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Using Social Hub Media to Expand Public Participation in Municipal Urban Plans

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Abstract

Within the last decade, there has been a boost in social hub media websites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. These websites were originally informal virtual places for friends to connect, but have gradually become used as tools for businesses, and more significantly, government to connect with citizens. Public participation is a form of civic duty that is required in all stages of planning. But fewer people in Jordan are taking part in the public participation process, and there is a trend towards an older group (over 40) of residents that come to such meetings or workshops.

Generally, plans such as specific plans or general plans in Jordan often take years to implement and require all generations to give feedback on what is needed for the future. This study investigates the relationship between public participation and the rise of social hub media as a tool for engagement, demonstrating how municipalities in Jordan use Facebook. This research suggests that social hub media provides a two-way form of communication between the community and the local government, which aids in promoting authentic participation. Additionally, social media allows for efficient outreach and noticing of meetings or public workshops. As opposed to newspaper or website noticing, websites such as Facebook allow local governments to target a specific audience by location, age, or interests. Additionally, the true potential of Facebook as a participatory tool has not been discovered. Cities are developing their own ways of using it as a tool as there is no formal best practices manual for city planning departments. The findings of this study have provided the necessary information to develop a best practice manual for planning practitioners. The manual provides information on developing a Facebook Page as well as the implications of the technology.

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1. Introduction

“*Twitter provides teeth to the masses*” was the headline in one of the major Dutch newspapers, the *Volkskrant*, in February 2012. The article claimed that internet users in the USA frequently succeed in blocking plans of companies, foundations and governments. The example featured in the article is a cancer research foundation changing its funding policy under immediate heavy public pressure, but the same article also claims that multinationals, banks, lobby groups and even dictators and autocrats and all those others who thought governance was unidirectional, have to fear for the mobilization power of the new media. Clearly social media sparked and fuelled the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The internet and social media helped mobilize protests against Putin in the weeks before the Russian elections but also forced the Bank of America and JPMorgan Chase to withdraw intended service fee increases. Moreover social media operate real-time and the quick response time makes, according to Mark Ghuneim of Trendrr, that responses and protests are immediate and become part of the actual event. A most recent example of the latter is the viral video action #stopkony2012 in March 2012, which after more than 10 years of silence suddenly sparked the cry for justice in Central Africa.

In this respect the digital revolution is a step towards democratization of power, claims Elshout [1] the author of the cited newspaper article, and he continues: “Social networks form a good platform for organizing countervailing power by political activists and consumers. The same or related argument can also be found in more established scientific literature on internet use for mobilization, for instance by Hirzalla [2] and Hara [3]. Others, like Bennett et al. [4] and Sreberny and Khiabany [5] discuss the mobilization power of digital media in the US and blogs in Iran; Karpf [6] discusses whether these new social media and internet sources is not just old wine in new bottles; is not the blog just the new flyer? Nielsen [7] argues along the same line and stresses that we should not forget the impact of the mobile phone. Their critical comments have in common that the new communication devices are not the cause but rather the tools for change. In the discussion section, we will turn to some governance dilemmas and agendize some issues for public participation practitioners.

2. Main Body

2.1 Research Problem

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Word Press, and YouTube are just a few of the hundreds of applications that make participatory information sharing and social networking possible. These new social media are being used to organize events, communicate information, develop positions, solicit membership, distribute petitions, and share documents, photographs, and videos. Given the rapid adoption by citizens around the globe for a diversity of purposes, it is timely to ask what role social media is playing or could play in facilitating public participation in municipalities plans.

This study focuses on two distinct areas of public participation and attempts to make a connection between them both. It is one thing to inform the public of a meeting or workshop, but it is something else to have them actively come to a public meeting. Generally, participation consists of community members physically attending the meeting/workshop in order to speak their mind about the particular topic. Through case studies, this study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How can Facebook be used as an proficient means of community participation?
- 2) Is there a difference between age groups as age relates to the use of Facebook for public participation?
- 3) What are the ways in which users access Facebook to be informed about city activities?
- 4) Can city residents who do not attend public meetings be informed via Facebook?
- 5) What are the practices of those cities that use Facebook as an outreach and public participation tool?

Quality data collection and methodology are needed to effectively answer these questions. The age range was chosen as it includes young adults who have a stake in their community.

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