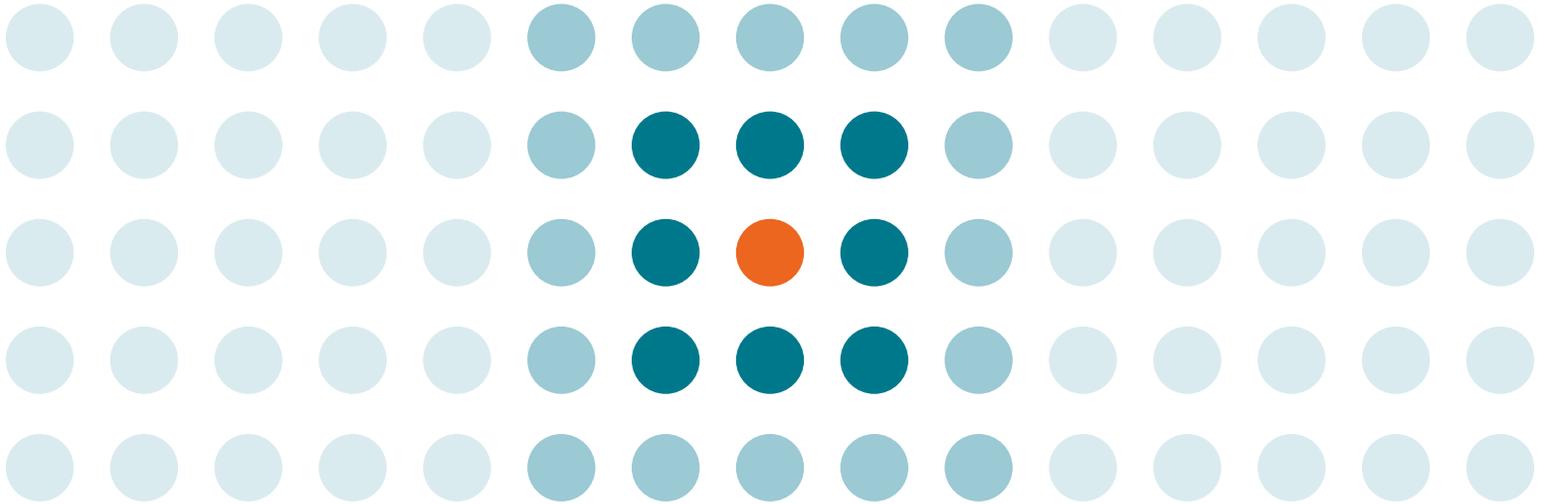




CENTER *for* ADVANCES
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Promising Practices in Online Engagement

by Scott Bittle, Chris Haller, Alison Kadlec

Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) researches, develops and disseminates new insights and practices that help improve the quality of American public life by building the field of public engagement and citizen-centered politics.

CAPE is dedicated to creating new and better ways for citizens to confront pressing public problems. CAPE is housed within Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit opinion research and public engagement organization founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance.

For nearly three decades, Public Agenda has been working in communities to help citizens understand complex problems and create momentum for change by building common ground, managing differences and creating new partnerships. The Center serves the field by advancing three distinct but interrelated strands of work:

- The Public Engagement **Research Project** conducts and disseminates studies that clarify the dynamics and impacts of specific public engagement practices. Among the questions it explores are: What are the short-and-long term impacts of public deliberation on citizens, communities, leadership and public policies? What are the impacts of framing public issues for deliberation in contrast to framing them for purposes of persuasion—and what are the democratic implications of those differences for the media, political and civic leadership and civic participation? Why do deliberative democratic habits and practices take root in some communities more than others? And how can deliberation practices best go to scale, and be applied beyond the level of individual communities?
- The **Digital Engagement Project** experiments with and explores new Internet-based tools and their application to engaging citizens in public deliberation and problem-solving. Guiding questions include: Can the Internet only be used to link together like-minded people, or are there effective ways to produce greater “boundary-crossing” online, bringing diverse citizens together to better understand their differences? Can blogging contribute to deliberative public engagement, or only to partisan electoral or interest group politics? Is deliberation feasible within online communities?
- The **Theory-Building Project** promotes greater interplay between researchers and practitioners to improve the field's understanding of how public deliberation works and how it can work better. Principal areas and inquiry are: How does the public come to judgment? How does public deliberation relate to political and social change?

Major support for CAPE has been provided by the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation** and the **Rockefeller Brothers Fund**. CAPE products have also been developed through work done in collaboration with the **Kettering Foundation**.

For more information on CAPE (<http://www.publicagenda.org/cape>) and Public Agenda's public engagement work (<http://www.publicagenda.org/publicengagement>), contact **Alison Kadlec**, Vice President, Public Engagement and Director, CAPE, at 212.686.6610 x 40 or akadlec@publicagenda.org. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

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Foreword

by Alison Kadlec, Center for Advances in Public Engagement

The fact that the Internet is one of the most powerful organizing tools in history is both thrilling and vexing to public engagement practitioners working to create the conditions for more effective public involvement in public life. We know that the Internet supercharges political campaigning and we know that like-minded individuals are more able than ever to connect with one another because of the Internet. But what is still unclear is how the Internet might help build capacity and momentum for inclusive, collaborative and boundary-crossing problem solving at all levels of public life (from the national level to the local level).

For those who believe that citizens deserve the best possible opportunities to become partners in problem solving, the public cannot be viewed just as an audience to politics or merely as customers of government. Instead, the public should be treated as a vital resource for effective problem solving and community building. In our work at Public Agenda we have seen over and over again that, under the right conditions, “ordinary” people’s ability to learn, to get involved and to come to thoughtful judgments about difficult shared problems is far greater than most realize. Regular citizens, who may not be intensely interested in traditional politics but who are greatly interested in the government choices that affect their lives, can make a major contribution in shaping policy and can effectively participate in local efforts to improve life in their communities.

From the perspective of public engagement, the seeming disconnect between the rhetoric and the reality of what is made possible by the Internet is perplexing. The rhetoric, and indeed the intentions, of everyone involved in the “digital democracy” movement line up perfectly with the aims of authentic public engagement. Everyone agrees the

potential is there to use the Internet to allow citizens to have a greater voice in naming and solving shared problems across boundaries. But so far, the Internet, especially the blogosphere and social networking platforms, is primarily enabling people in partisan silos to network within their own group. A lot of lessons still have to be learned about how to use the Internet effectively for public engagement, yet a wide range of promising examples exist and the opportunity to scale grassroots participation to national politics beyond the capacity limitations of face-to-face events is closer than ever before.

In this article we take a closer look at a range of online engagement practices, from high-level national politics to the lowest common denominators, our neighborhoods. The patterns of opinion shaping, dialogue and decision making on each level have changed through the widespread availability of new communication tools yet the differences between scope of engagement and communication tools can be tremendous. We work here to highlight multiple approaches that try to bridge partisan divides and seek to bring together individuals from all over the political spectrum in meaningful dialogue and deliberation.

Because of the vast and complex nature of the Internet and because of the rapidly changing e-escape it inhabits, we do not imagine to have gathered a complete catalogue of practices and we are certain that many interesting examples have been left out of our account here. Therefore, we hope that you will take the time to provide your feedback, join the conversation, and help us build our and the field’s knowledge about the most promising practices in online engagement. Please join us and share your thoughts at <http://www.PublicAgenda.org/pages/promising-practices-in-online-engagement>.



Introduction

From the Internet's earliest days as a truly public medium in the early 1990s, Usenet and pioneering communities like The Well showed how robust (if unruly) self-governing online forums could be. The early challenge was to find ways of keeping the medium's essential anonymity from spawning bad behavior, like spamming and flaming, or at least keeping that antisocial behavior from driving out real discussion. Usenet never solved this problem and consequently has become a marginal section of the Internet. Others have been more successful. Slashdot created a thriving technology community by allowing users to rate the comments of others, letting the group collectively reward constructive behavior and sanction misconduct. EBay uses a similar concept to allow hundreds of thousands of anonymous buyers and sellers to create a trustworthy market.

But all of these successful sites have one thing in common: They are all communities of affinity; gatherings of like-minded people. That's been true even from the beginning (it is no coincidence that The Well eventually became part of the liberal e-zine Salon). The Internet is a powerful tool for bringing together people with similar interests – or similar opinions. Only technologists use Slashdot. Only conservatives post at Free Republic. And the power to police bad behavior that these sites provide can easily become a way to enforce conformity in opinion. (To test that point, try posting a liberal comment in a conservative blog sometime, or vice versa.)

There have been promising experiments with bringing together those with different views. People have been brought together in Internet forums to discuss a specific topic or task. But these experiments rarely seem to occur naturally in the way that communities of affinity develop spontaneously. So far, reaching out to disparate groups online requires great effort, commitment and funding. In addition to the costs of suitable technology, these experiments require careful planning and consistent moderation. But perhaps there are pieces of the puzzle out there. Some of the experiments show what might be done and suggest core principles for what, eventually, we're confident *will* be done. We can glimpse what best practices are for such a community – a few basic rules for tying together the worlds

of online community, user-generated content, and public engagement to truly empower citizens.

In this paper on promising practices in online engagement we want to take a closer look at a selection of online engagement practices, from high-level national politics to our most immediate public realms, our neighborhoods. The patterns of opinion shaping, dialogue and decision making on each level have changed through the widespread availability of new communication tools. Nonetheless, the differences between scope of engagement and communication tools can be tremendous. At a national level, partisanship strongly affects the political discourse in the general online realm. We will highlight multiple approaches that try to bridge this divide and bring together individuals from all sides in meaningful dialogue. While we focus here on a range of national and local examples, we have organized what follows according to a number of principles that we think are especially salient:

- Allow Citizens to Set Priorities
- Use Citizens as Fact Finders
- Generate Bi-Partisan Buy-In
- Merge Online and Face-to-Face Engagement
- Help Experts and Citizens to Collaborate
- Foster Local Problem Solving

Online engagement and participation has matured and produced a wide variety of methods and projects, often temporary and focused on particular topics or decisions that help bring together partisan voices and create a productive dialogue focused on problem solving rather than ideological in-fights. While political opinion is obviously a factor in any deliberative effort, we highlight approaches that have successfully included diverse voices and produced tangible results outside of party lines. All examples highlight key considerations for developing a successful online engagement strategy such as audience, objectives and process, and then showcase what combination of tools was used to accomplish it. An attempt to identify a general online engagement strategy framework concludes the report and provides an outlook on the new challenges that lie ahead.

Games & Deliberation

There's no question that games are one of the most intense new media experiences but what do they have to offer to dialogue and deliberation? Game designers in the "serious games movement" use the technology of video games and virtual worlds to have an impact on the real world rather than as pure entertainment. However, serious games are largely meant to persuade, inform or educate gamers, not to allow them to deliberate. Many are created by advocacy organizations with the explicit goal of persuading gamers to their point of view, subtly or not. Others are rooted in the world of educational software and attempt to inform the gamer. For example, *The McDonald's Game* is a fairly sophisticated game that takes the player through the entire production chain of the fast-food industry, showing that it is destructive and unsustainable.

In general though, the gaming experience is largely defined by the gamemaker rather than the players. They can't change the rules or redefine a problem – which is where so much of the potential of digital democracy lies. So how can opportunities for collaborative problem solving be made available to gamers interested in using games to tackle serious issues?

Other game genres like simulations, e.g., the classic *SimCity* where players act as urban planners or new virtual worlds like *Second Life*, which allow players to participate in creating worlds, offer opportunities to inform or even host deliberative experiences. But it is still unclear how the seductive power of these types of games can be harnessed to the creativity of the individual user. How can virtual worlds offer meaningful opportunities for people to deliberate with others about complex, real-world problems, or even work on them together?

Please join us and share your thoughts in the comments section at <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/promising-practices-in-online-engagement>.



Allow Citizens to Set Priorities

Change.gov

The Obama administration used its transition period between the November election and January inauguration to experiment with a range of online tools to bring citizens into the policy-making process. Examples of so-called “eConsultations” aren’t uncommon but it’s rare to attempt it on a national level. Other countries, with Great Britain being a frontrunner, have had positive experiences with online petition systems like www.10Downingstreet.co.uk. But these systems rarely feature deliberative elements, which has been one of the key criticisms about the UK system.

Obama’s team tested a wide range of “white label” online engagement tools on their transition Web site, Change.gov, mostly focused around idea generation and storytelling. For example the “Your Seat at the Table” section on Change.gov allowed citizens to see and comment on what outside groups were telling the Obama transition team. “Join the Discussion” featured weekly questions from the transition team to start an online discussion, followed by a video response from the Obama team.

One of the most interesting but also controversial exercises on Change.gov was the online “Citizen’s Briefing Book.” The overall purpose for the transition team was to collect policy ideas from the public to be presented to the president, the same way he receives input from other interest and advisory groups in Washington. After registering on the site, individuals were able pitch their ideas to the new administration. Users were allowed to comment as well as rate the ideas of others, with the best ones rising to the top. Categories were provided to structure the process. All told, there were more than 125,000 participants submitting 44,000 ideas and casting 1.4 million votes.¹

The forum had both good and bad aspects. For one thing, there was no active moderation present in the forum. This led to several inefficiencies: At intervals during discussions, some of the comments didn’t really mesh with the point that was being discussed. There were times when some of

the participants used their time to discuss the platform itself or personal stories rather than the ideas presented. But on the positive side, most of the ideas pushed into the “top 30” by the ratings system dealt with real policies and issues.

On the negative side, there continue to be questions as to how effective this rather simple type of online idea generation is on a national scale. Change.gov chose to allow participants to remain anonymous, rather than require them to identify themselves. Anonymity provides room for inappropriate comments and insults, while identification typically leads to a more constructive conversation online. In addition, anonymous participation allows “sock puppeting,” where interest groups attempt to influence the debate without revealing their real agenda. If real policy is at stake, transparency becomes a critical issue.

Another real drawback that became obvious during the engagement period was the “early submission bias.” Ideas that gained an early lead in voting rose to the top, while new ideas were still being generated. These early ideas have more exposure and therefore collect more votes while good ideas that are submitted late in the process are at a serious disadvantage. One such idea was *Ending marijuana prohibition*, which ranked at the top early on and at the end of the process earned the highest overall ranking by far (92,970 points). While the idea does have its place among the topics discussed, it is doubtful that it would have ended up in such a key position without a prominent ranking from the start.² This idea’s high ranking was also the result of several communities, such as the pro-marijuana groups, pushing their supporters to participate on the platform and lobby for their case.³ While this tactic is as old as letter-writing, it can also be viewed as “gaming the process” and raises questions about how representative the online process can be.

Finally, it remains unclear what the actual impact will be of the “Citizen’s Briefing Book.”⁴ The ideas range from very specific ones that the administration had already embraced (“revoke the Bush tax cuts” and “increase MPG requirements

¹ http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Citizens_Briefing_Book_Final.pdf

² Bonnemann, Tim, <http://www.intellitics.com/blog/2009/02/09/clay-shirky-on-changegov-and-crowd-wisdom/>

³ Peterson, Pete, <http://personaldemocracy.com/node/7322>

⁴ Scola, Nancy, <http://techpresident.com/blog-entry/whither-citizens-briefing-book>

now”) to more conceptual (“no more wars on abstract concepts”) to controversial (“revoke the tax-exempt status of the church of Scientology”). Whatever virtues many of these suggestions may have, it isn’t clear what impact this process will have on administration policy.

Nor is it clear whether the top-rated ideas line up with the priorities of most Americans.⁵ Since the top-rated education idea was “age-appropriate sex education” and the highest-rank health proposal was in support of medical marijuana, it’s fair to suspect that conservatives were not heavily represented in the participation base.

Change.gov served as a useful experiment in how well different types of online engagement work on a national scale and as a way for the public to express their ideas and beliefs. But the questions raised remain relevant and should be addressed when designing future online participation efforts on Whitehouse.gov. Those efforts must be capable of handling large amounts of input while fostering a constructive, multi-partisan dialogue.⁶ Devising online public participation that can help shape real policies in the future remains an area in need of innovative tools and approaches.

NAPA Health Care Forum

In contrast to the broad approach on Change.gov, the National Academy of Public Administration asked participants to set priorities in a much more narrowly focused topic: safeguarding patients’ rights to privacy while using information technology now available to improve the health care system.

At the core of the online dialogue about Health Care IT was the desire to demonstrate to government that eParticipation can provide a different but effective way to work on these types of issues on a national level. As a group, participants came up with new ideas as well as recommending principles that were to be presented to the new administration at the inauguration in January 2009.

Three core components were necessary for this online dialogue to be successful: First, awareness of the issue at hand had to be generated to promote active participation by interest groups and the broader public. Second, the Web site needed content to inform participants and create a similar starting point to the discussion for everyone. Last, a sophisticated Web platform was needed to support, capture and aggregate the dialogue.⁷

To get the word out to as many people as possible, a social media strategy was applied which included channels such as Twitter along with outreach to blogs and even YouTube. A YouTube video about the event was used to introduce the issue and proved to be a valuable low-cost marketing tool for this event that ended up being reposted on multiple blogs. Attempts were made to get participants who weren’t outspoken to engage in the discussion. All team members, including the organizers and even the advisory board members, actively communicated with the participants. The use of moderators, while using more of a passive facilitation approach, helped to enforce ground rules and maintain a safe area to discuss issues. Multiple e-mail updates kept participants informed about what was happening in the dialogue. The combination of all these strategies made the effort a great success.

⁴ Scola, Nancy, <http://techpresident.com/blog-entry/whither-citizens-briefing-book>

⁵ See, for example, Gallup’s long-running survey question on the “most important problem” facing the nation, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1675/Most-Important-Problem.aspx>, or

⁶ Towards the end of the editing phase of this publication, the White House has started its first true online dialogue since Obama took office, managed by the National Academy for Public Administration. The dialogue was created as part of the Obama administration’s new Open Government initiative to engage the public in a discussion of how to make government operations more transparent and open to public input, and to engage the citizenry in problem-solving. While experimenting with a new platform, the shortcomings of earlier attempts during the transition seem to remain and, unfortunately, the discussion is being negatively affected by spam from “birthers” – a fringe conspiracy group claiming that the President is not a legitimate U.S. citizen. All interactive Web sites are subject to gaming, especially if not actively facilitated. The unprecedented scale and reach of a national dialogue makes active facilitation almost impossible and technical improvements, such as the “Flag Off-Topic” button suggested by eDemocracy expert Steven Clift or mechanisms to combine repetitious posts, are currently not in the toolbox of any dialogue software. While some of the shortcomings could have been avoided by having more staff dedicated to the project, a clearer facilitation strategy and prior consultation with some of the leading online engagement practitioners in the dialogue and deliberation field, most lessons learned are in uncharted territory and it remains to be seen what new online engagement practices for public administrations will emerge from it.

⁷ Reeder, Balutis, Christopherson, Lyles, Payton, “A National Dialogue – Final Report”



At the Web site,⁸ users were asked to register using a simple e-mail verification process prior to submitting content. After logging into the site, participants were asked to submit their thoughts as one of four content-type categories. These categories consisted of Ideas, Concerns, Principles and Stories to provide structure and reduce noise by untangling different types of user input that often clutters discussions when not separated. The Web site encouraged everyone to comment and vote on the submissions to explore potential tradeoffs and to highlight the best submissions.

After a weeklong discussion, the site had more than 4,000 visits and 2,800 unique visitors. Some 420 users registered and submitted 120 unique concerns, ideas, stories and principles. Those submissions were commented on about 500 times. For example “consumer-generated health information” was one of the early ideas submitted. Principles that were submitted consisted of suggested definitions for terms such as *confidentiality*, *privacy* or *security*.⁹

The success of the online dialogue was dependent on several key elements. First, the registration process was open for participants long before the dialogue was due to start. This was accomplished by using a splash page for pre-registration which provided information about the upcoming dialogue, a form to submit name and e-mail address for notifications, and included a place to provide initial comments. As a result, the outreach team was able to gather support and commitment for participation in the dialogue before it actually started.

When the dialogue began, comments made by thought leaders who were interested enough to participate and other pre-registered users already populated the forum. This eased new participants in by preventing them from looking at a blank page and giving them a better idea of what was expected by reading other submissions.

The time frame for the dialogue was set to one week, allowing enough time for busy people to find time to participate but short enough to avoid fatigue. This also helps to get momentum going early on in the dialogue, as it is less likely that participants procrastinate or postpone their submissions to a later date.

What are the lessons learned? By having users submit ideas and vote at the same time, the team experienced a phenomenon introduced earlier as the early submission bias. Ideas that were submitted on the first day and received a high number of votes were more visible and therefore more likely to receive more votes and stay on top. Additionally, ideas that are similar in nature, but submitted separately, detracted from each other’s total score. Since the process was based on an idea-generation model, these two effects led to a significant bias. Separating phases for submitting ideas, followed by combining and refining them through collaborative editing, and prioritizing and rating the ideas afterwards might be a concept to prevent this issue.

The rating system used for the ideas was a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest rating that could be given. This type of rating system might have skewed the data gathered, as the scale represents something different to every participant, which leaves open how an average score of 2.3 for a personal story should be interpreted. An alternative would be to use a thumbs-up/down voting system to either promote the idea or demote it, as seen on social news sites like Digg.com.

The dialogue produced valuable insights into how citizens think about issues regarding IT and privacy in the US health care system, especially along three major themes that require further exploration: Health and Privacy Trade-Offs, Health Information Technology and Health IT Best Practices.¹⁰

⁸ <http://www.thenationaldialogue.org/healthit>

⁹ Johnson, Janet Lee, <http://janetleejohnson.com/2008/10/27/a-national-dialogue-on-health/>

¹⁰ Reeder, Balutis, Christopherson, Lyles, Payton, “A National Dialogue – Final Report”

Use Citizens as Fact-Finders

Will Rogers famously said that “everybody is ignorant, just on different subjects.” But one of the lessons of modern social media is that the reverse is also true: everyone is knowledgeable, just on different subjects. And social media provides unique ways to tap into that knowledge. Phones have turned into small computers on the go and nearly everyone carries one. Additionally, entertainment shows like American Idol, which offers voting for contestants via text message, have significantly increased mobile phone literacy amongst Americans. It comes as no surprise that experiments with mobile phone engagement have started to increase and early lessons have been learned.

The advantage of mobile phones is they are “*always there, always on.*” This enables communication and engagement in places outside of our homes or event venues. While more sophisticated software and Web browsers for mobile phones are still only accessible to the small but growing percentage of Americans that have smartphones, text messaging is still the most common denominator for mobile engagement. The limitations of 160 characters that come with the use of SMS are obviously a burden to more qualitative engagement. But, especially for on-the-ground reporting and organizing, text messages have a proven niche. Most successful examples in this realm can be found around political activism, from organizing protests to fundraising. Beyond this basic application, a few examples exist where mobile engagement was used to gather feedback or engage in events.

Twittering

In the run-up to the 2008 election, there was considerable concern among election-reform groups that the voting problems seen in 2000 and 2004 would repeat themselves. Twitter Vote Report, hosted by a large sponsoring coalition from TechPresident to NPR, was designed to enlist mobile-phone-armed citizens into a network of poll watchers. Using text messaging and phone hotlines, voters could alert others of developing problems in real time.

In St. Louis, for example, long lines at some polling locations were forcing voters to wait five hours or more. One person tweeted that “*In STL, poll workers shortstaffed, coming outside and asking random people if anyone can help! Poll workers require training. #votereport*”. (The so-called hash-tag #votereport was used to aggregate messages from Twitter.com). Voters were able to keep each other apprised to both long lines and trouble as well as keeping each other cheered up with positive notes about the good things taking place such as one who tweeted “*MeanRachel: #votereport #6th and Lamar - people laughing waiting for cross walk eating free ben and jerrys. Is this what hope looks like? Yes.*”¹¹

National Public Radio used the aggregated information to release a story detailing such incidents and other issues taking place on Election Day.¹² Perhaps one of the greatest successes was the ability of Twitter Voter Report to provide a venue to ask questions and build a database of information to give voters the help they needed. Questions poured in from different voters such as “*how can I know whether my voting rights are being ensured,*” to “*where should I go to cast my ballot.*” Twitter Vote Report helped to facilitate answering such questions by enabling peer-to-peer communication right at the polling place.

One interesting element of the mobile Web is that it blurs the lines between online and face-to-face communication. Since most Americans carry their cell phones with them anytime they leave their house, it is a communication channel that is pretty much available everywhere. This can also be used to enhance traditional face-to-face approaches with an additional back-channel.

In one of Public Agenda’s Community Conversations around Math, Engineering, Technology and Science education in Liberty, MS, a mobile phone-based survey was used to collect opinions from the audience during dinner. Handouts on each table asked participants a set of three questions and gave instructions on how to submit their answers via text message. The polling software tallied the responses and, right afterwards, the host was able to compare the results to a state-wide survey

¹¹ Fine, Alison, <http://afine2.wordpress.com/2008/11/05/twitter-vote-report-wrap-up/>

¹² Clark, Jessica, http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=voter_protection_twitter_style



to highlight differences and similarities between the actively interested audience and the general residents of the Kansas City region. This technology, often referred to as text-to-screen mobile technology, proved to be a great way to enhance the meeting. It also showed that help is still needed to support participants who are unaware of their phone's capabilities or who do not know how to send a text message. Tech savvyness remains a barrier for live polling depending on the demographics of the audience. Younger users are typically more familiar with their mobile phones than older adults.

Nonetheless, mobile technology is on the rise and provides a whole new set of tools for audience interaction, from polls to message boards. And with mobile technology maturing and gaining widespread adoption, these kinds of exercises can be applied in new and creative ways to enhance face-to-face civic engagement.

Mobile applications, by their very nature, don't support information gathering in depth. And some problems require more in-depth analysis. But the public's information-gathering talents can be drawn into this realm as well.

SourceWatch

Some sites, like OpenCRS, ask visitors to gather and share government information that wouldn't otherwise be available. OpenCRS (www.opencrs.com) is devoted to making reports from the Congressional Research Service, the official "think tank" of Congress, available to the public. CRS reports are public documents, prepared for members of Congress and their staffs, and any citizen can request one (usually through their local congressional office). But the CRS, unlike other congressional agencies like the Congressional Budget Office, does not make its reports easily accessible online. OpenCRS asks citizens to request CRS reports and pass them on so they can be posted online. This provides a useful service – but of course it doesn't include deliberation.

SourceWatch (www.SourceWatch.org) takes the transparency effort further in the realm of deliberative democracy. The goal of SourceWatch, a wiki created by the Center for

Media and Democracy, is to monitor the hidden worlds of the lobbying and public relations industries in politics. Frequently, advocacy groups and "think tanks" portrayed as independent analysts are in fact funded by industries and lobbying groups with a stake in the debate. In particular, SourceWatch is interested in "front groups," organizations that claim to be independent advocacy groups but who are in fact funded by industries. SourceWatch asks participants to be "citizen journalists," bringing what they know to the table. The organization does have one full-time editor to police entries. The organization boasts nearly 37,000 articles on public relations firms, think tanks, industry-sponsored groups and journalists. The Center for Media and Democracy has also launched Congresspedia, devoted to profiling members of Congress.

SourceWatch borrows heavily from Wikipedia in its policies, but the fundamental rules are "be fair" and stick to the "documented facts." The fact that it has a full-time staff editor provides a mechanism for dealing with inaccuracies, although it is important to note that no one examines articles before they are posted – the editors' job is to catch problems after the fact. Since it uses the same "MediaWiki" platform as Wikipedia, the SourceWatch pages offer a "discussion" option where people can debate the quality of the entry – but unlike Wikipedia, these pages are open only to registered users.

Until recently, data was exchanged as print-outs, static PDF documents or burned on a CD-ROM. The latest generation of Web applications set out to change that. So-called "mash-ups" are Web sites that aggregate content and information from different sources in real time, process it and often add interactivity on top of it. Google Maps, which allows people to display their own information on top of their map or satellite image base layers, is one of the first and best-known examples. Over the last years a large number of services have been built on this concept, from Walkscore.com, a Web site that provides walkability rankings for neighborhoods by aggregating geographical, business and other data, to EveryBlock.com, which overlays geographical information with crime statistics, news stories and election data on a neighborhood level.

FixMyStreet & PledgeBank

Government has been slow to adopt open data policies to provide its data for instant aggregation. Nonetheless, entrepreneurs have come up with impressive tools that can help strengthen our communities.

U.K.-based FixMyStreet has been one of the early success stories, providing a place for people to talk with fellow citizens as well as local authorities about infrastructure problems in their community. The site was developed by mySociety along with the Young Foundation and funding from Department of Constitutional Affairs Innovations Fund.

FixMyStreet does exactly what the name implies: It lets people report infrastructure problems in their neighborhood using a mapping tool. All new concerns are automatically forwarded to the relevant local administration. This brings together reports to one central place rather than going through the painful process of finding the contact information for the responsible department on the often complex municipal Web sites. In addition to passing this information on to the authorities, this also allows everyone in the neighborhood to see problems and provide updates. The service now even features an iPhone version to conveniently submit issues right on the spot.

What has FixMyStreet accomplished? The British government has embraced the site as a way to provide user-friendly government service.¹³ In the meantime, some local administrations have started to embrace the service and added procedures to automatically gather the information submitted by the community on FixMyStreet and directly integrate the submission of incidents to their own workflows and routines.¹⁴ Sending problems straight to the council's database without first going through e-mail decreases the turnaround time, saves money and avoids frustration. In a way, the service helps local administrations to crowd-source some of the maintenance tasks thus decreasing their work-

load while reducing cost. FixMyStreet is a path-breaking demonstration of how volunteers working together can become a part of an official government offering.

PledgeBank is another example of volunteers working together for the betterment of their communities and beyond. The same British organization, mySociety, founded PledgeBank, which went live in 2005, to provide a new way for individuals to gather support for actions that go beyond what anyone can do by themselves.

How does PledgeBank work? First organizers identify a need that can't be tackled by one person or small group by themselves. They then create a "pledge" on the Web site, promising to fulfill their part of the pledge if a certain amount of supporters will do the same. Last, they determine a minimum and a maximum threshold for participation to be met as well as a deadline for completion. To spread the word and organize support for their pledge, they may send e-mails, print flyers or contact friends and colleagues to let them know about the pledge. When the deadline approaches, the organizer checks to see if the minimum number of volunteers has signed up to start the project. If there is enough support, all volunteers are asked to fulfill their pledge.

Pledges can be everything on the form of time, skills, money or other goods. For example, in 2007, books and donations were needed to set up a small library for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in India. Facilitated by PledgeBank, 1000 people came together and donated the books for the hospital.¹⁵ This demonstrates the positive effect the Internet can have to bring strangers together to collaboratively work for a good cause. The U.S. has had similar successful pledges to save books from landfills, donate blood and other worthy causes. Even Tony Blair, former British Prime Minister, set up a successful pledge to find 100 fellow volunteers to become patrons for a community sports club.¹⁶

¹³ Briggs, Dave, <http://davepress.net/2008/12/21/fixmystreet-on-directgov/>

¹⁴ Somerville, Matthew, <http://www.mysociety.org/2008/10/02/fixmystreet-ssl/>

¹⁵ <http://www.pledgebank.com/Bakul-Library>

¹⁶ BBC, April 5, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4877598.stm>



Foster Bipartisan Buy-in

10 Questions

Deliberative democracy, on or off-line, isn't just about technology. The right platform can enable good discussion and collaboration and the wrong one can certainly impede it. But the platform does not ensure nonpartisan or bipartisan participation. There's nothing in the technology of blogs or message boards that causes people to self-select out by ideology. To actually gather a crowd that hasn't already made up its mind requires outreach and a willingness among those you reach to believe the playing field will be fair.

10 Questions, another initiative by TechPresident, had tremendous success in drawing a bipartisan crowd. TechPresident is a blog on the use of technology in the 2008 presidential campaign put together by Personal Democracy Forum, the major U.S. conference on politics and technology. The concept behind 10 Questions was actually quite simple. Participants would submit their own video asking a question for all the presidential candidates. Users would vote on the 10 best questions. Then the questions would be submitted to the candidates for their video responses.

Some 243 videos were submitted and more than 145,000 votes were cast. The questions had the virtue of going into much different territory than most of the media coverage. The top-ranked question was on Net neutrality, which didn't get much media attention at all in the primaries. Some of the other 10 questions included "is America unofficially a theocracy," medical marijuana, and abolishing "corporate personhood." (The full list is available at www.10questions.com.)

But the real success of 10 Questions was not the questions themselves, nor the responses from the candidates. Indeed, only five of the presidential candidates submitted responses: Obama, Edwards, Gravel and Kucinich for the Democrats

and Huckabee for the Republicans. The success of 10 Questions was in the multipartisan support the initiative got from other Web sites. Backers included major media organizations like MSNBC and The New York Times, which certainly drew traffic. In the blogosphere, the project was endorsed by sites as different as the Huffington Post and Daily Kos on the left to Instapundit and Red State on the right. This gave the project bipartisan credibility and, more importantly, a bipartisan audience. The submissions seemed to come from all points of view and the final 10 questions selected by the voters show a mix of liberal and conservative concerns.

A key element in this was the nature of TechPresident itself. The bias of TechPresident and the Personal Democracy Forum is only that technology is reshaping politics. The conference and its associated blogs welcome people of all political stripes and that certainly gave 10 Questions credibility across the ideological spectrum.

Public Agenda has had a similar experience with its Facing Up to the Nation's Finances initiative, a nonpartisan effort to deal with the national debt and the long-term fiscal challenge. We found Public Agenda's own reputation for nonpartisanship, and the fact that the Facing Up initiative includes organizations as diverse as the Heritage Foundation and the Brookings Institution, gave the initiative credibility on both sides of the aisle. On our Web site, FacingUp.org, we were able to create a blog carnival on fiscal issues that drew from both conservative and liberal bloggers – a rare accomplishment.

Those dual advantages – a nonpartisan host and bipartisan outside support – are critical to building online engagement initiatives that break out of the current partisan divide.



Merge Online and Face-to-Face Engagement

One of the persistent criticisms of online engagement has been its often tenuous relationship to the real world. There's a growing body of evidence that suggest the most powerful applications merge online and face-to-face interaction, switching seamlessly from one to the other.

Kansas City METS Engagement

Starting in 2008, Public Agenda helped the Kansas City Regional METS Leadership Coalition (regional leaders dedicated to supporting Math, Engineering, Technology and Science achievement), to implement a multi-year public engagement initiative to improve opportunities for young people and support economic growth through METS. Community Conversations were held in multiple communities around the region to discuss issues and ideas locally. Each of the participating communities joined an overarching, region-wide online social network as a platform to continue the conversation amongst the participants of their own events, but also to learn from each other and connect people interested in improving METS education across the region.

The Web site itself was designed as a gathering place for all participants of Community Conversations in the region, with the goal to create an overarching resource on a regional level. Before their respective events, some organizers used the platform to provide background information and materials to participants. Participants were introduced to the platform at their Community Conversation and invited via e-mail right after the event to use the momentum generated that night to kick-start the online conversation. After signing in and creating a profile about their interests, skills and background, members have been able to meet other participants and continue the conversation about how to make sure students get the math, engineering, technology and science education they'll need to succeed in life. The member profiles proved to be helpful to make connections between the various stakeholders in the region that are often unaware of each other's work. Meeting notes and final reports of each event were posted online to create a one-stop shop for

information and follow-up. A community-specific discussion area on the Web site helped participants exchange ideas and resources. These conversations were often initiated at the Community Conversation.

The model of combining face-to-face events with online follow-up provides significant value to civic engagement events to keep participants in the loop all the way through the implementation phase and to leverage their input and buy-in, something that typically proves to be challenging after events. And while the Web site itself can't assure that planning teams are actively pursuing the implementation of ideas that come out of Community Conversations, the Web site helps to support their work. Additionally, some of the information that surfaced in the discussions turned out to be useful for the whole region and served as a starting point to build a resource section on the Web site. A shared events calendar between the different communities began to be used more frequently to promote regional events such as job fairs or science contests. Evaluation after completion of the project will show whether the concept was successful and helped form an active online community around METS education in the Kansas City region.

While large social networks like Facebook and MySpace are thriving with thousands of new users every day, what goes into building a successful online community is often overlooked. It takes time and work to build a niche social network that serves the need of the targeted audience and grows into a vibrant community over time. Generally, online community building efforts have shown us that only 1 percent of visitors make up the core group that consistently posts, asks and answers questions and acts as the life blood of a network. Another 9 percent are less frequently engaged but post comments to the forum and contribute on their own schedule, while the rest are mostly passive readers.¹⁷ Knowing this, it becomes obvious that networks must be formed around a meaningful topic that the targeted audience strongly identifies with. On top of that, users judge the community by its activity to determine if participation is

¹⁷ Nielsen, Jakob, "Participation Inequality: Encouraging More Users to Contribute" October 9, 2006, http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html



worth their valuable time. That means online communities need a consistent stream of new content to encourage users to become actively involved and to return frequently. Estimates are that the number of posts per day required for a community to appear active is somewhere between five and 10.¹⁸ In order to get a forum of this magnitude off the ground, the key is to recruit a group of volunteers early on to participate and provide content before opening doors to the public and beyond just the core team of moderators.

Participatory Budgeting in Germany

The participatory budgeting process in Berlin-Lichtenberg, Germany, is an example of online deliberation as part of a broader annual civic participation effort. The process combines face-to-face dialogues based on the Open Space technique with online dialogue to provide citizens with multiple channels to participate and contribute their budget ideas.

The Berlin-Lichtenberg participatory budgeting process consists of a five-stage process. First, a kick-off meeting with residents from the district is held to welcome the participants and introduce the process. The second stage includes five meetings where residents in each of the neighborhoods generate suggestions for budget items while others do the same online. The dialogue platform not only allows discussion via a forum, but has a second phase where participants with similar ideas collaboratively create a final version of their suggested budget item. The online platform is also used to collect and track the progress of all suggestions no matter where they originated. The third stage consists of a one-day meeting where a citizen's panel edits and aggregates all the submissions down to a comprehensive list of proposals.

Next, the ideas go back to all participants to be prioritized, using the same channels as before. They use a written vote, an Internet vote and the final citizen assembly to select the 20 most important proposals. The results are submitted to decision makers who beforehand committed to including all feasible suggestions into the budget, as long as they fit within the framework of the budget laws. The final stage in the process is a citizen survey to see how the people who did not participate react to the prioritized proposals.

Past outcomes for the Berlin Lichtenberg budgeting process demonstrated that offering different channels for participation can increase participant numbers and diversity, with approximately 4000 people from all parts of the district taking part in the first round in 2005/2006. Evaluation showed that this approach leads to greater diversity, with people of various age, gender, nationality and education participating. Online participants outnumbered the participants of the various events. In following years, approximately the same number of residents took part while the cost of the process was significantly reduced.¹⁹

While online engagement methods have evolved and matured over the past years, research shows that the Web is not replacing traditional ways of civic engagement – it is expanding the set of tools in the toolbox. But as the example of a multi-channel approach to public participation in Berlin Lichtenberg shows, the integration of different channels of participation still must be refined and best practices identified. Further exploration into approaches that combine face-to-face and online techniques is needed, especially since rapid technological advancements offer new opportunities on a monthly basis.

¹⁸ Cohen, Heidi, "Building Online Communities by the Numbers", Feb. 23, 2009, <http://www.clickz.com/3632853>

¹⁹ Governance International Case Studies, <http://www.govint.org/english/Case%20Study%20Lichtenberg.pdf>



Allow Experts and Citizens to Collaborate

One of the major concerns of the public engagement movement is the extent to which the “culture of expertise” that dominates decision making works to relegate citizens to the sidelines of public life. In traditional politics, and even more in the traditional efforts at “public outreach” and “public comment,” experts tend to wall off the public and treat citizens as clients, spectators or consumers instead of potentially valuable resources for public problem solving. In a wide range of fields, from education to environment to foreign policy, we have “professionalized” policy making in such a way that it excludes the knowledge and insights that ordinary citizens can productively bring to the table. Decisions are largely in the hands of civil servants and interest group staffers who have devoted their lives to a problem. Clearly, there are benefits to that – someone who has devoted their life to a subject (and presumably to public service) has built up a level of knowledge and professionalism that few average citizens can meet.

But in case after case, in public engagement projects across the country, we’ve seen the unintended consequence of professionalism: the alienation of the public from policy and the deepening divide between leaders and the public that fuels apathy and incites hostile partisanship. In fact, in our public engagement work a “gap” between experts and the public on policy issues is so common as to be a routine barrier that must be overcome. Because few in the public have spent as much time researching problems as the experts have, they don’t have the same knowledge base. Since they’re drawing on their day-to-day experiences and media coverage, rather than in-depth research, the public often frames the issue in very different terms than experts. Frequently their starting point for the political debate is something experts consider simplistic or naïve. But in order for experts and leaders to make sustainable progress on issues, they must find better ways to communicate effectively with the public and to enlist the energies and knowledge of non-experts in grappling with shared problems.

So how can experts and the public work together online? There are a number of interesting experiments from the field of “citizen journalism.” Citizen journalism embraces the idea that, in the digital world, anyone can be a reporter – and even their own publisher. Blogging is an obvious example of this and so is YouTube. But clearly the quality of these sites varies widely. Some are excellent, some are terrible. Some have in fact grown into sophisticated media forces, like Talking Points Memo and the Huffington Post.

At first, mainstream media organizations rejected these new voices out of hand. Newsrooms have long been tradition-bound places, deeply invested in their own professionalism. But now, under substantial economic stress, many organizations are opening themselves up to citizen participation. Often this is simply in the realm of accepting viewer video submissions, as both the BBC and CNN have done for some time.

NewAssignment.Net

But the most intriguing efforts attempt to blend the best of both worlds. NewAssignment.Net, founded by New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen, has created a series of experiments in “pro-am” journalism, where citizen journalists work together with professionals. The first attempt was Assignment Zero, in partnership with Wired magazine, where more than 900 citizen journalists and professional editors worked together, with the professionals acting as mentors. Based on their skill and interest, citizen journalists might be assigned any piece of a reporter’s usual work, from digging out sources online, conducting interviews or actually writing articles. The resulting reportage was published in Wired in 2007 (zero.newassignment.net).

Further activities include Off the Bus, in collaboration with Huffington Post on the 2008 presidential campaign, in which citizen reporters are given assignments to cover the campaign, including events in their communities. The goal is (in a twist on the classic book on pack journalism, “On the Bus,”) to bring new voices into campaign coverage. Beatblogging.org is designed to enable specialty reporters (who cover a specific beat) to use social networking to connect with experts and interested citizens on their coverage.



These “pro-am” projects suggest a model for ways other kinds of experts can engage with the public. If professional editors can mentor and collaborate with interested citizens on stories, why can’t educators create social networks of parents on learning plans? Why can’t environmental regulators and citizens collaborate on a Superfund plan? The possibilities of civic institutions enlisting interested citizens who buy into the institution’s values and are willing to actually do some of the organization’s fundamental work are endless. And while the debate over whether crowd wisdom can match experts and professionals may continue to rage, the fact is that expertise is too well embedded in our political system to ignore. Professionals hold the levers of day-to-day power in society and you can’t realistically implement policy without them. Their experience can help the “crowd” avoid pitfalls that others have run into before. But policy professionals, like candidates, journalists and many in the business world, have to learn to “let go” and cope with this new, engaged world. NewAssignment suggests new ways that professionals and citizens can work together amicably to solve problems, surmounting one of the biggest challenges to any public engagement project: the expert/public divide.

Connecting Neighbors

e-Democracy Local Issues Forums

A great example of grass-roots, bottom-up citizen forums that blend online and face-to-face activities to shape local politics is e-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forums. Started in St. Paul, MN, and followed by 30 additional forums worldwide, these local online discussion boards are a place where citizens, local officials, or journalists post their questions and get an idea of how residents feel about these issues. The objective of Local Issues Forums is “to give everyone a greater voice in local decisions and encourage more citizen participation in local public policy making.”²⁰

Often they have become vibrant online communities where citizens connect with one another and collaborate. They are a place that journalists visit to gather ideas for news stories and where local politicians can listen to the opinions of their constituents. But one of the most important aspects of this type of local forum is that it is completely citizen-driven to empower people in the community. By encouraging both on and off-line communication, people are getting to know others within their neighborhood and a sense of community emerges as citizens develop respect for each other’s ideas and opinions.

The online forum itself works both as an e-mail-based discussion similar to a listserv and as a bulletin board online. People in the community subscribe to the site and view or respond to comments via e-mail or on the Web site. Digests are available for those with less time to more easily catch up on what is happening in the forum.

As these forums are expanding to other communities, potential hosts are advised to recruit at least a hundred subscribers before opening the discussion group, to gain initial traction. Each site has a community manager to recruit and welcome new members and facilitate the forum. This includes introducing new topics if the discussion is slowing down or calming it when differences arise. Each community develops their own set of rules and guidelines that emerge over time to provide structure to the group and to keep the discussion civil. Additionally, each participant has to post

²⁰ Clift, Steven, <http://e-democracy.org/if/guide.pdf>

under their real name in order to make lasting connections with neighbors and to prevent inconsiderate posts. When only two posts are allowed in a 24-hour period, people are more apt to consider carefully what they say and outspoken individuals are prevented from dominating the forum.²¹ This encourages effective communication and a meaningful exchange of ideas and thoughts.

While the results of Local Issues Forums are not instantly visible, anecdotal evidence exists that underscores their value. In multiple instances, discussions in the forum have influenced local politics and news articles rooted in a forum discussion have shaped the outcome of local decision making.

What are the keys to success for Local Issues Forums? First, they encourage a culture of discussion that is not just about complaining, but rather a constructive exchange of different perspectives on things that affect the community. Further, the discussion is local only (the community actively encourages participants to go to other online forums to discuss national issues) which means that participants who interact online are easily able, then, to also interact in person. The citizen-driven and locally-focused nature of these efforts makes it possible for participants to move between online and face-to-face engagement in ways that strengthen local communities and encourage productive problem solving.

Harringay Online

Harringay Online was launched in 2007, built on a white label social network platform called Ning. The same tool was used in the Kansas City example outlined earlier with similar features, while focus and scale differ. Harringay Online was set up with the intention to strengthen the neighborhood of Harringay in a North London borough. The site was designed to blend a combination of Web-based and real world neighborhood interactions.

The central idea behind the social network platform was to generate and provide neighborhood information by neighbors for neighbors. This may consist of information about safety, health care, businesses in the community, community event planning and local news.

What can online social networks, such as Harringay Online, achieve on a local level? A couple of examples highlight the usefulness of providing a Web site that goes beyond simply offering a discussion forum with additional features like profiles, event calendars, resources and sub-groups. A community priorities survey hosted on the site had a remarkable 70-percent response rate. The Web site also hosted the largest petition ever signed in the neighborhood in response to local traffic issues. In the meantime, the local police have become active members of the site, providing safety information while listening to the concerns of the community.²² The online social network has provided a bridge between individuals, groups of individuals and local government officials, making it a true community working together for the benefit of the neighborhood. The practical and emotional support that the site has provided to its members has been a tremendous success.

Like many other online community building examples, Harringay Online experienced a phase of slow growth. Organizers had to be patient and persistent until the community was active enough to sustain with less input from the core organizer team. This also proved true when trying to get involvement of local area groups. But, in hindsight, this step turned out to be a critical part of the success to broaden community involvement in order to create a feeling of co-ownership of the project.

²¹ Same as above

²² Azyan, Liz, <http://www.lgeoresearch.com/LGEONewsletters/Vol1.pdf>



Conclusion and Outlook

After looking at a variety of online engagement practices operating from the national level down to our neighborhoods, the question remains how to best identify a successful online engagement strategy that works in your particular situation. And for those of you who come from the world of face-to-face civic engagement with defined and proven models, how can online elements become a part of your civic engagement process?

Planning is essential. So is a strong sense of your initiative's audience. We identify several steps to planning a solid campaign in the sidebar below. This kind of careful analysis will protect against one of the more dangerous qualities of the Internet: its hipness. It's a common situation. Somebody in your organization just read that social networking on Facebook is the next big thing so "you should" create a group or fan page. Or "you should" set up a wiki to collaborate with your constituents. Too often, online engagement is driven by technologies rather than technologies being selected that fit into the overall process. Wikis or Facebook groups and pages might become part of the mix, but the decision to use these technologies should never be the starting point for any online engagement strategy.

Over the last couple of years online engagement has matured from initial experiments to a broad range of proven methods. While the technologies and practices still have to prove whether they can handle the scale of engagement on a national level, online engagement has now become mainstream in government, business and non-profit work.

Rather than replacing traditional face-to-face approaches to civic engagement, the Web has added new tools to the toolkit, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. With this in mind, we as a field have just started to explore promising practices of how to best integrate online and on-site elements to create successful and lasting civic engagement experiences. Sharing what works and what doesn't is critical, as the possibilities appear endless. Therefore, we invite you to provide your feedback and share your own experiences. Please join us and share your thoughts in the comments section at <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/promising-practices-in-online-engagement>.

Appendix

Practical Suggestions for Starting an Online Engagement Effort

To organize your online engagement effort, we suggest that you follow a couple of simple steps. Start by taking a closer look at the different segments of your audience. Then, just as in any other project, identify your objectives and goals and put together your overall process, with typical phases like outreach, education, brainstorming, etc.²³ Let's take a more in-depth look at the different steps:

Audience

In civic engagement projects it is often challenging to identify a target audience. The target audience might simply be the broader public, especially if we are trying to engage a diverse group that represents our community. Nonetheless, we need to consider the different segments of people that we are trying to reach. If a large group that we want to include is affected by the digital divide, then part of our strategy must be to find the right face-to-face venues and connectors in their communities to bring them into the process. On the other side, teenagers, parents or a large section of individuals working in office environments have adopted new communication technologies as part of their daily lives and might prefer online participation instead of spending a night or a weekend day of their busy lives at a workshop. But even within those groups, the use of online tools varies. While older Internet users typically still prefer e-mail as the main channel of online communication, social networks and instant messaging have left e-mail far behind in terms of actual usage among today's kids. And just like in a face-to-face setting, more active users will contribute more, while others who use the Internet more passively are more likely to participate as observers or participate via low-threshold measures like rating. This will later inform your facilitation strategy as well as the decision about your online engagement platform and its features.

How much you can address communication preferences of your different audiences obviously depends on your specific setting and classic issues like participation reluctance of certain groups in the community. Those issues won't go away by offering online options for community involvement. But one thing is clear, just offering one way to get engaged is becoming a less viable option by the day.

Objectives

What are your objectives? It doesn't make sense to pick online tools or talk about your online process if you don't have a clear answer to this question. Objectives may vary depending on the stage of your project. You might have a phase that is focused on education about your topic, followed by actual deliberation about the options to identify strategies and next steps. It is important at this point to identify measures of success. Later, this will help us to identify the best tools to support each objective.

Being honest about your objectives is key to building a positive relationship with your participants. Be clear about what happens with results, since the negative effects of dishonesty will remain highly visible online long after project completion.

Process

Whatever civic engagement effort you are developing, most likely it will consist of different stages. You already have a better sense of what your objectives are; now is the time to translate them into a process. Depending on the complexity of your topic, you might have an outreach phase followed by an education component and an idea generation phase. Ideas are then reviewed and participants collaborate to finalize the outcomes. Or, something completely different. The question is, how can participants be involved in each stage and how can we encourage them to stay involved along the whole process?

²³ Inspired by POST method, Bernoff, Josh and Li, Charlene, "Groundswell", <http://blogs.forrester.com/groundswell/2007/12/the-post-method.html>



On a basic level, e-mail registration should be one of the first things right at the start of the project. Collected e-mail addresses can be used to keep prospective participants informed and send calls to action when the time comes.

Barack Obama's campaign used cell phone numbers, as well as fans on social networks to send messages with announcements. These measures provide bridges between different phases and can be used to guide participants to the engagement offerings they are most interested in.

Identifying a comprehensive process is more important in a complex setting with multiple participation channels. The example of multi-channel participation to create budget ideas in Berlin-Lichtenberg highlights the possibility to provide different venues to accomplish the same goal during an idea generation phase.

Channel Strategy

Offering online and off-line participation in the same project makes sense when dealing with a large geographic area or diverse time lines. As seen in the participatory budgeting process, further steps are required to combine results and create a deliberative experience across channels. To successfully implement a civic engagement process that contains these elements, it's critical to connect all channels. Too often, online elements are add-ons, patched onto a process rather than being fully integrated.

Channels must be broken down further than just to the technical level of Internet vs. face-to-face. A Web site to provide information about the project is a different channel than the online dialogue hosted on the same Web site. The first one is a channel that provides one-way information; the second is a multi-way dialogue between participants. Text messaging might make sense as a point of entry to the process but not later, when you want to deliberate about issues. An online dialogue might accompany your series of face-to-face dialogues but how does the dialogue have to be structured to make sure the results are comparable? And if

we expect different demographic groups will use different channels to participate, how can we assure that they consider each other's opinions and deliberate across channels?

Good answers to these questions are hard to find and not enough lessons have been learned. But as seen in the Berlin Lichtenberg example, a Web site can help to host results from all venues, a citizens committee might be able to help bring the results together and a phased approach can ensure that results are going back to all participants. During the METS dialogues in Kansas City, the momentum created at face-to-face meetings helped get participants excited about online follow-up. Once that is gone a few weeks after the event, participants are less likely to move to a different channel and participate in the next phase. Use elements like momentum created during face-to-face meetings, media partnerships or contests to connect phases and channels of your project.

Technology

After completing these basic steps, it is time to look at technology. By now you should have a better sense for your technology needs. As mentioned before, the idea is not to replace face-to-face elements but to take a critical look at where you can gain an advantage by using online tools. This could be using social media as part of your outreach to groups that you would have not been able to identify otherwise. And we've seen that small social networks or further collaboration on a wiki can be great ways to keep participants engaged after events. Each tool in the toolkit has different strengths and weaknesses but, with a thorough analysis upfront, you should have a better sense of what to look for. Depending on your technical savvy and available staff resources, you will have to decide whether to hire a service provider, use one of the free or paid white-label platforms or build (what?) yourself. If you don't have much experience, it's worth looking into hiring a service provider that will help you identify a solid strategy and implement it for you. If you feel somewhat confident, it's best to take a

look around and sort through the available services online. Thousands of entrepreneurs have created a wealth of readily available tools, often free in a basic version and paid-for upgrades. Depending on your needs, some of these services might be a great fit and embeddable into your existing Web site, as seen on Whitehouse.gov, which used Google Moderator to host its Open For Questions section. In case you need special functionality, there's often no way around building a custom Web site. But today, open source platforms like Drupal enable developers to build tailored solutions in a short time without reinventing the wheel.

Engagement Plan

After identifying the tools that fit into the desired process and support your objectives, it is time to look at the details of successfully putting your technology to use. Do you need to have participants identify themselves, for example, because your project is limited by geography or you are discussing a highly controversial topic and expect a heated discussion? Or is the topic sensitive and anonymity gives participants the freedom to express themselves openly without being afraid of being personally attacked? Do you need a community manager that welcomes members, provides support and initiates conversations? Can you collect some input beforehand and seed the conversation before opening the gates to the public? The decision about online tools seems to be a technological decision in the first place, but it is really the implementation strategy that will determine the outcome.

We encourage you to experiment but keep in mind that, on the Internet, the times of let's-build-it-and-they-will-come are over. Community building, whether as a temporarily effort through a specific online dialogue or as a long term endeavor with a niche social network, requires a lot of energy and commitment from organizers. Your effort not only competes with other causes worldwide but also the fantasy football leagues on ESPN.com or participation on community sites like Digg.com. Be mindful about what you are asking your participants to contribute and provide the right incentives to keep them engaged.



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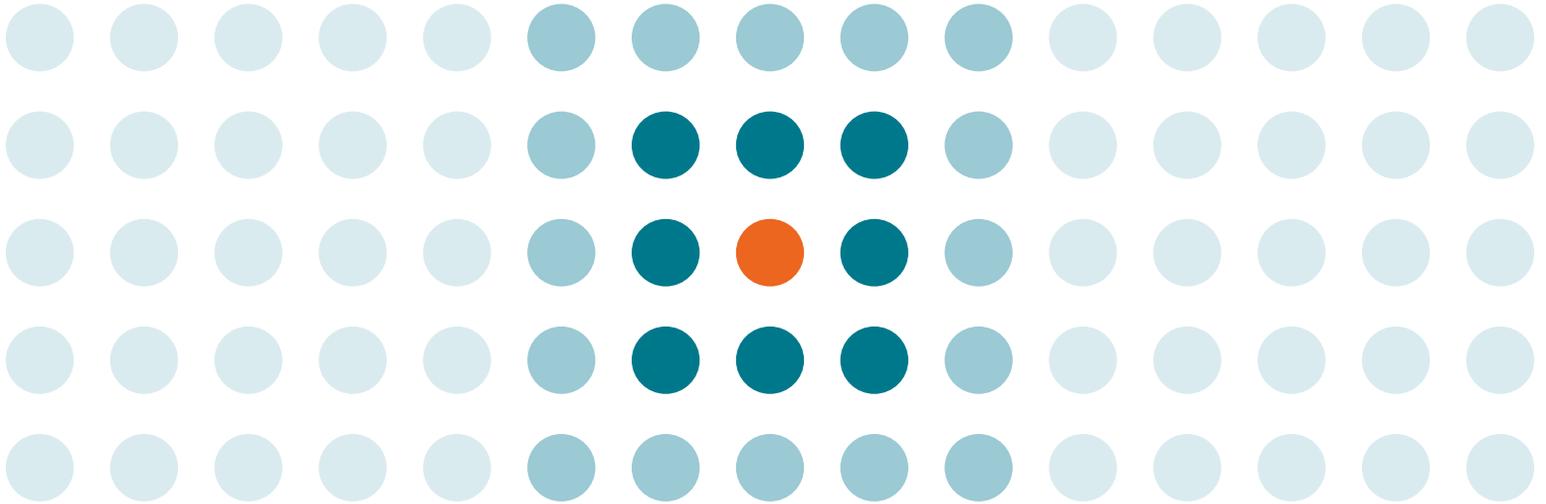
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Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) is at the forefront of efforts to research, develop and disseminate new insights and best practices that build public engagement's capacity.

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