my research also uncovered counter-arguments to this, where vertical participation was successful along with an augmentation of engagement between on and offline arenas. For example, the highlighted case studies of the school campaign and the traffic survey. What this suggests is that how residents participated was indicative more of the inclination of the residents that were involved rather than the influence of the medium itself.

The failure of service provider agencies and power elites to meaningfully engage within the Grange Farm Facebook groups was a significant flaw in their capacity to enable social

change. The extent to which any tangible benefits to both agency and residents could be gained by organisational engagement in the Grange Farm Facebook groups would need to be a focus of additional follow up research however I feel confident in suggesting that such endeavours would likely bring about practical benefits as well as an increased understanding and trust between residents and those who deliver services on their behalf. Contemporary research is beginning to emerge such as that from Witten et al (2020) that documents how such an approach can be beneficial. My research from Grange Farm proves that a developing bedrock of community participation has emerged in the social media space that is prime for both residents and agencies to explore a new relationship with each other.

It is apparent in Grange Farm 1.1 that there was a sound and robust basis for institutions and policy makers to engage in this space in the future to bring about a more meaningful dialogue between themselves and Grange Farm residents. The onus needs to be on both parties to make this happen; service providers and policy makers will need to take a brave step into the unknown and residents will have to commit to a significant leap of trust.

The Grange Farm Facebook groups provided a groundswell of local involvement but few opportunities to capitalise on it at strategic or influential level. As such they had become an attractive space for local politicians to engage with what they saw as a captive and engaged audience. The groups, rather than enabling and developing participative democracy, had instead strengthened representative democracy.

Chapter Eight – Conclusions: A Blueprint for the Future of Community?

Introduction

This thesis concludes by reconvening the evidence and findings of my research to evaluate the impact and significance of neighbourhood Facebook groups in the context of community participation in Grange Farm. This Chapter will point to a number of recommendations for community development practitioners in relation to how the incorporation of neighbourhood Facebook groups into participation and engagement frameworks can enrich the experience for practitioners and communities alike. Previous chapters have outlined ways in which the neighbourhood Facebook groups studied in Grange Farm had broken new boundaries in understandings of how individuals build and participate in community where once they may have not. This final Chapter will reflect on how this impacts on contemporary understandings of community and participation.

In the introduction to this thesis I presented a descriptive analysis of Mark Zuckerberg's corporate vision for the future of Facebook as a social media platform. I outlined how the mission of the social media giant was evolving from connecting people with their friends and families to building and strengthening community. My research evidences a clear linkage between this vision and how communities like Grange Farm were utilising Facebook in practice. The five 'participation parallels' that I have outlined in this Chapter had come to substitute offline, traditional community involvement and demonstrated a clear link to Zuckerberg's five ambitions for Facebook as a community building platform. To recap, Zuckerberg states his five ambitions as;

Supportive communities - through the social and kinship bonds that are created, developed and nurtured through the bowling alley function the Grange Farm Facebook groups are able to connect individuals to each other and facilitate mutual support and reciprocity. We also observe residents supporting each other through requests for help with the surgery function, especially where these requests involve problems with local services and agencies (Mosconi et al, 2017; Swart et al, 2019) perceived as remote or alien.

Safe communities - in much the same way that a traditional Neighbourhood Watch Group helps to deliver community safety, through intelligence, information sharing and collective vigilance (Kelly and Findlayson, 2015) both the ‘noticeboard’ and ‘agora functions’ of the Neighbourhood Facebook group facilitated safer communities through sharing and awareness. They would also help to build social capital and trust and increased connection between neighbours ultimately helping people to feel safer.

Informed communities - through the ‘noticeboard’, ‘agora’ and ‘surgery functions’ the groups were able to share information and community news amongst community members in an accessible and informal manner – often in real time making it possible for residents to act on information.

Civically engaged communities – The Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 provided new and accessible avenues for civic participation and engagement. By removing some of the barriers to traditional participation and facilitating a space that was accessible and community-led they were re-engaging disenfranchised populations. I observed this through all five of the ‘participation parallels’. In particular I observed how the ‘committee function’ of groups facilitated civic engagement that oftentimes transferred into real life community action.

Inclusive communities - through the sharing of information and shared histories and memories the Grange Farm Facebook groups helped to build a sense of belonging and collective attachment with community members similar to how Cohen (1985) explained community as a symbolic togetherness. The 'noticeboard' and 'bowling alley functions' demonstrated this feeling of togetherness.

Experiences from Grange Farm 1.1 suggest that neighbourhood-based Facebook groups were indeed beginning to align to Zuckerberg's corporate vision of community and in turn are beginning to influence power dynamics at a community level. Although as I have outlined throughout this thesis and will surmise throughout this conclusion there was still some way to go.

Summary of Key Findings

The Grange Farm residents I spoke to for this research were not unaware of the significance of their creation; they took great pride in it. Nor was Grange Farm by any means unique; many estates, towns, villages and city communities could boast locally administered community Facebook groups with memberships in the thousands. The migration of community participation to the social media sphere in Grange Farm was both a conscious and an unconscious phenomenon. Conscious in that it represented a concerted effort by Sophie and others to re-enfranchise themselves in their local community. Frustrated by their perceived impotence within 'invited' spaces of participation and their inability to bring about local social change, Residents had (through their local Facebook groups) developed what Gaventa (2006) refers to as a 'reclaimed' space of power. My findings also advance themes put forward by Swart et al (2019) who point to the community-building utility of social media participation – my research shows how this utility can be focussed into a distinct social media

space linked to geography of the neighbourhood. Their creations were unconscious, and moreover technologically determined, in the ubiquity of the technology they had utilised as the solution. Sophie explained to me how and why she established GPPF in 2009:

“I’d seen (other similar groups) from the different parts of the country and from the different areas I’d lived in obviously because I was still in touch with people (on Facebook). And I said to my daughter ‘I’d like something like this for Grange Farm’ and I checked that it hadn’t been done, and it hadn’t, so she said ‘OK yes I’ll help you’. She was an admin, I was and one of our friends were and that’s how it started really. With my husband, because he was born in Grange Farm, he had a few old photographs so we started up just like that really.” (Interview with Sophie, March 2016).

Within the context of a modern-day society characterised so intuitively by the presence of hyper-connectivity and an ‘always-on’ culture the Facebook Groups Platform was the natural, instinctive destination for Sophie and her counterparts to seek out re-engagement and re-enfranchisement. What they created was simultaneously familiar and alien, and, not unlike more traditional channels of social and civic participation both powerful and impotent at the same time.

Aligning Research Findings to the Proposed Definitions of Community, Participation and Social Capital

Back in Chapter 2 I drew upon historical and more contemporary theoretical positions to present a conceptual understanding of community, participation and social capital that would underpin and rationalise the findings of this research.

I have crafted an understanding of community that places it as akin to the cardio-vascular system of a living organism acting as the network of relationships between individuals and institutions and providing a unifying common bond. The understanding of community presented in the second Chapter centres on three key concepts; identity, attachment and participation.

With regard to promoting and crafting a local Grange Farm identity my research has uncovered how neighbourhood Facebook groups have been able to provide a viable avenue for local people to reconnect with a local identity that, by their own admission, had been weakened in recent years. The Facebook groups had come to represent a common bond of community that, through their individual memberships, residents were able to identify with. Through the groups they felt a sense of belonging to Grange Farm. Moreover, residents used the groups to establish symbolic boundaries by communally establishing acceptable norms of behaviour.

Positive views of the community were reinforced through the groups, in particular through GPPF and GFR. Whilst negative portrayals of life in Grange Farm undoubtedly emerged through the groups these were often engaged with by residents in order to promote common standards of behaviour and to symbolically strip those involved in any negative activity of their community membership. In this way my findings support a recent study by Borch et al (2020) that demonstrates how Facebook groups have come to be relied upon as a means of providing mutual moral support by some communities.

The residents I interviewed indicated that their involvement with the groups had enabled them to view their community in a more positive light; That in many ways the groups reinforced perceptions of the area that people wished to be associated with. Whilst the groups helped residents to view one another in a more positive light they did little to build relationships or trust between residents and institutions. Linking capital was seldom apparent. Moreover, community opinion formulated through group discussions served to further distance state and citizen, a distinct characteristic of disadvantaged communities that was suggested by Hay and Stoker back in 2009.

In reinforcing a shared Grange Farm identity the community Facebook groups played a key role in promoting various attachment factors. Through the 'noticeboard function' residents were able to share news and information about their local community that helped them identify with the area. The 'bowling alley function' enabled residents to celebrate Grange Farm; Through the sharing of old photographs, anecdotes and histories from the community's past residents were able to cement their local identity. Marone (2015) notes how traditionally communities have used humour and comedic anecdotes as an identity building and bonding tool. My research has demonstrated how Marone's theory has been successfully put to the test on a hyper-local and digitally focussed social setting. Finally, interactions concerning the institutions of Grange Farm also helped local residents to feel a belonging to the community.

In Chapter 2 I proposed how participation acted as the lifeblood of community; Connecting individuals with local institutions as well as simultaneously legitimising institutions by engaging residents with them. I have also advanced a definition of community participation that consists of both social participation (interactions between individuals that serve to build relationships, bonds and networks between each other) and civic participation (involvement of residents that seeks to improve social outcomes of the community). With regard to social participation my research suggests that neighbourhood Facebook groups had created new social spaces that residents migrated to to satisfy their social desires akin to what Mosoni et al (2017) refer to as 'social streets' where online and offline interactions combine to provide an augmented community experience. In an age of decline in neutral third spaces community Facebook groups had come to replace the traditional spaces of community interaction such as cafes or pubs as a place where residents could engage with one another. In an era of decline for community 'third places' (Oldenburg, 1989) the Grange Farm

Facebook groups have come to represent the new Town Square (Tussey, 2014) – they have become true digital agoras. Moreover, as neighbourhood Facebook groups reached a critical mass of membership in Grange Farm they increasingly become a desired place for residents to frequent and interact with each other.

I observed how Grange Farm 1.1 had helped local residents to create new friendships, acquaintances and social networks with each other. In many instances these new relationships would traverse both online and offline interaction. Similarly the Facebook groups would help to strengthen or reinvigorate pre-existing relationships between residents. My findings build on Witten et al’s (2020) study of Facebook groups utility in promoting social interactions between inhabitants of new housing developments. What I have learned from Grange Farm is that this utility stretches to established settlements also, going some way to also re-establish interaction that may have waned over time. For many such as Sandy or Maggie there were major convenience reasons why they were choosing to participate socially online. They were able to participate at times and places that were convenient for them and able therefore to fit it in around unsociable work schedules or other personal commitments. Clifford et al (2020) outlined how Facebook groups have helped overcome distance as a barrier to community building; My findings from Grange Farm suggest that many other barriers (time, space ownership, confidence) are also broken down through the medium.

The content of social participation in Grange Farm 1.1 was not too dissimilar to social participation in Grange Farm 1.0. Discussions and interactions between residents would revolve around community news or humour, the sharing of local histories and traditions or partaking in community gossip. Civic participation was also been partially transformed by the advent of community Facebook groups in Grange Farm. In a community that had

traditionally experienced low levels of civic engagement these new digital avenues to engage were enabling new ways in which residents were able to work together to improve their local area – although it is recognised that there was still a considerable way to go. In terms of residents utilizing the Facebook groups to bring about social change in their community there had been some successes and whilst these had predominantly been where they have been able to mobilise horizontal relationships between them rather than directly using them to engage with power elites there was an established engagement framework emerging that could be exploited by all sections of the community should there be a conscious effort to do so.

As I have documented in previous Chapters a small number of elected representatives or paid local officials were active within the group. In reclaiming participatory space for themselves through the Facebook groups and achieving a critical mass of residents present within the space they had, perhaps unintentionally, become spaces of considerable influence and during my time in Grange Farm 1.1 I would observe the emergence of a recognition of this fact by a small number of power elites. Whilst this was encouraging, they were often used to fulfil the role of *go-between* whereby the 'surgery function' of the groups was utilised to collect resident issues and concerns and relay them to authorities and service providers through recognised offline channels. On a purely utility basis their aims were achieved in so much that this would often achieve the desired outcomes of residents in addressing their identified issues. This situation did not, however, address the fact that there still existed a disconnect between local residents and the institutions that served them. Whilst residents freely participate in their preferred online spaces, these spaces were not recognised, or in some cases even known about, by local institutions. Such a disjointed dialogue, I propose, had implications for the level of trust that residents hold in local authorities and service providers.

My research denotes that where civic participation was recognised as bringing about positive social outcomes was when utilised along horizontal channels of participation. As I have documented throughout the thesis, this had tended to be when residents used the 'committee function' of the groups as a conduit for collective community action and organisation. When using the groups to organise along horizontal lines, co-ordinating actions that could be addressed at community-level I observed a number of successful interventions; the house fire, the school campaign and the family fun day to name a few. However when civic participation required residents engaging in the groups to organise and participate through vertical channels I found the groups to hold limited success. Whilst residents would become adept in coordinating community campaigns through their Facebook groups a number of factors ensured that their effectiveness was limited. Firstly any groundswell of community support that could be garnered through the groups would not necessarily be recognised by institutions or power elites. Secondly any coordinated community action facilitated through the groups would need to migrate offline to more traditional channels of participation in order to be effective. In many cases residents either did not feel comfortable or were not confident enough to engage in recognised offline spaces as well as experiencing the barriers to participation (pressures of time and convenience, disenfranchisement, lack of local ownership) that had hitherto been established as characteristic of Grange Farm 1.0.

Finally, I conclude that the introduction of neighbourhood Facebook groups to the community landscape of Grange Farm had implications for my identified indicators of social capital within the community setting. As with the implications on the realizations of community and participation, Grange Farm 1.1 had limited success in building or reinforcing social capital. Some success was observed but I propose that there was still much to do.

Neighbourhood Facebook Groups Strengthen and Encourage Traditional Involvement

It was apparent through interviews conducted with Grange Farm Residents that the purpose of the Facebook groups was not to negate the importance or replace traditional 'real-life' participation. Their role had been to strengthen and encourage traditional involvement wherever possible. In this sense my research corresponds with a number of other studies into augmented community participation conducted in the last few years (Shah et al 2005, Eimhjellen 2019, Murayama and Sugawara 2021). Although, as I have documented, this goal was not always achieved. This situation was implied by the words of Ozzy. I asked Ozzy if he thought community participation through social media could make a positive difference locally. He seemed unclear, recognising an undoubted benefit of Facebook facilitated involvement but also suggesting that it could not be viewed in isolation from real World participation. He mused:

"I think you can mobilise people (through social media), I think you can spur people into doing things. At the moment you can rant all you want about the town status on social media but the Parish Council won't recognise that they'll only recognise official feedback.... and I think you can spur people into taking part in the official consultation, you can spur people into taking part in petitions or protests. So I think it's a good tool to mobilise people to make a change but to actually change it on social media, nah" (Interview with Ozzy, March 2016).

What is apparent, however, is that the Grange Farm Facebook groups had stepped in where traditional forms of community participation had failed. In bridging this gap they provided a suitable platform for residents to participate. They demonstrated a suitable entry point from which further engagement could be developed. This invariably was centred on moving participation to offline, more traditional spaces. My research suggests that in some instances the participation of residents was able to migrate offline and continue to flourish and in others

it was not. My observations lead me to suggest that there were two major contributing factors as to whether or not online participation through the Facebook groups evolved into continued offline participation. These would be; the capacity and willingness of the residents to do so and the issue being addressed. With regard to the first factor, I noted that those who were engaged either already or historically in community action offline were more likely to move their social media participation offline when deemed relevant to do so. With regard to the second factor I noted that where a community response could be undertaken through interaction between residents on a peer-to-peer basis it was much more likely to evolve into continued offline participation than if the response required engaging with power elites or community institutions. I found that social media usage did not tend to increase the skills and confidence of residents to engage at a more strategic level.

Through mirroring the ways in which residents had historically participated in their community, both socially and civically, and adopting the ‘participation parallels’ the actions and interactions of residents in the digital space were familiar to them. Whilst they were now participating digitally they felt comfortable with the nature and content of their participation. The themes around which they interacted remain consistent; local news, shared traditions and community gossip to name a few.

My research found also that when there was a conscious effort from individuals active within the groups to harness their mobilising power and transfer this engagement to the offline World they could indeed strengthen traditional methods of community participation. I have documented in this thesis Cllr Frost and his Street Surgeries and how this local councillor had been able to mobilise his constituents online using it as a basis for face to face engagement. I have also recounted how a group of local residents utilised GTE to mount an online and offline campaign against the proposals to reclassify Grange Farm as a town.

Again it took commitment and determination of the participants themselves to ensure this. The medium, I have established, was a passive component in the complexities of community participation in Grange Farm 1.1.

Mirroring Traditional and Familiar Forms of Participation

Residents engaged in Grange Farm 1.1 had come to use their neighbourhood Facebook groups in a manner the traditional manner that communities had hitherto participated. The nature and content of their participation remained the same only the channels through which they did so was different. As I have referenced throughout this thesis they engaged with their community digitally through the five 'participation parallels' – the participatory functions of the Facebook group that mirrored traditional forms of community interaction. Through the 'noticeboard function' they engaged in the mutual sharing of local news and information. Through the 'committee function' they used the Facebook groups to organise community responses to identified issues. They engaged in the 'bowling alley function' to enable them to create and enhance social bonds between them. As well as serving to build bonds, the 'bowling alley' function' was employed by residents to exploit these bonds for individual or community benefits. The 'agora function' provided a digital town square for residents to frequent, enabling them to discuss and debate community issues and ultimately to encourage the formation of local public opinion. And finally through the 'surgery function' residents were able to solicit information, advice and guidance from their peers and occasionally from representatives from service providers or local authorities. Throughout each of the five 'parallels' there existed elements of what VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) refer to as 'power within' – the capacity to exercise power within a given social framework.

Whilst these 'participation parallels' were familiar to residents they were also recognised as restrictive and a less favourable avenue for participation than offline avenues that have

flourished in the past. Residents simultaneously recounted the community ownership and accessibility benefits of community participation through their neighbourhood Facebook groups as well as harking back to a nostalgic vision of community where they were not needed. For the residents of Grange Farm digital participation was viewed as second best; A necessary tool in their attempts to maintain their sociability.

Like with traditional community involvement, some forms of participation were engaged with more than others. Participation in Grange Farm 1.1 was characterised by who was participating, the issues with which they chose to engage and the desired outcomes of their involvement. In this sense my research provides an updated reflection on Fung’s (2006) theories of participation. In this respect digital participation through Grange Farm was no different from non-digital participation. During my time in Grange Farm 1.1 I uncovered that residents were more likely to engage in the ‘participation parallels’ that required less commitment or sustained involvement. In the largest two groups GPPF and GFR residents committed the majority of their involvement to actions that required little more commitment than writing or commenting of group posts. Primarily this was through the sharing of news through the ‘noticeboard function’ and engagement in localised discussions through the ‘agora function’. In GPPF and GFR participation from residents that required more than mere opinion or comment tended to be few and far between. In this sense trends with digitally mediated community participation aligned with traditional methods of participation in that most people had an opinion on local matters but few of them were willing to put their head above the parapet to act on them.

Finally in this sub section I conclude that in Grange Farm 1.1 the ‘participation parallels’ were not always used in isolation. For example, residents were unlikely to use the ‘noticeboard function’ for a purely one way exchange of information. News would be shared

but most often would then be engaged with through community discussion and debate through the 'agora function'. Likewise resident discussions through the 'agora function' could and did evolve into community action individually through the 'surgery function' or collectively through the 'committee function'. Just as participation in the physical realm is a montage of differing forms of activity and interaction, digitally mediated community participation in Grange Farm 1.1 reflected these same characteristics.

Overcoming Barriers to Participation

Earlier in this thesis I documented how local perceptions were that Grange Farm 1.0 was characterised by low levels of resident participation, either civically or socially. These perceptions were reinforced through other trends or quantitative data such as voter turnout or formal volunteering levels. I have also noted how the experience of Grange Farm mirrors the contemporary community experience as noted by scholars of community (Oldenburg 1989, Putnam 2000, Bauman 2001, McComas et al 2006, Hays 2007) that suggests multiple factors at play that lead to lower levels of citizen participation at a local level. Within the context of Grange Farm I have identified these barriers as; the pressures of time and convenience, a lack of local ownership over traditional participatory channels and a perception of active disenfranchisement by local residents.

My research suggests that the existence of resident-controlled neighbourhood Facebook groups in Grange Farm had ensured some successes in overcoming these barriers. In respect of overcoming the pressure of time and convenience on community participation I observed the successes that the groups could herald. I have presented a case study of Sandy; A resident whose busy work schedule prevented her from engaging through existing traditional channels. For Sandy GFR offered her an opportunity to participate, both socially and civically, at times and locations that were convenient to herself – although by her own

admission the trade-off for convenience was a less immersive experience. Sandy was happy with this as her alternative was to not participate at all.

I have also presented examples from my research (the Traffic Survey, the School Campaign and the Family Fun Day) where the neighbourhood Facebook groups facilitated civic participation across an extended period of time. This enabled residents to get involved and contribute to community projects or campaigns at their convenience or leisure. As is a cross-cutting theme of this thesis, when non-structured, sporadic participation of residents was complimented by more organised or formal offline involvement the results were encouraging.

Secondly I have noted how Grange Farm 1.0 had hitherto been characterised by participation and engagement frameworks that had been imposed on the community from outside. Traditionally these had been in the guise of Local Authority community forums, survey sampling or single issue community meetings. The residents I spoke to did not see any value in their participation through these channels. It was clear that they viewed any participation through these channels as akin to what Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation would term as ‘therapy’, ‘placation’ or at best ‘tokenism’. In crafting an engagement space that was ‘owned’ and managed by themselves residents had developed a forum that they were comfortable in and familiar with. Moreover, they recognised the confidence of their own interactions within it. Again, however, there was a trade-off associated with this; Whilst the Facebook groups were recognised and well used by some residents they were not recognised by the majority of local institutions or power elites, save for one or two representatives of local charities and an active local Councillor.

Residents could engage in rich and varied participatory discussions but with most representatives of local power elites absent from the space this participation was often fruitless. Instead what happened was that vertical participation, when it did occur was conducted by a small number of ‘go-betweens’ who harvested the views, opinions and concerns of residents active within the digital space and conveyed them upwards. The fact that the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 were resident owned and controlled ultimately meant that vertical participation was detached from the grassroots and disjointed – although I propose that the blame for this lies as much, if not more so, with the power elites who were unable to recognise resident controlled spaces as it does with the residents themselves.

Finally, my research uncovered where the Grange Farm Facebook groups had helped redress a perceived intentional disenfranchisement of residents by local power elites. The residents I spoke to, for example, believed that the local Parish / Town Council actively prevented resident participation in their affairs. They pointed to the difficulties residents had hitherto experienced in submitting and asking public questions at monthly Parish / Town Council meetings and how over-zealous interpretations of the Authority’s Standing Order had been used to stifle or silence debate. They pointed also to the Parish / Town Council’s resident consultation survey on the town status proposals which despite apparently being distributed to every household in the Parish (a claim disputed by every resident I spoke to and many more on social media) only yielded 41 returns. Ultimately they felt that residents were being shut out from meaningful discourse with their first and most immediate tier of local Government. In this sense the Facebook groups did allow those who wanted to connect with and discuss events in their community to find a space within which to do so. The willingness of Grange Farms residents to participate in their online space helped to overcome this perceived disenfranchisement meaning that resident desire, or at the very least willingness, to engage in community matters was not lost. However, as is another

cross-cutting theme of this thesis, if those with the power to enact change were absent from the space the effectiveness of the medium was lost, save for what is achieved through peer-to-peer altruism.

The Limitations of a Digitally Focussed Participation

What is apparent through this research is that within the context of Grange Farm 1.1 locality-based Facebook groups were being used to fill in the gaps where traditional participation has failed but they were by no means a replacement for traditional face to face involvement. They were complimentary to it. My findings endorse the work of Antoci et al (2014) by suggesting that the ready store of information available through the Internet, the network ties that reside within it and the ease of access with which individuals can participate have created a situation where computer-mediated communication is the most logical first step for people to 'defend their sociability'. However this first step was impotent in isolation.

Whilst the growing trend towards social media facilitated community involvement in Grange Farm had enabled somewhat of a renaissance of participation it was by no means a panacea to the Bowling Alone prognosis. I suggest that this renaissance was perhaps comprehended because of the traditionally low levels of community participation apparent in Grange Farm 1.0. The Grange Farm Facebook groups provided a recognised, accessible space for association and interaction but there was an understanding, both from this researcher and the residents of Grange Farm themselves, that in certain situations their digital participation must transcend to the physical if any tangible outputs are to be achieved. For some, more social activities, such as the sharing of old photos or group reminiscence participation was able to remain effective whilst staying within a digital boundary. For other more civically involved participation a transcendence of on and offline space was needed. All too often this transcendence was not realised. Moreover, the participation of Grange Farm residents

within the local Facebook groups was often conducted within a power vacuum. Whilst the groups have given ordinary residents a voice there were very few individuals or organisations with the power to effect change active within the space.

The findings of this research question how the use of neighbourhood Facebook groups as a community participation tool has evolved contemporary understandings of space and place (Jurgenson 2011 2012 and 2012a, Foth and Hearn 2007, Skwarek 2018). The residents of Grange Farm viewed their Facebook groups as part and parcel of Grange Farm. This primarily digital space contributed to the importance of geographical place. In Grange Farm the digital revolution had come full circle. As I have shown throughout this thesis place is reinforced rather than weakened.

The realities of geographic community settings are increasingly being played out in the social media environment. The context of community participation is rooted in real life but is played out through a digital medium. As Jurgenson states, “We cannot focus on one side, be it human or technology, without deeply acknowledging the other” (Jurgenson, 2012, p.84). I suggest the long term consequences of an augmented realisation of space and place in Grange Farm are yet to be realised. Should communities such as Grange Farm continue to embrace a reality where digital and physical realms overlay and respond to each other then this poses significant questions that those of us concerned with the ideal of community will need to address.

Grange Farm 1.0 vs Grange Farm 1.1

In this thesis I have documented two accounts of social and civic life in Grange Farm. I classify Grange Farm before the emergence of neighbourhood Facebook groups into the community landscape as Grange Farm 1.0. The advent and evolution of the Facebook

groups represented an upgrade to the existing participatory infrastructure rather than a completely new version. Hence why I have termed this scenario Grange Farm 1.1. I conclude that there were however tangible differences with regard to community participation between Grange Farm 1.0 and Grange Farm 1.1.

Firstly, there was a perception locally amongst the residents of Grange Farm who engaged through the community Facebook groups that they possessed a franchising quality. For many who I spoke to during the research such as Sandy and Maggie the groups had either given them a voice or enabled them to use it. Despite this those who actually actively participated in either GPPF or GFR (counted as posting an original post or a follow on comment) remained significantly low, only 6% and 5% of the total Grange Farm population respectively. However, if the increasing trend that was observed through my time in Grange Farm continues this relatively small section of the local population will continue to grow.

Moreover, my observations and semi-structured interviews led me to conclude that many of these digitally active residents were also socially and civically active in Grange Farm 1.0. I conclude that digital participation through the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 had not significantly increased levels of social and civic participation. Although this is undoubtedly the case for some, rather they had enabled a stronger, more influential and more accessible voice for those who were already involved. Moreover, there is a strong case to suggest that despite active participation levels remaining low the perception amongst residents was that the existence of the neighbourhood Facebook groups has a large enfranchising effect.

My research has uncovered a paradox of convenience that was enabled by the evolution of the Grange Farm Facebook groups into the popular community experience. There was little doubt that for those that now choose to participate this way the participation experience had changed. For residents engaging in civic participation, in particular, it had become a less

structured or rigid process. Participation was no longer confined to the formality of public meetings or timed and structured activity. Participation in Grange Farm 1.1 was fluid and could be both instant and in real time, or engaged in when availability allowed. There were few restrictions on this new form of digital participation save for access to an internet enabled device, an active Facebook account and an opinion that residents were willing to voice. There was no real membership criteria, no special knowledge that needed to be learned or no bureaucratic processes to follow. This convenience, however, came at a price. Whilst the space was easily accessible its lack of formality ensures that it was not recognised as legitimate by most power elites and service provider organisations and furthermore it lacked the organisational acumen to affect social change. There existed a paradox in the power dynamics of Grange Farm 1.1. Frustrated with their inability to bring about change, whether that be illustrated by their inability to advance further along the participatory ladder (Arnstein, 1969) than degrees of 'tokenism', or a lack of control over the decision-making and non decision-making forms of power (Lukes, 1974) they had developed new participatory spaces for themselves, a phenomenon Gaventa (2006) would term as 'reclaimed' spaces. These spaces, however, whilst yielding some semblance of power in terms influence through the sheer weight of numbers present within them were simultaneously without the power of official recognition or incorporation into the recognised 'invited' spaces of power of local participation frameworks.

Finally, I conclude that the neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 were locally recognised as resident controlled spaces. As such the dialogue and discussions that characterised community participation within the space was centred on issues that were of importance to local residents. Whereas with some of the more traditional participation channels of Grange Farm 1.0 such as attendance at community meetings or local forums the participation experience is controlled, or at least mediated, by outside agencies the agenda is often based around the engagement requirements of such agencies. This was

not the case with the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 as participation revolved around the issues and needs of residents. Whilst this is to be lauded, such a novelty was rendered impotent in the absence of involvement of any other actors other than residents themselves.

Returning to my Research Aims and Objectives

Finally, in this section I will return to each of the three original aims and objectives of my research outlined in the first Chapter of this thesis. In order to refamiliarise the reader these are stated below:

1. To understand the extent to which neighbourhood Facebook groups have re-engaged people and communities at a local level and how this compares to and compliments ‘traditional’ participation methods.
2. To analyse the participation experience of those who engage through neighbourhood Facebook groups and evaluate how these experiences translate to social capital and community.
3. To understand the nature of community participation through neighbourhood Facebook groups and analyse the extent to which it impacts on local polity and influences established local power structures.

Firstly, let us reflect on the extent to which the neighbourhood Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 had re-engaged people and communities at a local level and compare and compliment more ‘traditional’ participation methods. The results of my research suggest that the local Grange Farm Facebook groups had gone some way towards re-engaging people within their community. I have documented case study evidence (the School Campaign, the Traffic Survey) that has outlined where new, and hitherto, absent participants had utilised the groups to enable active participation. However, my observations of Grange Farm 1.1

suggest that community Facebook groups served a more effective purpose in strengthening the participation of those who were already involved through more traditional offline means. In this sense they were an ideal complement to traditional participation structures rather than a direct replacement for them. Furthermore, I have documented, on a number of occasions throughout this thesis, that online community participation usually requires augmented offline action (the House Fire, 'Divvy Up', the School Campaign, the Traffic Survey) in order to achieve holistic re-engagement of communities.

Secondly the results of my research suggested that the experiences of Grange Farm residents who engaged within the local Facebook groups did go some way to help reinforce their collective community identity. This was seen through the use of the groups by residents to promote local traditions and shared histories, to build and strengthen kinship bonds and through the celebration of local achievements. As I have noted previously, the Grange Farm Farm Facebook groups would help to develop bonding capital but were limited in their capacity to facilitate bridging or linking capital. Local residents would however reflect on their digital spaces with a sense of pride and achievement, very much looking upon the groups as their own community-controlled space. They would also characterise their experiences of the groups through imitation, modelling their participatory behaviours on the form and functionality of similar participatory behaviours experienced in the Offline World (participation parallels)

Finally, and in relation to how the medium of neighbourhood Facebook groups could bring about influence on local power structures and polity it is apparent from my research that they would achieve very little. Of course, there are case study examples in this research of where such feats were achieved, but these were few and far between. Whilst the groups were perfectly placed and adapted to facilitate new kinship bonds as well as strengthening

them along a peer to peer axis, or horizontally, they did very little to actively link local residents into the decision-making processes of local power elites and in these terms the utility can be viewed as limited.

Limitations of my Research

“Researchers have an obligation to the academic community to present complete and honest limitations of a presented study” (Ross and Bibler Zaidi, 2019). This observation by Ross and Bibler Zaidi provides description of what I will outline in this section. Whilst any academic researcher worth their salt will aim to be as comprehensive as possible in the construct of their research design and research strategy, it is the holistic nature of academic rigour that ensures that inevitably, with any research study, there will be gaps or limitations. In some ways this is to be welcomed as it is these gaps or limitations that provide justification for future research to be developed.

Through undertaking a retrospective analysis of the research design and ensuing results and conclusions drawn I have identified three key limitations of my research that will be of interest to those who are seeking to advance academic knowledge in this area. Firstly, it should be pointed out that my research into the community Facebook groups of Grange Farm was primarily restricted one sample community, Grange Farm. Whilst I have presented a sound rationale for the selection of Grange Farm in Chapter 3 it is also worth noting that this research does not include similar undertakings within other communities. In this respect this thesis is an isolated study. Had time and resources allowed it may have been beneficial to undertake similar ethnographic research within another community to identify similarities, differences, trends or otherwise.

Secondly, my research concerns itself mainly with the participatory behaviours of those who are already active within the Grange Farm Facebook groups. I have pointed to the fact that the number of 'active users' of the groups, whilst ever growing, is still a minority of the community. This research does not address the views, opinions, motivations or otherwise of the 'silent majority' of Grange Farm residents who are not active within these particular digital spaces. Further to this, the research places a particular emphasis on those who were most active within the community Facebook groups with the justification given through my research strategy that they would have the most comprehensive story to tell. There was less attention paid to the activities of more casual users or those who could be classed as 'lurkers', limiting their engagement to consumption of information rather than dissemination of it. Again, the justification provided here is that I have throughout this thesis presented a conceptional analysis of community that is active rather than benign.

Finally, and perhaps of most importance to the third objective of my research which was concerned with the causal effects of residents' participation in Grange Farm 1.1 with regard to improved local social and policy outcomes, this research does not comprehensively consider the views and opinions of power elites towards the participatory activity taking place in the Facebook groups. Whilst I should note at this juncture that research did take place with *some* local power elites (informal conversations with Grange Farm Parish / Town Councillors and two of the elected Borough Councillors for the area) this was not conducted on a wider scale and moreover this research does not consider the corporate position of local power elites in relation to social media engagement through community Facebook groups.

Recommendations for Further Research

In presenting this thesis I have contributed to a relatively new and emerging academic narrative concerned with the participatory utility and meaning of social media facilitated participation within the community setting. In the case of this research this has focused around the pivotal role played by the Facebook Groups Platform. The social media landscape in terms of the usage trends being influenced by newly emerging platforms; As do user interface characteristics and possibilities within established platforms (Arriagada and Ibanez, 2020). Social media as a socializing tool continues to evolve. I propose that my findings in this thesis could be used as a basis to research the extent to which other social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter and others are used to generate participatory capital within the community context. This may be of particular relevance in non-Western societies where Facebook is less prominent.

My research has specifically pointed to areas and instances where neighbourhood Facebook groups have been seen to fail or not been able to achieve their full participatory potential (failure to move online campaigns offline, failure to achieve meaningful engagement with local state actors, prominence of populist opinions and echo chamber mentalities). Due to the chosen methodology employed much of the context and explorations around these issues were conducted with those were fully active with Grange Farm 1.1 and had, in general, experienced more successful endeavours within the space. The chosen methodology, however, did not consider the opinions and experiences of those who had tended to have been unsuccessful in generating meaning participatory capital from the community Facebook groups. Moreover, it did not consider the sizable proportion of the community that was not active within the social media space in any capacity whatsoever.

Finally in this section I want to reflect back to Chapter Six, where I presented an understanding of how neighbourhood Facebook groups could be utilised by residents, through engaging with them in ways familiar to them ('participation parallels') to bring about a degree of social change. As I have highlighted throughout this study in most cases resurgence of social and civic participation was hamstrung by a lack of any meaningful corporate presence of Public and Voluntary Sector actors within the space. I propose that this is an area of participatory action research that should be of particular relevance to the community development profession. Committed, and potentially bold steps, need to be led by the Public Sector (followed on by the Voluntary Sector) to engage with local residents in *their* online spaces. Could enabling a corporate presence into resident controlled online spaces bring about a sea change in the relationships and outcomes between the people and the institutions that serve them? Could such a bold step enable communities to advance the rungs of Arnstein's' Ladder? My research uncovered how the evolution of neighbourhood Facebook groups at Grange Farm had gone some way to alter the power dynamics between actors at a community level. Further research is proposed into the medium and long-term impacts of this on local authority participation and involvement policies.

Recommendations for Community Development Policy and Practitioners

This research has been borne out of grassroots community development tradition. It analyses the community participation experience through the motives and actions of those at the coalface of community rather than by objectives and outcomes scribed through policy. Community participation was observed as much as an end itself as it was to as a means to an end. The agendas and causes advanced in Grange Farm 1.1 were those of local people themselves rather than of local authorities. It is for these reasons that this study represents a valuable contribution to the field of community development practice.

In many ways this research is all the more valuable because authorities were mostly absent from the participation framework that was analysed. This thesis gives an unadulterated look into the themes and issues communities will progress when left to their own devices. Whilst the participatory content that the Facebook groups of Grange Farm 1.1 engaged in would often mirror local socio-economic or political issues of the day (the town status debate, the campaign to save the Library, the traffic survey) they would just as often focus around issues that mattered solely to residents – issues that flew under the radar of local policy makers (the school campaign, the family fun day, the desire to keep open the Grange Farm hotel).

I have outlined throughout this thesis how neighborhood Facebook groups represent a tangible community space that are linked inextricably to set physical space. Whilst not all are present or even aware of the space my findings from Grange Farm suggest that the memberships of these groups constitute their consideration corporately by local authorities and Voluntary and Community Sector organisations as tangible spaces to engage. Whilst I have shown their utility to be limited in some areas there is enough evidence generated through this research to claim they could be considered a legitimate area of development in supporting community action and development. Therefore, I propose three specific recommendations for community development policy and practitioners to consider as they continue to evolve their engagement practices in an ever evolving and augmented landscape.

First, I propose that awareness and training sessions be made available to local authorities (paid and elected officials) and Voluntary and Community Sector organisations to educate them on the potential benefits of engaging within resident-controlled social media space. This should include; the advocating of the rich and diverse audience that can be engaged

with in these spaces, the comfort and ease with which residents operate within the space, the breaking down of barriers and the opportunities for trust building between residents and authorities and the understanding that working within resident-selected agendas is likely to bring about organizational benefits and efficiencies.

Secondly, I encourage local authorities and Voluntary and Community Sector organisations to trial the distribution of their usual corporate communications through their local neighbourhood-based Facebook groups. I noted in this thesis how some smaller Grange Farm-based organisations had already begun to do this successfully. I also noted how in some instances corporate communications from local authority social media channels were shared into the groups. I would like to propose that communications officers take the bold step of adding the litany of locally-controlled neighbourhood-based Facebook within their boundaries to their list of media contacts for the distribution of media release and corporate announcements. There should be no additional costs associated with this. Further to using neighbourhood Facebook groups as a recognised channel for corporate publicity and messages I suggest that authorities and organisations engage in any follow-on engagement with residents that may result from posting there. I have outlined in this thesis how 'noticeboard function' posts were often commented upon and discussed by residents, facilitating a bilateral rather than unilateral flow of information. This will take a leap of faith for some local authorities who may traditionally take a more cautious approach to corporate communications however I anticipate that if they were to do so the wealth of additional community information and intelligence that could be gathered and the potential for trust building between residents and institutions make it worth the risk.

Within communities where this approach is deemed to be successful I propose that authorities pilot a further step of tasking community-facing officers with a development or

engagement role with entering into the neighbourhood Facebook groups and interacting directly with residents in the space. It is community development or engagement officers that are usually familiar with engaging with communities within resident-controlled spaces and they will likely be most adept to navigating the interactions that occur there.

Finally, I make a recommendation that provides a practical solution to the issues I have identified concerning the failures of neighbourhood Facebook groups to facilitate effective vertical lines of participation. It is one where the onus lies with communities rather than authorities I noted in Chapter 7 how informally some group members had adopted the position of *go-betweens*, collecting and collating issues and information through the Facebook groups and taking them directly to service providers and reporting back if necessary. I propose that residents that are actively involved with local neighbourhood Facebook groups look to appoint official *go-betweens* that can fulfil this liaison function and provide a recognised route for vertical participation to travel. I would propose that this be an official role within the group, similar to that of administrator and would ideally be suited to a volunteer who has the knowledge, skills and confidence to engage with public officials effectively. This proposal would still maintain the community-ownership and character that is one of the redeeming features of these groups as well as providing an accessible route into quality and potentially hard to reach residents for authorities and service providers.

Epilogue – Sophie's Story

All communities are a story of ongoing change. The community of Grange Farm continues to evolve. The nearly completed Lower Grangeside Development continues at pace effectively doubling the size of the community in both geographical area and population. This unprecedented local growth places ever growing demands on an already overstretched Statutory and Voluntary Sector. The building of new housing has brought an influx of new

residents to Grange Farm. The Development’s marketing as a commuter conurbation has meant that many of these new residents naturally gravitate to the larger urban service centre of Bryerton, relegating the dwindling Grange Farm High Street further towards irrelevance. There is hope on the horizon however. A new £5 million Regeneration Masterplan has just been adopted by the local Borough Council setting out ambitious projects that aim to generate employment, improve public realm and improve the overall quality of life for residents. These projects will be funded through financial windfalls relating to the Lower Grangeside Development.

In the six years since the field research for this thesis was undertaken the lives of those who were heavily involved has changed also. Alice graduated from University and moved back home to Grange Farm with her long term partner – she has since begun a career locally and dips in and out of community affairs whenever time allows. Sandy continues to stay involved in community life; primarily through digital means and continuing to stay on the side-lines of ‘real World’ involvement. Maggie disbanded her local friends group but still keeps up to speed on community issues – primarily through GPPF and her job at the Medical Centre. Dave closed down GTE following the community’s defeat on the town status proposals. He now takes a backseat in community issues as does his close friend Kevin. Ozzy put himself forward again for local office, this time standing as a candidate for the Conservative Party in the latest round of local Council Elections. He was unsuccessful, due in part to comments he made on social media being used against him by political opponents. Cllr Simon Tasker retired from local politics after serving only one term as a Borough Councillor for Grange Farm.

At the next local elections in May 2019 Grange Farm turned red as Councillor George Frost was returned to office alongside two new Labour Councillors for the Ward. Cllr Frost’s

success was, in my opinion, due in no small part to his prominence on social media – both of his new councillor colleagues have embraced the Grange Farm Facebook groups. His political ambitions were further realised at the same election when in a shock result the local Labour Party was able to take control of the Borough Council for the first time in over a generation, albeit without a majority of seats and reliant on a coalition with Independent and Green Councillors. Cllr Frost was rewarded for his hard work with a seat on the Council's Cabinet. He still holds his regular Street Surgeries every Monday. Life has moved on for the nine residents of Grange Farm who were interviewed for this research. However, to varying degrees, they all are still involved in the Grange Farm Facebook groups in some form or other.

Many things change; Some things stay the same. GPPF and GFR are more active than ever. The memberships of both groups have vastly increased. The other three groups studied as part of the research GTE, GFUA and GCC have all either closed or faded into irrelevance through lack of engagement. GTE had run its course and once the town status battle had been lost it ceased to fulfil any real purpose. GFUA struggled to remain relevant without the critical mass of resident membership needed for a community Facebook group to be sustainable. GCC faded with a whimper as the attempts of Dave and Kevin to morph the group into the offline World as a recognised residents association came to nothing.

On occasion I will log on to either of the two remaining groups to see what has changed in the years since they were my digital second home. Many of the familiar names are still active; Some no longer so. There are, of course, new members whose names I do not recognise. Some of the issues that people discuss are remarkably similar; vandalism and fly tipping still blights the area, dogs still go missing and need reuniting with their owners and of course the Town Council are still disliked by more or less everyone. GPPF still holds

its annual Grange Farm photography competition and a new Admin, a resident who was not involved back in 2015/16, has taken this on as a side project. For GPPF in particular there is one constant that still remains the same. Sophie still heads up the group and leads a team of increasingly accomplished administrators.

Mine and Sophie’s paths occasionally cross during the course of my professional duties. We will talk about the ongoing success of GPPF; Sophie is as proud of her creation today as she was when I interviewed her in 2016 and, I suspect, as when she founded the group in 2009. Sophie has expanded her community involvement further in the years since my fieldwork. Four years ago she established a not for profit community café at the local Community Centre and then left the project after falling out with the Centre Trustees. She worked with Officers from the local Borough Council and the local Scout group to host a community fun day, all the while her offline community exploits have populated and influenced the newsfeed of the GPPF group.

More recently Sophie has become one of the leading residents in the development of G.A.S.T. – Grange Farm Always Stands Together. G.A.S.T. is the latest attempt to provide an offline voice for the Residents of Grange Farm. Sophie and the other Committee Members have learned from the mistakes of other such groups that have quickly come and gone in the past. They have established strong links with the local Councillors and are receiving intensive support from local authorities and support agencies. Rather than operating in a vacuum G.A.S.T., from the outset, has been linked into the ongoing Grange Farm Regeneration Masterplan whereas in the past Grange Farm residents have passively accepted attempts to disengage them from the decision-making process. They always had a voice they just did not know previously how to yield it. Now they are demanding to be heard and demanding to be involved.

G.A.S.T. is very much an offline entity. There is a recognition that for social action to occur it has to manifest through physical interaction – pixels on a screen is simply not enough. Like the previous avenues of participation that characterised Grange Farm 1.0 their monthly open meetings attract no more than a small handful of willing residents who are however committed to taking forward actions, lobbying service providers and delivering community projects. However where Sophie and her fellow residents have excelled in this new venture is through linking the extensive community participation utility of GPPF. Community issues are raised and discussed through GPPF and where relevant taken into the offline G.A.S.T. meetings to be actioned. They recognise that this online space is where residents are comfortable to engage, offer opinion and share information. Where once resident participation was lost within a largely impotent echo chamber it is now harnessed and put to community use.

As I finish typing what will be the final words of this thesis I pause briefly to engage in one last browse of Grange Farm Past Present and Future. Pinned to the top of the group feed is a pinned post from Sophie outlining the group rules. The rules have changed somewhat from when I first glanced eyes over them in 2015. I get the feeling they have been adapted incrementally as the administrators have had to deal with issues they had not anticipated. The evolution of the neighbourhood Facebook groups has been a learning curve for all those involved, not least Sophie. But this is part of their charm and their effectiveness. They have not been precisely planned out at some civil servants desk to reflect whatever 'grass roots engagement techniques' are the political flavour of the month. They have evolved into what the people of Grange Farm want them to be and they have changed in response to their needs. Finally I have one last check on the number of total group members, 4,316 – just over three times larger than the total membership when I finished my field research in 2016.

That is 4,316 people that Sophie and her fellow administrators have helped to find a voice. Some of them may not use that voice and of course some will shout louder than others but it is a voice that they had hitherto not been able to find.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

'Bowling Alone or Blogging Together' - PHD Research

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

OPENING SECTION

Introductory statement

(Shake participants hand). Hello, my name is Matthew Joseph, as you probably know, I am a PHD student at the School of Social Sciences at the University of Hull. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. The interview should last no more than 45 minutes but you are free to terminate the interview at any point if you wish.

This interview will form part of the research that I will be using as part of my PhD thesis. There may be the possibility that information from this interview will also be used for related academic purposes such as journal articles and presentations. However please don't worry, I will be adhering to the University's strict code of research ethics as well as the ethical standards of the British Sociological Association. Basically this means that you will not come to any harm or disadvantage because of your participation today. I will be using false names for all those who are involved in the research and anything you discuss or tell me today will be only ever be used for academic research purposes and nothing else. At this point I need to ask you for your permission to record today's interview, this is to enable me to transcribe word for word our discussion so that I have an accurate record of the interview. Do you have any objections to me recording our interview here today? (wait for response - if yes continue, if no explain that an alternative at this point is for me to make notes of the discussion as we go along). Thank you. As I said I will be transcribing our discussion today and will ensure that you receive a copy of the transcript once it has been produced so that you can indicate whether or not you believe it is a true and accurate record of our discussion.

As you may be aware my research is concerned with the use of social media platforms, in your case the Facebook Group Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide, and how local people are using these platforms as a means to participate in community affairs. My research is focussing specifically on the community of Eastfield and as well as online observations I have been observing how local issues are played out offline and how the online and offline worlds are linked.

I have selected to use interviews and focus group sessions as the primary research method for my thesis because I want to understand the personal feelings and connections that are experienced by people like yourself who get involved in community affairs through using social media - I don't believe that I can achieve that through statistics and questionnaires. You have been invited to participate in this interview because I know from my initial observations of Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide over the past few months that you are a particularly active member. I will be asking you a number of relatively simple questions about your involvement with Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide, there are no right or wrong answers. I hope this next 45 minutes or so can feel more like a two way conversation rather than a set of questions and answers so please by all means feel free to take the conversation in whatever direction you wish, particularly if you feel strongly about something that I may not be asking you about. I have a set of questions in front of me but please be aware these are for guidance only, I may choose not to ask some of them or ask questions that I have not previously prepared depending on where our discussion takes us.

I would just like to remind you again that you are free to terminate the interview at any point, you do not have to give a reason if you do not wish.

Do you have any questions you would like to ask me before we start?

INITIAL BACKGROUND QUESTIONS - YOURSELF & YOUR COMMUNITY

Can we start with a few questions about yourself? A bit of your background I suppose, would you like to take a couple of minutes to tell me about yourself? (Employment, family situation, how long lived in Eastfield, interests etc)

Social & Civic Engagement

In these next few questions I am going to ask you about how you see yourself in terms of your involvement with community life in Eastfield, at this stage I would like you to just answer in relation to 'offline' activities. We will talk about your involvement with social media a bit later. How would you describe your involvement in local community affairs / issues? Im going to read out a number of different types of what we call civic participation and I would like to just answer yes or no to if it is an activity that you normally get involved with. I may ask you some follow up questions afterwards:

Vote in local (Parish, Borough County) elections

Attend Eastfield Parish Council meetings

Attend any other community meetings / forums

Write letter to local newspaper

Are a member of any group (offline) that aims to improve quality of life / services in Eastfield (PTA, residents group, friends group, NWS).

Contacted a local Councillor / MP?

Organised a petition on a local issue.

Signed a petition on a local issue.

Are there any issues locally that you feel passionate about? If yes please explain.

Overall would you say that you are well informed about local issues? (Allow participant to expand)

To what extent do you believe that you can influence decisions in your local community?

To what extent do you believe local people work together to influence decisions and bring about positive change in the community? (Prompt for examples if necessary)

I would like to know a bit about your offline social networks in Eastfield. Im going to ask you a few questions about who you interact with socially and the nature of those relationships, if you could answer these questions as fully as possible it will really help with my research:

How well do you feel you know your neighbours?

Do most of your friends and family live in Eastfield?

Are you involved with any voluntary organisations in the community? (Scouts / Guides, WI, charity work etc).

Do you do any other form of 'unpaid work' for others in your community? (This could be helping out with domestic work for an elderly neighbour, looking after friends kids etc)

If you had a personal or family crisis is there anyone locally you feel you could call upon to help? Who?

Finally, would you class your friends and social contacts as having the same 'background' as yourself? (Allow to expand if necessary).

The Eastfield Community

How do you define the community of Eastfield? (Estate, Town, Village, part of Scarborough etc) and where do you think the Community's borders are? I.e where does it start and finish?

What do you think are the main issues and concerns for Eastfield residents at this moment in time?

Is there anything in particular that you like about living in Eastfield? (Tease out examples).

I would like to know how you view the local services that are active in Eastfield. I'm going to name a number of local services or agencies and I would like you to tell me your opinions on them. Please answer honestly and remember that anything you say to me will be completely anonymous. (scope for opinions on; trust, accessibility, effectiveness etc):

Eastfield Parish Council

Scarborough Borough Council (and associated services)

North Yorkshire County Council (and associated services)

North Yorkshire Police

Scarborough & Ryedale CCG / NHS

YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide

OK thank you for your answers so far. We are going to move on now to talk a bit about your involvement with Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide. As with the first section, I am just going to ask you a few simple questions about your involvement, feel free to answer them however you wish.

Ok first of all please could you tell me when you first became involved with Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide? And how did you discover the group? Also can you tell me a little bit about how you access the groups? (Smartphone, PC, Tablet etc)

Was there any particular factor or reason why you got involved with Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide?

And how active would you say you were in Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide? How often do you log on? And what is the nature of your participation (lurker, poster, involved in discussions debates?)

What do you hope to achieve through your involvement with Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide? (Gaining info about community, making a positive change in community, meeting new people / Friends).

And what kind of discussions / debates about life in Eastfield do you get involved with?

Could you tell me a little bit about the relationships you have with other members of the group; How did they come about? What are they based on? Would you regard them as generally positive or negative?

Please could you tell me about a time when you felt that members of the group worked positively together towards a common aim for the community? (Prompts; how did members work together, how did group utilise its individual skills for common goal, was group stronger after outcome had been achieved, were there any disagreements).

Do you think Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide? is helping local residents build social bonds and networks with each other in ways that perhaps offline participation does not? (or perhaps not, is the opposite true ie social media harmful to pre-existing relationships and networks?) Ask for examples and give prompts if necessary

A) Tell me about how you feel the group uses the platform to share information, this could be up to date information such as details of a community meeting or activity or historical information such as old photographs of the area.

B) Given the lack of public meeting spaces in the community and the poor turn out at community meetings, how true do you think it is to say that the social media groups are becoming the 'de facto' place for discussion on community issues.

Speaking from your own experiences do you feel a sense of belonging within the group? Does it feel like a community ie do you feel like a part of something larger than just yourself? (Try to probe for indicators of identity and attachment).

I'd like for us to discuss the issue of trust within the group. First of all, do you think it exists between members? And if so what form does it take? (Is there a clear understanding of shared aims and objectives for the group? Do members act with the best interests of others in mind?)

From your own experience can you recall any occasions where a group member has stepped forward to help another group member? (If relevant prompt from own observation)

Finally, thinking about the diversity in your real life community, such as; age, ethnicity, gender, income etc, do you think this is adequately reflected in the group. Basically does the membership of the group(s) represent Eastfield community?

HOW THE ONLINE INFLUENCES THE OFFLINE

Finally with this last set of questions I am just going to ask you about how your involvement with Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide? Has influenced your views and relationship with the offline community of Eastfield.

First of all, do you have any relationships with any of the group members offline, ie in real life? If so how have they, if at all, been shaped by your experiences with social media?

Has your involvement with Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide? Helped you in any way become more active in the local

Eastfield community. For example have online discussions prompted you to attend local meetings or forums? Or has advertising through social media led to you participating more with local community groups or events.

Has your involvement with Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide? changed how you view where you live? For example has it made you think of the areas as better or worse, safer or more dangerous, greener or more polluted? If so please could you tell me how it has changed your views? Do you for example feel more a part of your real-life community because of your participation online?

In your opinion, how much do you think that participating in Eastfield Past Present and Future / Eastfield For Real / Eastfield Town or Estate - You Decide? can change things and make a difference locally. For example do local councillors and officials get involved and interact with members comments and take on their issues? Is the group used to recruit and mobilise residents to local causes? Is the group a place where effective discussion and debate can take place and in the end help shape local outcomes? (Depending on how this question goes, may want to explore Arnstein's Ladder and Fung's three questions).

Ok, that's the end of the pre-prepared questions. Is there anything at all that you would specifically like to add or anything that you feel I have missed out?

Finally, now that we have finished the interview, is there anything you now wish to ask me about my research and how I will be using the information you have given me today?

(Hand participant a copy of the research information sheet and thank them for their participation for a final time)

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